



## Governing to Achieve

A Synthesis of Research on School Governance  
to Support Student Achievement

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# Governing to Achieve: A Synthesis of Research on School Governance to Support Student Achievement

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## Introduction

The California School Boards Association developed the Professional Governance Standards in 2000 through a collaborative process including hundreds of board members, superintendents and other educational leaders throughout the state of California. The intent of the standards was to enhance the public's understanding about the critical responsibilities of local boards and to support boards in their efforts to govern effectively.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, the body of research on school boards has grown. This report synthesizes and summarizes some common findings from the research as well as from the concepts and theories suggested by governance practitioners. The findings suggest an evidentiary basis for the Professional Governance Standards. In addition, the findings identify some new governance practices that have come to light in the decade since the standards were developed.

The purpose of this report is to describe the research-based activities of boards that contribute to raising student achievement in a framework that can serve as the foundation for informing boards and communities about how to strengthen local governance as an important step in improving education for all students in California.

### *Why school governance matters*

There is wide consensus that students graduating from high school will need at least some post-secondary training to acquire the skills necessary to participate in the emerging economy of the 21st century. School boards bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that students leave our K-12 schools prepared for post-secondary success. A growing body of literature and research suggests that boards can add value to raising student achievement. Therefore, understanding the research on how boards contribute to school effectiveness should be a primary concern to board members, the communities that elect them, and the professional educators they support and direct.

Not only have our expectations for student outcomes evolved, the way in which we teach students is also undergoing major changes. Technology is bringing vast informational resources to some teachers and students, though not all have equitable access. The digital divide creates a significant challenge, and overcoming the inequity can translate into significant cost. Technology also brings the possibility of online learning, and alternative forms of instructional delivery. It has been predicted that 50% of all high school classes will be online by 2019, making the typical high school experience a blended learning experience, mixing the best of online and face-to-face learning. In addition to technology, recent advances in neuroscience, specifically on how the brain learns, are causing researchers and practitioners to talk about the structures we need for 21st century learning, and there are calls for teacher education to include neuroscience coursework. These changes are inspiring new conversations about the assumptions we have for learning. For decades, time and space for learning was fixed and student outcomes varied. Now, educators

are talking about keeping time and space flexible, but making student outcomes fixed: all students meet standards of performance. Because of their authority and responsibility to set goals and policies that guide districts, boards have a crucial role to play in transforming how K-12 schools will work in the 21st century.

Finally, our K-12 schools serve a deeper purpose. According to historian David Tyack:

*The founders of the nation were convinced that the republic could survive only if its citizens were properly educated ... The common school ... was a place for both young and adult citizens to discover common civic ground, and, when they did not agree, to seek principled compromise.<sup>2</sup>*

Professor Benjamin Barber, director of the Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland contends that the founding fathers “agreed that the success of the new experimental Constitution depended as much on the character and competence of the citizenry as on the clarity and farsightedness of the Constitution.”<sup>3</sup> Public schools are the place where we develop the character and competence of young people.

Schools teach students how democracy works. Schools also engage students in collaboration, preparing them for participating in public life. Schools model the democratic process because they are governed by locally elected boards. Our country desperately needs schools that are committed to modeling, teaching and engaging young people in the practice of democratic citizenship. Thus, the importance of a clear and coherent understanding of how local school governance can be most effective is directly related to one of our most important goals as a free society. Our ultimate goal must be that every student become, in the words of Michigan State College president John Hannah in 1944, “an effective citizen, appreciating his opportunities and fully willing to assume his responsibilities in a great democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Locally, school boards must make decisions that will prepare the next generation not only to govern, but to want to govern.

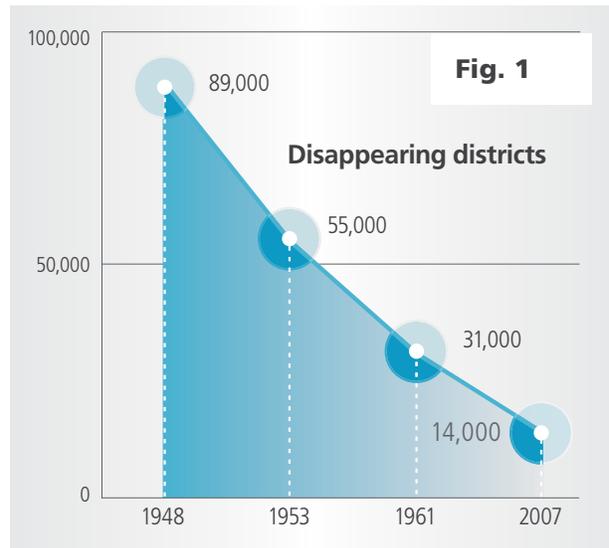
### ***Context: The evolution of K-12 education and governance***

Though most school classrooms may look similar to the one’s our grandparents knew, K-12 public education has experienced tectonic changes that have significantly shifted the work of school boards. Several major changes in the last sixty years that deeply impacted K-12 schools nationally include:

1. Teaching grew as a profession. The requisite knowledge and skills have become more specialized over the decades.
2. The business of schools became increasingly complex.
3. Federal and state government regulation dramatically increased. Federally, this included the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Bilingual Act of 1968, Title IX in 1972, Education for All Handicapped Children in 1975 (renamed in 1991 as the Individual with Disabilities Act), leading up to No Child Left Behind Act in 2000.
4. School districts grew fewer in number and larger in size, reducing the total number of districts nationally by more than 50,000 in just 13 years. On any given day the 1970s, “three district disappeared forever between breakfast and dinner.” (Figure 1)
5. As result of the growth of districts, the relative number of constituents represented by board members increased significantly. In the 1930s, school board members represented an average of about 200 people. By 1970, that number had jumped to an average of 3,000.<sup>5</sup>

6. More recently, the county is being changed by sweeping demographic and economic shifts. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2015, net international migration will account for more than half of our nation's population growth. At the same time, our country is experiencing a wide disparity in literacy and numeracy skills which are not evenly distributed across race, ethnic or socioeconomic subgroups. In addition to the skills gap, there have been major changes in the economy, including a dramatic decrease in manufacturing jobs.<sup>6</sup>

At the state level, there are additional factors in California that impact school boards.



