



# Successful boards: What makes them so effective?

*Center for Public Education*

**W**hat makes an effective school board — one that positively impacts student achievement? From a research perspective, it's a complex question. It involves evaluating virtually all functions of a board, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators and the public.

The National School Boards Association Center for Public Education examined indicators of school board effectiveness.

From this research, it became clear that school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts.

In the most dramatic examples, researchers compared districts with similar levels of poverty and disadvantage to determine factors that separate high-performing districts from those with low performance. In many cases, these differences included the approaches taken by local school boards.

- having the board align with and support district goals;
- monitoring goals for achievement and instruction;
- using resources to support achievement and instruction goals.

## Shared beliefs and values

Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn. The same is true of the school system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.

So, what do these boards do? Following are eight characteristics.

## High expectations, clear goals

Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision. Effective boards make sure these goals remain the district's top priorities and nothing else detracts from them. In contrast, low-achieving boards showed limited awareness of school improvement initiatives.

The research identified five specific district leadership responsibilities that positively correlated with student achievement:

- establishing a collaborative process to set goals;
- establishing nonnegotiable goals that all staff must act upon in at least two areas: student achievement and classroom instruction;

In high-achieving districts, external pressures like poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors were described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members expected to see improvements in student achievement quickly as a result of initiatives.

In low-achieving districts, board members frequently referred to external pressures as the main reasons for the lack of student success and expected it would take years to see any improvements. Their reasons for pursuing change often were simple ones — to meet state mandates and avoid sanctions and a desire to not “have the lowest test scores” in the state.

## Accountability and focus

Effective school boards are accountability-driven, spending less time on operational issues and more



## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

### An in-depth look at what works in public education

This article is part of an OSBA initiative designed to share the latest education-related research with school board members and administrators. The association is working with colleges, universities and education organizations to disseminate studies about what works in K-12 public education. In addition to the Research Spotlight section appearing in the Journal, OSBA has dedicated a page on its website to serve as a research repository for members at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/66017>. For more information about this initiative, contact Gary Motz, OSBA senior editorial manager, at (614) 540-4000 or [gmotz@ohioschoolboards.org](mailto:gmotz@ohioschoolboards.org).



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time focused on policies to improve student achievement. Researchers found that high-performing boards focused on establishing a vision supported by policies that targeted student achievement.

In low-achieving districts, governance was characterized by factors such as micromanagement by the board; confusion about the appropriate roles for the board member and superintendent; and interpersonal conflict between the board president and superintendent. Other factors included board member disregard for the agenda process and a lack of respect for the chain of command.

### **Strong collaboration, communications**

Effective school boards have collaborative relationships with staff and the community. They also establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

In high-achieving districts, school board members could provide specific examples of how they connected

and listened to the community. Board members received and shared information from many different sources, including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals and teachers.

By comparison, school boards in low-achieving districts were likely to cite communication and outreach barriers. Staff members from low-achieving districts often said they didn't know the board members at all.

### **A dozen danger signs**

While the Center for Public Education study on successful school boards did not specifically focus on ineffective boards, following are 12 characteristics of such boards.

#### **Ineffective boards:**

- are only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives and seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning;
- focus on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, little parental support, societal factors or low motivation;
- make negative comments about students and teachers;
- micromanage day-to-day operations;
- disregard the agenda process and chain of command;
- are left out the information flow and have little communication with the superintendent;
- are quick to point to communication and community outreach barriers as reasons for poor student performance;
- look at data from a "blaming" perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance;
- have little understanding of the importance of staff development for teachers;
- are slow to define a vision;
- do not hire superintendents who agree with their vision;
- participate in little professional development together as a board.





### **Data-driven toward continuous improvement**

Effective school boards are data savvy. They embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement. Board members in high-achieving districts identified specific student needs through data and justified decisions based on that data. Board members regularly sought such data and were not shy about discussing it.

Board members in low-achieving districts tended to greet data with a “blaming” perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance. In these districts, board members frequently discussed their decisions through anecdotes and personal experiences rather than by citing data. They left it to the superintendent to interpret the data and recommend solutions.

### **A commitment to aligning and sustaining resources**

Successful school boards align and sustain resources to meet district goals and recognize the need to support high priorities, even during times of fiscal uncertainty. They saw it as their

responsibility to provide professional development for teachers, administrators and other staff despite budget challenges.

In addition to providing funding for professional development, board members were highly engaged in the process. They could cite specific examples of activities and describe how they linked to teacher training and board or district goals for students.

In low-achieving districts, however, board members said teachers made their own decisions on staff development based on perceived needs in the classroom or for certification. Board members knew there was a staff development budget but were unsure if there was a staff development plan. In fact, the study noted board members frequently made disparaging remarks about staff development, calling it an ineffective strategy.

### **United leadership**

Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust. In successful districts, boards defined an initial vision for the district and sought

a superintendent who matched this vision. They continually refined the vision through effective communication between the board president and superintendent and among board members.

In stagnant districts, boards were slow to define a vision and refine it over time. They often recruited a superintendent with his or her own ideas and platform who would develop solutions without board involvement. This proved to be a barrier to the board and superintendent being in alignment. In addition, such boards frequently did not hold their superintendents accountable for goals.

### **Ongoing professional development**

Successful school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts. High-achieving districts had formal, deliberate training for new board members. They also often gathered to discuss specific topics.

Low-achieving districts had board members who said they did not learn together except when the superintendent or other staff members made presentations of data. They did not see professional development as a priority.

The studies included in this report make it clear that school boards in high-achieving districts have attitudes, knowledge and approaches that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts. In an era of fiscal constraints and an environment focused on accountability, boards in high-performing districts can provide an important blueprint for success. In the process, they can offer a road map for school districts nationwide. ■

*Editor's note:* This article was reprinted with permission from the Center for Public Education, an initiative of the National School Boards Association. To access the full report on which this article is based, visit <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/85411>.



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