The Center for Public Education

PRACTICAL INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION

Eight characteristics of effective school boards: At a glance

What 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.

But the research that exists is clear: boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts. So what do these boards do? Here are eight characteristics:

1. 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 that nothing else detracts from them. In contrast, low-achieving boards "were only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives" (Lighthouse I). "There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level," researchers said. (Lighthouse I)

2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels. In high-achieving districts, 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 lack of student success. (Lighthouse I)

3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement. In interviews with hundreds of board members and staff across districts, researchers Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman found that high-performing boards focused on establishing a vision supported by policies that targeted student achievement. Poor governance was characterized by factors such as micro-management by the board.

4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and 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, and school board members received information from many different sources, including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals and teachers. Findings and research were shared among all board members. (Lighthouse I; Waters and Marzano) 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.

5. Effective school boards are data savvy: they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement. The Lighthouse I study showed that 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, even if it was negative. By comparison, 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.

6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals. According to researchers LaRocque and Coleman, effective boards saw a responsibility to maintain high standards even in the midst of budget challenges. "To this end, the successful boards supported extensive professional development programs for administrators and teachers, even during times of [fiscal] restraint." 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.

7. 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. In contrast, in stagnant districts, boards were slow to define a vision and often recruited a superintendent with his or her own ideas and platform, leading the board and superintendent to not be in alignment. (MDRC/Council of Great City Schools)

8. Effective 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. (Lighthouse I; LFA; LaRocque and Coleman)

Though the research on school board effectiveness is in the beginning stages, 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 this era of fiscal constraints and a national 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.

This summary is based on a report written for the Center for Public Education by Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien. O'Brien is an independent education researcher and consultant in Alexandria, Virginia. Much of her work has focused on access to quality education for disadvantaged and minority populations. O'Brien has a Master of Public Administration from George Washington University and a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Loyola University, Chicago. Chuck Dervarics is an education writer and former editor of Report on Preschool Programs, a national independent newsletter on pre-k, Head Start, and child care policy. As a writer and researcher, he has contributed to case studies and research projects of the Southern Education Foundation, the American Council on Education, and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, often focusing on issues facing disadvantaged populations. Dervarics has a Bachelors degree from George Washington University.