7. California communities are becoming increasingly diverse. More than 1.4 million English language learners made up 23% of California's K-12 student population in 2010-11.<sup>7</sup>
8. California has one of the lowest per-pupil spending rates among the 50 states.
9. Initiated after years of funding cuts triggered by a national recession, the implementation of Common Core is requiring changes in instructional pedagogy, learning materials and assessments. This initiative requires significant and ongoing investments in teacher professional development and technology hardware and infrastructure.
10. The state is changing its state assessments and revising its accountability system at the same time.
11. The Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control and Accountability Plans (approved in 2013) are changing the how district funding is allocated and how districts and boards must align budgets to outcomes.

In summary, districts became larger, the business of schools more complex and the profession of education more specialized. Government regulation became more prescriptive and the overall level of funding declined. There are several significant changes taking place simultaneously in the educational system, and there is a high degree of uncertainty. The population is increasing in size and diversity, the economy has been turbulent, and the job market is changing significantly.

Despite all these challenges, public opinion still supports local school boards. When asked, in a 2006 Phi Delta Kappa poll, who should have the greatest influence on what is taught in public schools, 55% of respondents chose school boards, 26% chose the state, and 14% chose the federal government. Despite this support, the public is not engaged in school governance. This is evidenced by the consistently low voter turnout at school board elections, especially off-cycle elections.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, if boards can help raise student achievement, and the research indicates that they can, then all stakeholders have a vested interest in the effectiveness of school boards. Students will be best served when community members, parents, staff and board members share an understanding of what effective boards do. There is room for hope—a growing body of research is clarifying how boards contribute to raising student achievement, and we turn now to that research.

## Executive Summary

Effective boards engage in three kinds of governing activities that are separate but inter-related, and all take place at board meetings. In addition, both in and outside of school board meetings, effective boards engage the community. The individual concepts summarized below are not difficult to understand. Collectively, however, they constitute a wide array of individual and group knowledge and skills that are practiced in very unique context—board meetings. These meetings address a wide variety of issues, with varying levels of detailed information in the public view of constituents with very different interests. Because the boards can only do their work at board meetings, there is a considerable time constraint. This makes the practice of governance difficult.

This report summarizes research on effective school governance that can provide boards with a framework to assess how the board can best improve its own performance, and to do so in ways that contribute to student achievement. Great governance happens when board members and superintendents implement these simple ideas with uncommon discipline.

### *Effective boards establish governance commitments*

- **Embrace a common set of core beliefs** about public education, the ability of students and staff to perform at high levels, and the elements of good school governance.
- **Build and sustain productive partnerships** among board members and between the board and the superintendent.
- **Reach clear internal agreements** regarding board values, norms and protocols to organize board operations.

### *Effective boards adopt practices to increase their effectiveness*

- **Improving their capacity to govern** by creating protected time and structure for their development as a board.
- **Understanding successful reform structures** by practicing systems-thinking, continuous learning, and extending leadership for learning.
- **Using data** to make decisions and monitor district performance.

### *Effective boards focus on core governing decisions*

- **Set direction** by making student achievement a high priority, prioritizing all district improvement efforts and clarifying the board's expectations for performance.
- **Align all district resources and policies** to ensure improvement efforts are supported.
- **Establish a comprehensive framework for accountability** that includes board, superintendent and district performance and involves and is responsive to the needs and interests of parents and community members.

### *Effective boards engage the community*

- Create a sense of **urgency** for reform.

- **Involve stakeholders** in vision and long-term planning.
- Develop and maintain district **partnerships**.
- Build **civic capacity** in the community to support district reform.

# Chapter 1: Governance Defined

To guide this research effort, it is necessary to first unpack our definition of school governance. What is governance? What do school boards do? A working definition emerges from a combination of 1) general theories of governance and concepts of K-12 school governance, 2) the purpose and complexity of K-12 education, 3) the representative, fiduciary and instrumental roles of school boards, and 4) the scope and limits of school board authority.

## Concepts of governance and school governance

Government, for-profit (corporate), and non-profit/philanthropic entities offer similar definitions for governance. For-profit governance has been described as “the framework of rules and practices by which a board of directors ensures accountability, fairness, and transparency in a company’s relationship with its stakeholders.” The International Federation of Accountants published a 2001 report entitled *Governance in the Public Sector—A Governing Body Perspective* which states “Governance is concerned with structures and processes for decision-making, accountability, control, and behavior at the top of organizations.” A 2009 article in *Australian Philanthropy* defines governance as the “framework of rules, relationships, systems, and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled.”

At first glance, the definitions above could be applied to school boards generally, but they do not account for the differences between school boards and other elected governing bodies or between schools and other for-profit and non-profit entities. A 2006 Wallace Foundation report posits a definition that applies to all levels of education from federal to local: “governance creates the framework through which high-quality leadership can be exercised throughout the educational system.”<sup>9</sup>

## The purpose and complexity of K-12 education

The governance of any organization must be partly defined by its desired ends. One of the over-arching purposes of K-12 schools is to ensure that all students are prepared for post-high school success. Achieving this is the work of education professionals with special training. The requisite knowledge and skills have become more specialized over the decades and boards have increasingly looked to the expertise provided by the superintendent and staff, since this expertise is neither required nor expected of board members. In addition, the business of schools has also become increasingly complex. It is “heavily statutorily regulated, usually unionized, responsible for large employment costs, policy-laden, and financially challenged.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, boards have increasingly looked to the professional staff for research-based and field-tested practices that inform the board regarding what the district ought to do.

## The roles of school boards

There are three distinct and sometimes conflicting roles that boards and board members must balance in their governing work.<sup>11</sup>

### *Representative role*

School boards are elected or appointed to serve the community, so individually and collectively board members have a responsibility to ensure that their governing work is guided by the values and interests that the community has for its schools. Community input is critical; it informs the board what the community wants the district to do for its students. The representational role can be endangered by low voter turnout. In a recent election in Austin, Texas, school board election turnout was less than 3% of registered voters. With so few voters, local school board elections can be significantly shaped by special interest groups, who may exert a disproportionate influence on the outcome. A second challenge that communities face is a lack of clarity of the authority and role of local school boards, and the skills and characteristics that most often result in effective board service. The representational role of the board is strengthened when communities: 1) understand the role of the board, 2) help to identify high-quality candidates, and 3) participate in local elections.<sup>12</sup>

### *Instrumental role*

There are some things that boards must do, regardless of public sentiment. California Education Code 35161 mandates that boards “shall discharge any duty imposed by law upon it” In this role, boards must ensure that the district is legally compliant with state and federal law, including ensuring that all district policies remain consistent with the California code as laws change. This can create a conflict for boards—when the local community supports a course of action that is inconsistent with legal requirements.

