



# Why Boardsmanship Matters

Research Shows that School Boards  
Do Impact Student Achievement

*By Ivan J. Lorentzen and William P. McCaw*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** As a follow-up to the TASB XG Summit held in January, this is the first of a four-part series of articles on school board performance and its impact on student success, written by education management expert and psychology professor Ivan J. Lorentzen and educational leadership professor William P. McCaw.



**S**chool boards have many responsibilities, including approving budgets, constructing and maintaining facilities, hiring a superintendent, and ensuring the safety and security of students. The current era of accountability has added student achievement to this list. Specifically, the Texas Education Agency's Framework for School Board Development has at its core a focus on "excellence in student academic achievement."

Ask a dozen people why their school district is high- or low-performing, and you'll get a dozen different answers. Many reasons have been suggested, including differences in funding, facilities, quality of teaching, skill of administration, teachers' unions, socioeconomics, quality of parenting, influence of ethnic minorities, extracurricular opportunities, and the like. Each of these issues, and others, have been studied and found to have some influence on student achievement. But no single issue can adequately account for the vast differences in student achievement that exist between and within school districts.

Student achievement is affected by many factors. Clearly, the most important factors are the individual characteristics, abilities, and circumstances of the students themselves. While public schools are dedicated to addressing individual student needs, schools have no control over who decides to walk through the door. But the district does have control over all the other factors.

If the solution to creating high student achievement in all districts were simple, high student achievement would already be pervasive. Student achievement needs to be addressed in a variety of ways and at different levels where professional expertise can be found. Achievement of individual students is best dealt with by the teacher, while achievement at the classroom and school level is the responsibility of the principal. These are the proximal (nearest the student) factors that have the greatest influence

on student achievement at the individual, class, and school level.

However, there are several distal (farthest from the student) factors that also demand consideration. Student achievement at the district level is best addressed by the superintendent and school board. The district superintendent, for example, has been found to exert districtwide influence on student achievement. And most recently, research has established a relationship between school board actions and district student achievement. This most distal factor was long thought to be far enough removed from the student that the actions of the board did not exert any influence whatsoever on student achievement. This assumption, however, was found not to be true.

**AFTER MORE THAN 15 YEARS OF FOCUSED RESEARCH, IT CAN NOW BE STATED WITH CONFIDENCE THAT BOARD BEHAVIORS ARE RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT.**

## **SCHOOL BOARDS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Boards do matter, and they can either work with the school district and community in constructive efforts to raise student achievement or behave in ways that actually undermine student achievement. Boards that govern districts with low student achievement scores can no longer hold teachers or administrators solely accountable. Boards themselves are culpable and must accept their proportional level of responsibility.

In fact, the board's role is surprisingly large in determining the student achievement levels of the district. The exact details of how the board exerts influence is the topic of subsequent articles in this series. But at this point, suffice

it to say the board is in charge of the district; interacts with the community; hires the superintendent and staff; adopts the budget; establishes what it feels are acceptable levels of student achievement; is responsible for technology, curriculum, and condition of the facilities; and determines the level of accountability. The board is in charge of all that happens within the district and cannot evade this reality. If student achievement is to be addressed in a district, it is up to the board to initiate, monitor, and sustain the efforts. If the goal is to address student achievement throughout the district, the school board, in collaboration with the superintendent, is the responsible agent.

While most everybody agrees that schools could and should be doing a better job, there has been little agreement as to how this might be accomplished. How a school district addresses student achievement is obviously complex and involves a great number of players. These players include students, teachers, school administrators, the school board, parents, and many other members of the community. Some people think nothing can be done for students who are restricted by poverty, disruptive homes, or ethnicity, while other students are already privileged by wealth and supportive environments. But there are too many instances that defy these stereotypes. School districts exist where high performance occurs in the shadow of high poverty or where low performance is coupled with affluence. In cases such as these, the exceptions disprove the assumptions.

What, then, makes the difference? What is/are the critical factor(s) that accurately predict high or low student achievement in a school district? For decades, teachers, administrators, and

parents have been able to access literature describing effective strategies designed to raise student achievement scores. Unfortunately, school boards have had few resources with which to consult. However, there is a growing body of research pertaining to the board's role in student achievement. This research has begun to identify ways in which individual trustees and school boards can make a difference.

### IDEAS BASED ON RESEARCH

Foundational research on the role of school boards arguably began in 1971 with Donald McCarty and Charles Ramsey, both professors of education at the University of Michigan. The McCarty-Ramsey Model examined the power structures that exist among the community, superintendent, and school board. This model helped spawn the highly influential Dissatisfaction Theory by Frank Lutz and Laurence Iannaccone in 1986. Dissatisfaction Theory addresses the issues resulting in the defeat of an unpopular incumbent school board and subsequent superintendent turnover. While each study increased our understanding of school boards, it was not until 1998 when Mary Delagardelle conducted groundbreaking work in Georgia that school board research finally gained a solid footing. For over a decade, Delagardelle led the Lighthouse Studies, which described how school boards and student achievement were related.

Individuals and organizations continue to expand our understanding of school board and superintendent roles. The National School Boards Association's Key Works of School Boards encourages boards to focus on what is important in order to raise student achievement. The Mid-continent Research for Education

and Learning has demonstrated that superintendent and principal leadership is a contributor to increased student achievement. A clear qualitative connection between school boards and student achievement has been provided by the Lighthouse Studies, sponsored by the Iowa Association of School Boards. Because of the Lighthouse Studies, the relationship between school governance/district leadership and student achievement is now better understood.

The good news is that research is now moving the conversation from generalities to specifics. We now know that boards that govern districts with high student achievement behave differently from boards that govern districts with low student achievement. Two recent studies have described these differences with precision, reporting statistically significant relationships between certain board behaviors and student achievement (Lee & Eadens, 2014; Lorentzen, 2013). The study that first established a quantitative connection between boardsmanship and student achievement was completed in Montana (Lorentzen, 2013). This study found statistically significant relationships between specific school board behaviors and high student achievement.

After more than 15 years of focused research, it can now be stated with confidence that board behaviors are related to student achievement. This can only be good news for everyone involved in public education. These research findings have cemented the relationship between specific board behaviors and student achievement at the district level. 🏠

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