### *Fiduciary role*

Boards have a fiduciary obligation to ensure the financial health and long-term stability of the district. Boards must hold the assets and resources of the districts in trust—literally acting in the district’s best interests. The fiduciary role requires boards to balance costs for operations and change initiatives with district capacity. Therefore, one of the key responsibilities of the board is to monitor district revenues and expenditures throughout the year. The annual calendar for the board’s budget oversight activity is established in law including budget adoption, first and second interim reports, unaudited year-end financial reports, and an annual audit. This role focuses the board on what the district is able to do.

These three roles, combined with purpose of K-12 education, create a framework of four perspectives within which boards govern:

- the community perspective: what stakeholders want the schools to do;
- the legal perspective: what the law says the schools must do;
- the professional perspective: what educators say the schools ought to do; and,
- the fiduciary perspective: what the schools are able to do.

## School board authority

Boards of education in California's K-12 school districts and county offices of education receive their governing authority from state law. California law specifies what board must do, may do, and may not do. These are contained in multiple education and government codes too numerous to summarize or analyze here. There are, however, three specific codes that establish the general scope of school board authority.

Education Code 35160: "On and after January 1, 1976, the governing board of any school district may initiate and carry on any program, activity, or may otherwise act in any manner which is not in conflict with or inconsistent with, or preempted by, any law and which is not in conflict with the purposes for which school districts are established."

Education Code 35160.1(b): "It is the intent of the Legislature that Section 35160 be liberally construed to effect this objective."

Education Code 35161: "The board ...

- may execute any powers delegated by law to it
- shall discharge any duty imposed by law upon it
- may delegate to an officer or employee of the district any of those powers or duties. The governing board, however, retains ultimate responsibility over the performance of those powers or duties so delegated."

## Limits of authority

While California Code clearly provides broad authority for boards to act, it also very narrowly defines how and when boards exercise these governing powers. Boards are authorized to take action:

- only at meetings open to the public. [Education Code 35145, with some exceptions outlined in Government Code 54954.2]
- only on items listed on the board's agenda—posted 72 hours in advance. [Government Code 54954.2, with some exceptions for emergencies and other qualifying criteria.]
- only by a formal vote of the board majority. [Education Code 35163-4]

It is important to clarify that neither California Education Code nor Government Code grant any authority to individual school board members. The board's power is collective only, and only when they convene at publicly-noticed meetings that are open to the public.

## The definition

By combining the concepts of governance, the purpose and complexity of K-12 education, the various roles of board members, and the scope and limits of school board authority granted in state law, a possible definition emerges.

Definition language	Definition elements (criteria)
School boards ensure success for all students	Boards ensure the ultimate purpose (mission and vision) of the district.
by making decisions	Boards are granted broad decision-making authority in California Education Code.
that fulfill legal mandates and	Boards have an enforcement role.
align district systems and resources to ensure long-term fiscal stability of the district.	Boards have a fiduciary role to hold the best interests of the district and students in trust.
Boards must act collectively and openly,	Boards have only collective authority. Meetings are open to the public (with certain exceptions permitted in law).
be guided by community interests, and	Boards have a representative role.
informed by recommendations of the superintendent and professional staff.	Boards rely on the professional judgment of educational leaders.

## Chapter 2: Governance Commitments

Effective school boards create and abide by governing agreements to which they mutually commit. These agreements are achieved through deep discussions that result in mutual understanding and common ground in three critical areas: board core beliefs, board and board-superintendent partnerships, and board values, norms, and protocols.

### Effective school boards commit to core beliefs

These commitments include establishing overarching values and beliefs they share about public education, governance, students and the district that help them transcend their individual differences to develop a cohesive board.

#### *Public education*

In order to support the district mission, it is important for board members to articulate a clear and coherent set of beliefs around the purpose of public education. Shared beliefs are a prerequisite for building shared vision for the district; these beliefs guide the district's mission.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Governance*

In order to be effective, school boards must develop a coherent understanding of what it means to govern. Board members should discuss thoroughly the purpose and functions of governance, and the value of "high-quality, citizen-owned and -led public education."<sup>14</sup> These conversations are critical because beliefs and values drive behavior. When board members have conflicting beliefs and understandings about governance, it can lead to confusion as board members practice their governing roles in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Creating clarity among all governing team members about the purpose, definition and practices of good governance is a key step to building and maintaining the trust that is necessary for board members to work effectively with each other and the superintendent.

#### *Students and staff*

Core beliefs about students have been correlated with high student achievement. Research has found that "board members in high-achieving districts had more elevating views of their students' potential."<sup>15</sup> This is consistent with CSBA's Professional Governance Standards, but constitutes a more prescriptive standard than keeping "learning and achievement for all students as the primary focus."<sup>16</sup> Boards that positively impact student achievement do more than simply focus on student achievement; they believe their students are capable of achieving it. In addition, the research findings were not limited to attitudes about students; board member beliefs and attitudes about the capacity of the district also matter. "Board members in high-achieving districts had ... more confidence in district staff's capacity to effect gains."<sup>17</sup>

### Effective school boards establish productive partnerships

Governance researchers and practitioners have reached similar conclusions on the importance of a positive and productive board-superintendent relationship.

- “Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.”<sup>18</sup>
- “Board members have numerous and complex relationships ... the most important are the relationships board members have with one another and with the superintendent.”<sup>19</sup>
- A strong school board-superintendent relationship is critical to achieving success”<sup>20</sup>
- “There is a significant correlation between the superintendent’s relationship with the board president and board alignment with and support of goals.”<sup>21</sup>
- “Exceptional boards govern in constructive partnership with the chief executive, recognizing that the effectiveness of the board and chief executive are interdependent.”<sup>22</sup>
- The board nurtures the development of its members as a group; it tends to the board’s collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness.”<sup>23</sup>
- Superintendents play a key role in ensuring good relations with their boards and among board members.<sup>24</sup>

The concept of partnership subtly shifts the concept of a ‘governance team’ where the board and superintendent lead together within their respective roles. This is still true, however, teams usually consist of equal members. Partnership is different; it includes people who are not on the same team. They have different roles with shared goals they mutually pursue. Partnership conveys the concept of mutual dependence, but not equality. Superintendents and board members are not the same, but each needs the other to be successful. Board members are usually not professional educators and have neither the special training nor the experience necessary for educational leadership. Superintendents do have these qualities, but they are not elected officials and cannot perform the governance functions that community-elected board members fulfill.

## Effective school boards clarify values, norms and protocols

Values, norms and protocols help boards clarify their collective beliefs, how they will work together, and the procedures they will follow to manage board operations.

### *Values*

Values are the principles and ideals that serve as the foundation of board culture. The board and superintendent must specifically articulate the values that will guide their working relationship. These values help answer the question: “What do you need from each other to function well as an effective group?” CSBA’s Professional Governance Standards speak directly to the question of values, and specifically mention openness, trust, integrity, civility and respect.

### *Norms*

Norms are the behavioral expectations that board members have for one another. While his concepts regarding organizational health are directed at executive teams, Patrick Lencioni’s work is pertinent to boards. Lencioni proposes that the question “How do we behave?” is second only to the question “Why do we exist?” because any group of people responsible for the leadership of an organization must be

cohesive, and this cohesion cannot be achieved without clear agreements on the behavior members expect from each other.<sup>25</sup> Values answer the question: “What do we stand for and believe in?” Norms answer the question: “What does that look like as we interact with one another?”

### ***Protocols***

Protocols are the board’s operational procedures that clarify how the board does its work. Effective boards are intentional and specific in how they structure and organize their governing work so that they can fulfill essential governance duties and focus organizational priorities.<sup>26</sup> Protocols provide clarity and remove confusion. Without clear processes, “governance is difficult, maybe impossible.”<sup>27</sup> Protocols are often the focus of board development work and clarify how the board will: communicate between meetings, prepare for meetings, conduct meetings, and interact with community members in and outside of meetings.

Failure to establish and abide by values, norms and protocols is a common source of difficulty for boards. Lack of clarity or commitment to these procedures can create confusion as well as anger or distrust among members. This often distracts the board from its real governing work and has a negative effect on board and district culture. Effective boards work hard to maintain clarity and commitment to the board’s values, norms, and protocols.

### **Summary**

Effective school boards establish governance commitments in three key areas: 1) They embrace a common set of core beliefs; 2) They are intentional about building and sustaining productive partnerships; and 3) They have clear agreements regarding board values, norms, and protocols. Reaching clarity around these issues is foundational to working effectively as a governing board. These agreements should be committed to writing, referred to regularly and reviewed periodically. This level of clarity creates the conditions for the smooth and effective functioning of the board, freeing the board to focus all of its energy on the most critical matters facing the district.

## Chapter 3: Governing Practices

Governance research identifies three major areas of effective school board practices, including improving governance, focusing on the foundations of successful education reform, and using data.

### Effective school boards focus on improving governance

Effective boards are intentional about developing their own capacity to govern through practices specifically designed to focus their attention on improving their board skills. These practices include board development and monitoring and evaluating board performance.

#### *Board development*

Board development can improve the board's ability to work together successfully<sup>28</sup> and translate into more effective leadership and governance.<sup>29</sup> However, school board members—and newly elected board members in particular—often receive little or no training for their governance work.<sup>30</sup> Board development includes learning about education trends and practices, but also focuses on learning about governance roles, knowledge and skills.<sup>31</sup> When boards are better educated about the work of governing, they are more likely to form an effective team.<sup>32</sup> Learning together about board roles has been identified as one of the key practices of boards in districts that effectively advance student achievement.<sup>33</sup> Similar findings are evident in governance research outside education. Exceptional non-profit boards build learning opportunities into their regular governing activities both in and out of the boardroom.<sup>34</sup> These learnings ensure that board members are well informed about the organization and the professionals working there, as well as the board's own roles, responsibilities, and performance.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Monitoring and evaluating board performance*

School board researchers conclude that boards in successful districts create mechanisms for accountability within and across the system,<sup>36</sup> including holding themselves accountable.<sup>37</sup> This is the second core aspect of strengthening a board's capacity to govern: to set governance performance targets, monitor performance toward those targets and conduct board evaluations. CSBA's Professional Governance Standards assert that an effective board periodically evaluates its own effectiveness. Eadie makes the point explicitly.

*“every truly high-impact board I have ever worked with has played an active, formal role in managing its own performance as a governing body, not only by taking accountability for the board's collective performance but also making sure that individual board members meet well-defined performance targets.”<sup>38</sup>*

To sustain their focus on improving governance, boards must create protected time for their developmental work and integrate these practices into the board calendar and meeting agendas.<sup>39</sup> A fundamental aspect of the board's development is the effectiveness of its meetings. Boards can only perform their governance work at board meetings, where they have limited time and often extensive issues that require their attention. So the effectiveness of these meetings is critical to effective governance. According to Donald McAdams, founder of the Center for Reform of School Systems, public board meetings can influence community perception about the district and its leadership. “Crisp, efficient, well-ordered meetings send the signal that the board knows its business and is taking its stewardship of the schools seriously.”<sup>40</sup>

## Effective school boards focus on the foundations of successful reform

Research and literature on the effectiveness of school districts and boards reveals three core elements of successful reforms that effective boards embrace as foundational to their change efforts: systems thinking, a culture of continuous learning, and distributed leadership.

### *Systems thinking*

K-12 school districts and county offices are complex organizations with many interacting parts. Changes in any one part of the organization will have consequences, often unintended, in other parts of the institution. Embracing systems thinking means that boards are intentional about learning the dynamics of the systems they govern and recognizing how changes will impact the entire organization.<sup>41</sup> Approaching school governance with a systems thinking mindset includes the understanding that large, complex systems are inherently resistant to change without careful planning and strong implementation.<sup>42</sup> Because the systems are complex, the changes cannot be isolated; “improvement doesn’t mean doing one thing exceedingly well, it is doing many aligned things well.”<sup>43</sup> This alignment is not theoretical, but experiential. Systemic change requires support for the change in every school, with all elements of the system interconnected and involved, day after day.<sup>44</sup>

### *A culture of continuous learning*

Boards maximize the performance of educators by creating a culture of continuous learning at all levels. In the field of K-12 teacher professional development, professional learning communities (PLC) have gained strong momentum and wide acceptance. One of the most important characteristics of PLC’s is focusing on collective rather than individual development. The board, working with the superintendent, creates and sustains this ongoing development through goals, policies and resource decisions that create dedicated time and space for collaborative learning. This time is dedicated to collectively studying and addressing classroom challenges in instruction and assessment.<sup>45</sup> In a culture of high trust, it provides educators the freedom and confidence to openly share mistakes and constructively analyze classroom practice.<sup>46</sup> Building this culture of continuous learning requires boards to understand the characteristics of quality professional development and to invest in it through intentional changes in the allocation of people, time, and money.<sup>47</sup>

### *Distributed leadership*

Boards and superintendents provide the top-level leadership that moves an education system towards fulfilling its mission. Recent research has revealed the importance of expanding leadership throughout the system. Capacity, accountability, and empowerment—giving adults as much power as possible to do their work—are the foundation of any successfully theory of change.<sup>48</sup> Others characterize this as a balance between districtwide direction and building-level autonomy, extending the relationship between the board and the superintendent to other district leaders, including central office staff, site principals and teacher leaders. Other researchers have described this empowerment as defined autonomy—giving authority and responsibility to principals within clear parameters for outcomes,<sup>49</sup> or as a balance between system-wide consistency and flexibility.<sup>50</sup> This is also described as building instructional and leadership capacity systemically and is predicated on the belief that sustained improvement can only be achieved when all the educators—principals and teachers together—are focused on improving learning.<sup>51</sup>

## Effective school boards use data for their governing work

The use of data by boards is well-established. Research in the non-profit sector reveals that effective boards are well informed about the institution and the professions that serve there.<sup>52</sup> These boards are analytical and embrace a culture of inquiry by seeking information and pushing back on assumptions and conclusions.<sup>53</sup> Effective school boards also use data.

### *Data at the system level*

School systems are complex and boards need a variety of data to have a complete picture of the system. The kinds of data boards need includes district- and school-level student outcomes data, demographic data, business operational data and perception data. Boards act strategically by not only focusing on the district-level data, but through the board's system-wide response to the data.

### *Data guides decision-making and accountability*

The National School Boards Association's framework of eight interrelated board actions that lead to raising student achievement includes continuous improvement: "Good data empowers the board and staff to refine, strengthen, modify, correct, and/or eliminate existing programs and practices to get better results."<sup>54</sup> This is echoed in the Center for Public Education's eight research-supported characteristics of board effectiveness: "Effective boards are data savvy: they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement."<sup>55</sup> The Lighthouse Study identified seven areas of board performance that lead to improvements in student achievement, including using data to set expectations, monitor improvement and apply pressure for accountability.<sup>56</sup> The board, with the superintendent, works to reach agreement on what the data means qualitatively—the story behind the data. Boards also determine which data will be used to share progress toward district goals.<sup>57</sup>

### *Data use guided by policy*

Data collection and analysis is an intensive task, and not all data is worth gathering. The processes for the use of data and data dashboards should be guided by board policy that clarifies its purpose, content, cycle of review, and sample displays as exhibits to accompany the policy.<sup>58</sup> Boards need to work with their superintendent to develop a clear and focused plan for collecting data that is necessary for monitoring district performance, and provide sufficient funding for the data functions that the board requests.<sup>59</sup>

## Summary

The research on effective K-12 school governance surfaces three practices of governance that are correlated with board effectiveness. First, effective school boards commit to improving their capacity to govern. They create protected time for their developmental work and model the culture of continuous learning by concentrating their efforts on learning about governance, setting performance targets, and monitoring and evaluating their performance. Second, effective boards focus on the foundations of successful reform of employing systems-thinking in their governance work, building a culture of continuous learning and extending leadership for learning throughout the system. Finally, boards use data to make decisions and monitor district performance. They study demographic, operational, outcome, and perception data. Boards use this data to reach agreement on the relative strength of the district's systems so they can set goals to address areas where growth or improvement is desired.

## Chapter 4: Governing Actions

### Effective boards set direction

Non-profit sector governance research has established setting direction as a core board responsibility. Boards establish a vision for organizational direction and help to ensure a strategic approach to the organization's future.<sup>60</sup> This important work takes time and requires the board to align board meeting agendas to strategic priorities.<sup>61</sup> These research findings on non-profit boards translate well to the school board context: setting direction is also a critical activity of effective school boards. Specifically, effective school boards:

- make student learning a priority,
- prioritize goals to ensure that the most important changes are addressed first, and
- clarify expectations for outcomes.

#### *Making student learning a high priority*

School districts successful in raising student achievement have board members for whom improving student learning is a high priority.<sup>62</sup> Research on districts that successfully raised student achievement found that board members were knowledgeable about learning conditions in the district, could articulate specific initiatives that the district was implementing, and could clearly describe the work of staff related to the goals.<sup>63</sup> Other research has described the importance of the school board playing an active role in leading innovation and change in order to raise student achievement.<sup>64</sup> A 2012 report based on case studies of thirteen large U.S. districts concluded that boards are most effective when their strategic role includes setting high-level goals for improving student achievement.<sup>65</sup> This focus on student learning is founded on what board members believe about students. The ability of the board to have an explicit agenda for student learning:

*“rests, in part, on a fundamental belief that all children can learn. Where policymakers and decision makers at all levels bring this to the table, there is a greater likelihood that the board will act in the best interests of the young people served by the district.”<sup>66</sup>*

#### *Prioritizing goals*

Setting priorities means deciding which goals matter most. If the top two most important changes require most of the district's resources, then other changes, however desirable, will have to wait. Goals and priorities express the school organization's core beliefs. Effective boards recognize that “mission, vision and values are the bedrock upon which the board conceives and articulates change.”<sup>67</sup> Effective boards define clear goals to move the organization toward the vision.<sup>68</sup> This focus on student learning also means deciding what not to do and limiting administrative initiatives to those identified by the board as key priorities.<sup>69</sup> The board needs to hone its focus in order to prevent goal-creep—the tendency of the district to take on too many changes—and resist allocating precious resources to too many goals, thus underfunding all of them.

### *Clarifying expectations for outcomes*

A critical element of the board's strategic direction work is setting clear expectations for results.<sup>70</sup> The clarity of these expectations is expressed through the data that the board will use to determine if they have been met. Boards use data to define what must change and to measure if and to what extent change has been achieved. In districts making significant progress in raising student achievement, board members received a variety of information that allowed the board to identify student needs and to set goals based on the data.<sup>71</sup>

## **Effective boards align the system**

Effective boards focus on systemic alignment to ensure that all aspects of district operations are pursuing the same goals in a coherent manner. This alignment has two fundamental components: resources and policies.

### *Aligning resources*

The importance of the district budget as a direction-setting tool cannot be overstated. Boards fund the changes they seek by allocating resources for all the things that money pays for: buildings, technology, instructional materials, services, and most importantly, people. Boards know that the largest percent of a district budget is spent on salaries and benefits, often constituting more than 80% of all district expenses. Therefore, boards need to ensure that the allocation of staff supports the district's operations and aligns with the district's priorities. For example, if establishing district partnerships with other organizations is a priority for the board as a long-term strategic effort, that effort may require the dedicated time of key staff.<sup>72</sup>

A study of three Texas school boards characterized this alignment work as building efficacy—the power to produce a desired effect. Specifically, school leaders committed a very high level of knowledge, skills, resources, and support to change efforts. When responding to the challenge of limited resources, priority was given to using funds in ways that most directly supported instruction.<sup>73</sup> The importance of resource allocation is well stated by Schmoker: “The key is to marry a priority on learning to an obsession with funding and the school calendar.”<sup>74</sup>

### *Aligning policies*

The board's strategic direction includes creating and improving district structures through policies that drive district operations and performance. Effective school boards spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.<sup>75</sup> A majority of district policies are often driven by changes in state law. These are usually brought to the board by the administration as recommendations to ensure the policy language remains consistent with the law. These policies might be considered operational because they ensure stability and consistency in the district's systems for learning, business operations, transportation and facilities, and more.

However, boards can also create policies to drive change. These reform policies are proactive; they are designed to make significant changes in the district.<sup>76</sup> For example, in addition to setting a goal for establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) the board could also develop a district policy that establishes the purpose of PLCs in the district, expectations for teacher participation in PLCs, and how the effectiveness of PLCs will be assessed.<sup>77</sup> By placing the practice of PLCs in policy, the board elevates PLCs to a higher level of strategic direction. In the Lighthouse study, board members in effective districts believed that providing guidance for district improvement efforts in written policies would sustain the initiatives in the event that key district leaders or board members left their positions.<sup>78</sup>

## Ensuring accountability

The accountability expected from governing boards is commonly understood as monitoring organizational performance and reporting results to stakeholders. In the non-profit sector, exceptional boards are results-oriented, measuring the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of programs and services.<sup>79</sup> It has been suggested that focusing directly on accountability does not create the incentive and intrinsic motivation that lead to successful reform in K-12 school districts.<sup>80</sup> However, this does not relieve boards of their statutory authority and responsibility for oversight. K-12 school and governance research suggests three aspects of accountability that can increase a school board's effectiveness:

- accountability as a framework
- accountability as a cycle
- accountability as shared responsibility

### *Accountability as a framework*

Effective boards establish districtwide accountability systems to measure the performance of the board, superintendent and the district:

- **Board performance:** Effective boards hold themselves accountable,<sup>81</sup> periodically evaluating their own performance.<sup>82</sup> Examples include regularly reviewing their governance functions, monitoring progress toward board performance goals, and the evaluating the effectiveness of board meetings.
- **Superintendent evaluation:** Holding the superintendent accountable for results is a critical practice of effective boards.<sup>83</sup> This process is often considered a board's most important accountability tool. Unfortunately, it sometimes receives insufficient attention because boards either do not recognize its importance, feel uncomfortable evaluating their superintendent, or do not feel competent to conduct the evaluation. Three key elements of an effective process include 1) working with the superintendent to set very clear performance targets, 2) monitoring performance regularly (not just annually), and 3) focusing the process on improving performance as well as improving the board-superintendent relationship.
- **District performance:** This includes monitoring improvements in student achievement and other district goals, as well as the district's operations and fiscal performance. Student achievement data should include indicators for achievement (where are they now) and improvement (how far have they come).

In each of these areas, the school board has the ultimate authority and responsibility for establishing and monitoring key indicators of success.<sup>84</sup> Specifically, effective boards use quantitative and qualitative data to: 1) set expectations, 2) monitor improvement, and 3) apply pressure for accountability.<sup>85</sup> Without clear expectations, professional staff has no way of knowing which information will be considered most important by the board.<sup>86</sup>

### *Accountability as a cycle*

Effective boards use the accountability framework not only to provide district oversight, but also to organize their governing work. Accountability is not an annual event; it is an ongoing cycle of reporting and review. Boards work with superintendents to determine how frequently data should be provided, and these reports are embedded into the board's regular meetings so that some accountability measures are

reported on a regular basis, if not at every meeting.<sup>87</sup> To ensure board and community understanding, these reports should be in consistent formats that are easy to understand.<sup>88</sup>

### *Accountability as shared responsibility*

According to a 2011 study,<sup>89</sup> community members have different views and definitions of accountability. Organizational leaders generally see accountability as primarily focused on using quantitative measures to improve performance and find technical solutions to problems. They believe that transparency is the basis of building community trust in the organization. In contrast, members of the public describe accountability as individuals at all levels behaving responsibly, ensuring fairness, acting honorably, listening to the public, and responding to public concerns with courtesy and respect. They also described it as shared responsibility—they do not believe that educational leaders bear the accountability burden alone. “They see it as a shared duty, and many seemed as frustrated by the irresponsibility of neighbors and fellow citizens as they were by irresponsibility among the powers that be.”

A follow up study in 2013<sup>90</sup> concluded that the public believes that most schools should do better and that some recent accountability reforms, including raising standards and education requirements, are good reforms. The study also reported some parent perspectives on school accountability that boards should consider.

- **The critical role of parent accountability:** Parents believe that their primary responsibility is to instill the “values and habits of behavior that will help their children lead responsible and successful lives.”
- **The impact of the larger culture:** Parents say that schools cannot be successful without greater social support.
- **The over-emphasis on testing:** Parents indicated that testing needs “to be put in context with other important elements of teaching and learning.”
- **The vital role of schools in communities:** Parents strongly reject the strategy of closing schools as ways to improve accountability.
- **The benefit of choice:** Parents were not united in weighing the sometimes conflicting goals of giving parents more choices or having good neighborhood schools everywhere.
- **Ongoing conversations:** Good communication is the goal, not more data. Parents want two-way communication. More information may be valuable, but it does not ensure that communication is taking place.

These findings about accountability suggest that as boards develop district accountability structures, it is important to engage parents and community members in determining how the district will demonstrate good accountability and what that means.

## Summary

Effective boards set direction by making student achievement a high priority, prioritizing all district improvement efforts and clarifying the board’s expectations for performance. They align all district resources and policies to ensure that the improvement efforts are supported. Effective boards also establish a comprehensive framework for accountability that includes board, superintendent and district performance and they review accountability results as a regular activity at board meetings. Finally, effective boards ensure that the district accountability system involves and is responsive to the needs and interests of parents and community members.

## Chapter 5: Engaging Community

### Evolving context and perceptions of community engagement

As noted earlier, a decades long reduction in the number of school districts across the county increased the relative number of constituents that boards are elected to represent. The populations of school districts have increased significantly. Also, California communities are becoming increasingly diverse. More than 1.4 million English language learners made up 23% of California's K-12 student population in 2010-11 and there are about 60 different spoken languages in the schools. In addition, the rapidly growing access to information and digital devices is impacting concepts and practices of community engagement while simultaneously creating a digital divide that must be bridged.

Recent research on community engagement and participative democracy offers valuable insights regarding how community members value and perceive engagement efforts. A 2009 report suggests that at least two critical elements of increasing engagement include maximizing the relevant and credible information community members need and increasing their capacity to engage with information.<sup>91</sup> However, data alone does not always address people's concerns, particularly if community members come to the table of engagement with a history of skepticism or distrust. In addition, while many agree that public engagement is essential to school improvement, a shared understanding of what that engagement should look like is often lacking.<sup>92</sup> Community engagement has to be a two-way conversation based upon a shared understanding of what the problems are. When conversations are framed thoughtfully, community participants assert that K-12 education is important to them. They believe they have insights worth sharing and that schools do not bear the responsibility for educating children alone.

### Effective boards create clear community engagement processes

Effective boards clarify their expectations for community engagement through district policy.<sup>93</sup> Information is essential to effective engagement, and district and board leadership is essential to ensuring that these discussions are respectful and productive.<sup>94</sup> Researchers identify some common mistakes that districts and boards make in stakeholder engagement. One is for leaders to assume that good works speak for themselves and as a result, to under-invest in community relations. Another is to communicate only in times of need or crisis. Finally, approaches to stakeholder engagement are often limited and superficial.<sup>95</sup>

In contrast, research by the Public Education Network,<sup>96</sup> a national organization working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education, identifies the characteristics of effective engagement between districts, boards, and community members. Such effective engagement is:

1. Strategic: focusing on student achievement with enough specificity to give participants confidence that the engagement will lead to real change.
2. Systemic: ensuring participants understand the inter-connectedness and complexity of the school system.
3. Structured: establishing processes that capture participants' insights regarding outcomes and courses of action, which can create momentum and lead to accountability.

4. Cyclical: ensuring engagement efforts are ongoing. An iterative process can provide continuous support and pressure for implementing change.

Research conducted by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy, identifies two key strategies that support such effective stakeholder engagement.<sup>97</sup>

1. **Provide consistent opportunities for meaningful dialogue.**

This may include learning about community perceptions of previous attempts at communication and reform. Information provided by the district in these conversations should be easy to access and understand. Districts should clarify who is responsible for receiving and responding to stakeholder inquiries and ensure that outreach efforts include a wide range of constituents and a variety of approaches.

2. **Invest more in existing resources.**

- (a) Invest in teachers. Teachers are often underutilized for community outreach and communication. Teachers can serve as the first point of contact for parents, students and community members. They are often in the best position to build strong, individual relationships with stakeholders, and to become a trusted source of information. For example, teachers of students who are not proficient in English often have the language skills to communicate with non-English speaking community members.
- (b) Work with community-based organizations. These organizations often have deep experience working with communities. If boards and districts can identify shared interests with local community outreach organizations, the district may be able to increase its capacity for effective engagement through partnerships.
- (c) Re-invigorate existing local school councils. In surveys, district staff and community organizers agree that these councils are an under-used resource.

## **Effective boards use engagement processes to support school improvement**

In effective districts, these processes for community engagement established by the board are the means through which boards: 1) create a sense of urgency for district improvement; 2) encourage participation; 3) develop partnerships; and 4) build civic capacity.

### *Effective boards create a sense of urgency*

CSBA's Professional Governance Standards<sup>98</sup> assert that effective boards "provide community leadership on educational issues and advocate on behalf of students and public education at the local, state and federal levels." In districts that successfully raise student achievement, boards take responsibility for informing the local community about the status of student achievement, identifying problems, and offering a compelling case for the urgent need for change. This role of sharing data that identifies problems and creates a sense of urgency about the need for change can be a difficult shift for board members, who are accustomed to building confidence in the school system by articulating its strengths and accomplishments.<sup>99</sup>

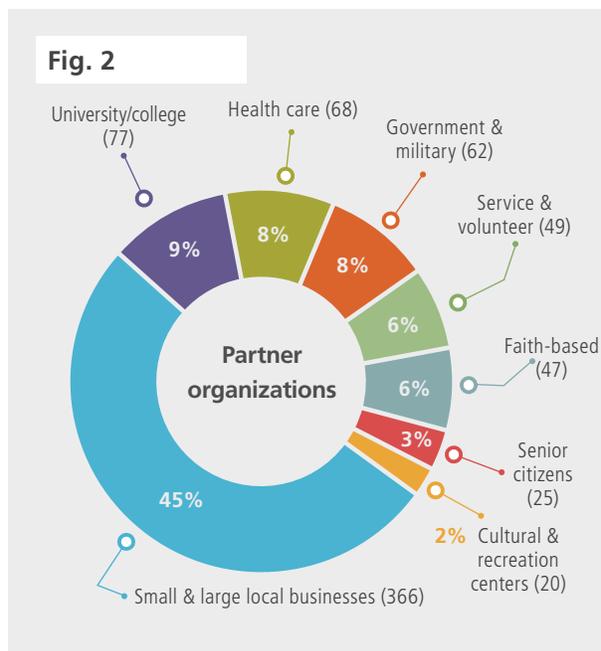
Research indicates that while data might highlight critical need, the sharing of data alone may not garner support for change.<sup>100</sup> Gaining support for district change requires building trust with parents and community leaders, anchored in a shared concern for the children in their community.<sup>101</sup> Beyond establishing the need for change, effective districts build consensus with stakeholders that the change will be a top priority for the district and will focus on improving student achievement.<sup>102</sup>

***Effective boards involve community in vision and planning***

Effective boards create opportunities to hear the views of a diverse range of community members. These opportunities, provided during regular board meetings as well as in other public venues, solicit stakeholder input for the district’s vision,<sup>103</sup> and long-range planning processes.<sup>104</sup> Ensuring that these processes include all community voices—particularly from community members who may not have been previously included such as non-English speaking groups—can be challenging and may require complex processes.<sup>105</sup> These major efforts to gain community support are considered necessary for implementing district improvement. In studies of districts that have made significant progress in raising student achievement, researchers found that boards not only involved the community, they “believed in them as part of the larger team.”<sup>106</sup>

***Effective boards build community partnerships***

Establishing partnerships is identified as a key activity of effective boards.<sup>107</sup> Boards use district policies to define roles and responsibilities for community partnerships, establish expectations for the participation of district leadership in partnership efforts, and allocate resources to support these efforts. Surveys reveal that schools often construe partnerships too narrowly, focusing on a limited range of student-centered efforts. In addition, out of 817 partnerships among 443 schools, 366 of these (45%) involved for-profit local and national businesses. Each of the other types of agencies accounted for less than 10% of partnerships. (Figure 2). These results indicate that schools have room to broaden their efforts to include family-, school- and community-centered partnerships and to widen their circle of potential partners.<sup>108</sup>



***Effective boards build support and civic capacity***

Building community support for the beliefs, commitments, and reform policies that the board has established to raise student achievement can help districts avoid the abandonment of reform efforts that can follow transitions in board and district leadership.<sup>109</sup> A 2012 study of boards supports this view: “the best outcomes occur when both district leadership and voters understand that successful reform requires a long-term commitment.” When the board, superintendent, and district as a whole reach an understanding with the community about why reforms are needed, the progress being made toward reform goals, and the importance of sustaining reform efforts—community members are more likely to identify potential can-

didates who can sustain the reforms.<sup>110</sup> A report by the Academic Development Institute recommends that districts create “recruitment pipelines” that introduce stakeholders to board member responsibilities and the role and work of the board.<sup>111</sup> Effective and shared board self-evaluation processes contribute to these efforts. When boards evaluate their performance and share the results, “it tends to attract the attention of qualified board candidates.”<sup>112</sup>

## Summary

Effective school boards build and maintain strong relationships in their local communities by clarifying the purpose of community engagement, and ensuring that engagement processes are strategic, systemic, structured and cyclical. Through the engagement process, effective boards build a sense of urgency for reform, and involve stakeholders in establishing a vision and long-term plan. Effective boards also create structures and processes for establishing and maintaining partnerships, and build the capacity of the community to support district reform through transitions in leadership as well as to attract future leaders to the work of school governance.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

Governing schools is hard work. Board oversight and decision-making is complicated, involving a great deal of information, often at a very technical level. In addition, board members have a difficult task of understanding and representing often extremely large and diverse groups, who differ in culture, language, expectations and interests. Finally, boards have limited time; they can only act during board meetings and the volume of work is considerable. Given the challenges, one of the most important decisions boards make on a regular basis is how to spend their very limited time. This research synthesis confirms what we have known about effective governance, reveals strategies for strengthening governance in the short- and long-term, and highlights the importance of participating in future governance research.

### Confirming what we know about governance

This synthesis of research supports several basic tenets of effective governance that have long been embedded in governance training programs. Specifically, effective boards make governance agreements as the foundation of their work (chapter 2); focus their governing work on three key kinds of decisions: setting direction, aligning the system and ensuring accountability (chapter 4); and effectively engagement the local community. These are found in CSBA's training programs and in the literature of other state associations as well as the National School Boards Association.

### Strengthening governance now

The research supports governance practices that have emerged more recently. Two of these are practices in which boards can invest now to improve their effectiveness almost immediately.

**Focus on increasing their capacity to govern** is something boards can do tomorrow. By developing a sense of mindfulness—being attentive to how well the board is fulfilling its governance commitments both during and outside of meetings—board members become attuned to how deliberations on difficult issues can lead the board to unintentionally violate those agreements, potentially damaging trust and respect among members, and making difficult topics even more difficult.

**Using data** has been a growing practice for school boards for many years. However, as schools have become more complex, the amount of data has multiplied. Without clarity for district staff on which data is the most important to bring to the board, district staff often very naturally over-inform the board. They can bring all the data. Boards can increase the focus and efficiency by working with the superintendent to determine which data the board needs for its governing work. Once agreed upon, that data can be formatted in easy to read layouts that can replace lengthy written reports. Because of the importance of data for monitoring and setting direction, determining what data the board needs and how and when it will be shared is high-leverage governing activity.

**Developing the accountability framework** has long been a core governance activity. Assembly Bill 97, signed by Governor Brown on July 1, 2013, reinforced this board responsibility by requiring boards to adopt Local Control Accountability Plans. Local boards have a historically unique opportunity to use those regulations as the floor—not the ceiling—of accountability. Developing a comprehensive framework for local accountability can be a powerful strategy for ensuring accountability and organizing the board's governing work.

## Strengthening governance in the long term

**Understanding the foundations of successful reform** has been identified as an important attribute of effective governance. In the research on effective school and district reform, boards are not expected to have a level of understanding equal to that of the superintendent. But they do need to pass budgets that fund these reforms. To do this, boards need to have a basic understanding of the research basis of reforms—so that they can support them. If board members can reach agreement on the characteristics of effective reform, it will make the adoption of goals and the adoption of budgets that fund those goals easier. It will also increase the board’s ability to build a sense of urgency in the community, as well as attract strategic partnerships and build civic capacity (see below).

**Building partnerships** is a high-level governing activity. Because they are elected—i.e., they have often run a campaign—board members have political capital and influence. Board members can leverage this influence to help establish and maintain district partnerships. Because they have fiduciary responsibilities, attracting resources to the district fits well into their governance role. Boards create policies and allocate resources to build partnerships which ideally are long-term, mutually beneficial, and support strategic district priorities.

**Building civic capacity** is a long-term strategic investment of board time and attention. Increasing community understanding of long-term district efforts and of the board’s governing work can lead to better informed citizens. So informed, the community can help identify and elect future board members who will support and sustain the reforms and sustain effective governance practices.

## Participation in future research

Everyone—board members, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members—benefit when school boards govern effectively. The effectiveness of boards has been studied, but K-12 education needs more and it cannot be done without board members. Research on K-12 governance and its effect on student achievement necessarily draws upon student achievement data, board action, and board member perception. Researchers need board members to participate in this research. Without the input of board members, researchers will find it difficult, if not impossible, to identify correlations between board member attitudes, preparation, or action and student achievement. Participating in school board research is a critical long-term strategy for strengthening school board governance and protecting local control.

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