Governance Brief

The School Board Role in Creating the Conditions for Student Achievement: A Review of the Research (Summary)

by Mary Briggs and Manuel Buenrostro

Introduction

This brief sheds light on how boards can carry out the essential responsibility of governance to help their school districts and county offices of education improve learning outcomes for the students in their communities. It is a summary of a CSBA report *The School Board Role in Creating the Conditions for Student Achievement: A Review of the Research.*

In studies of district improvement, research has focused on central offices and schools, paying limited attention to the role of school district boards, and virtually none to county boards. To address these oversights, the first sections of this brief focus on how school districts impact student outcomes, identifying six factors that support district improvement and noting implications for how school boards can affect each area. The final two sections explore research that focuses explicitly on school board professional development and roles and relationships. While research on the county board role is virtually non-existent, many of the research conclusions on the impact of school boards on student outcomes are also relevant for county boards.

The Six Factors Supporting District Improvement

The full report explores the six interdependent factors that appeared most often in our extensive review of the literature on districtwide improvement in student achievement. We paid particular attention to what scholars had to say about school districts that have made or are making progress toward improving outcomes for historically underserved student groups. The six factors include:

This brief will answer the following questions:

- » What are six research-based factors that support district improvement?

- » How can board members support each of these factors?

- » What does the research say about board member professional development?

- » What does the research say about board member roles and relationships?

1. Setting a vision and goals with a primary focus on student achievement, and aligning resources to realize those goals.

2. Establishing and maintaining a coherent, districtwide system that still offers a degree of autonomy at the school site.

3. Using data to inform and support continuous improvement, especially for student achievement.

4. Creating a district culture that supports student achievement, including establishing strong community partnerships.

5. Investing in staff capacity at all levels.

6. Maintaining stable and effective leadership while ensuring a shared vision and responsibility for meeting goals that can withstand leadership transitions.

Factor 1: Setting a Vision and Goals

Multiple studies have found a positive relationship between student achievement and boards that share a common vision and goals.[1,2] With this strong foundation, distractions can be reduced, nonessential initiatives can be filtered out, and people are more likely to work together effectively on a common agenda.[3,4] In setting a vision and aligning goals that improve student outcomes, boards should consider the following factors:

Focus on learning outcomes. Research has shown that goals focused on learning outcomes have the greatest impact on student achievement.[5,6,7] In a district comparison study, the boards from low-achieving districts reported focusing primarily on keeping costs low, while boards in high-achieving districts identified academic achievement as their main responsibility.[8] Studies also suggest that boards in high-achieving districts spend more time discussing student achievement and policy development than discussing administrative details.[9,10]

Engage stakeholders in the process. By gathering and sharing input from a range of stakeholders in a timely and effective manner, districts can encourage buy-in and establish a vision and goals that reflect the priorities of the whole system. This is supported by a study indicating a statistically significant correlation between the inclusion of relevant stakeholders in the goal-setting process and student achievement.[11]

Place equity front and center. Research indicates that boards in high-performing districts and those that close achievement gaps demonstrate a shared commitment to ensuring a high-quality education for every student,[12] set goals and policies that foster learning for all students, and develop goals for faster growth for high-need students (coupled with equitable investments).

Communicate. Researchers report that successful boards use the district vision as the basis for policy initiatives and monitoring. They also engage in a wide range of activities throughout the district, allowing them to communicate and reinforce the vision and goals more widely.[13]

Align resources. Research describes a positive relationship between student achievement and leaders' use of resources to support goals,[14] including an achievement boost in urban districts that funneled extra resources to the lowest-performing schools.[15]

Factor 2: A Coherent System That Also Provides Site-Level Flexibility

School and county boards are tasked with governance but not administration. They can support coherence by monitoring how the different components of the system interact in service of key goals, while leaving the details of strategy implementation and management to district staff. In establishing a coherent system, board members should consider the following:

Everything is connected. A focus on systems thinking recognizes that what is done in one part of the system affects every other part of the system. At the same time, changes in a single area are not likely to lead to system-wide change. A partial list of the systems operating within a district includes hiring and teacher assignment practices, evaluation systems, professional development, facilities use, scheduling, and instructional materials adoption processes. In a coherent system, these components complement rather than compete with one another.

"Islands of Excellence" are not enough. Having individual high-achieving schools, grade levels, or classrooms within a district while other students are left behind is not enough. School districts should be organized to support a coherent system of services that facilitates excellent teaching and learning in every school and classroom.[16]

What is Coherence?

Recent education research has argued for district coherence, but what does that mean? Researchers who study coherence emphasize that it extends beyond well-aligned structures. Coherence is a dynamic process that involves schools and central offices working together to continually negotiate the needs of each school within the broader demands placed on the district.[17] In other words, the ongoing work within the district is coordinated to support a district's progress toward its goals.

Ideas for new initiatives should be carefully filtered. Governing boards can guide administrators at both the central office and school level to filter new ideas so that "initiative fatigue" does not occur. As education consultants and authors Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn noted, the problem is "the presence of too many [goals] that are ad hoc, unconnected, and ever changing."[18] Likewise, policy researcher and expert Jonathan Supovitz advises leaders such as board members to use their vision and goals to

exercise discipline in considering whether new initiatives that are not expressly mandated are consistent with district goals—or divert critical resources, including time and energy.[19]

Centralization versus decentralization is not the issue. Many district reform efforts focus on increased or decreased centralization at the district level. However, research has shown that it is districts' ability to effectively implement their selected strategies, not their level of centralization that is most important to district improvement.[20]

District authority and site-level flexibility should be balanced. Research on district improvement consistently points to an approach that balances district authority with site-level flexibility.[21,22,23] The district's role is to establish a shared vision and goals, and measure progress. How schools meet goals, however, should allow for professional judgment and reflect the school context.[24,25,26] Research supports the need for district goals that are non-negotiable and strongly emphasized, while allowing school leaders—including teachers—to determine the approach to achieve those goals.[27]

Factor 3: Using Data to Inform and Support Continuous Improvement

Leaders at both the district and school level need reliable data to inform decisions about how to improve student outcomes and facilitate continuous improvement. Effective use of data depends on the capacity of users to interpret and act on it. To support continuous improvement, board members should consider how data is used by district leadership and within each school—particularly to advance equity.

District leadership for data use. A culture in which data informs decisions starts with district leaders, including the board, superintendent, and central office staff. District leadership can support continuous improvement by using data at the central office to monitor how fiscal and human resource investments contribute to meeting goals. In a study of how Sanger Unified School District achieved significant gains in the past decade, researchers identified decisions grounded in evidence as a key principle for improvement—this included looking at different types of data to test and improve approaches, as well as to gain community support.[28]

School use of data. District leaders are key to ensuring that schools have the appropriate infrastructure, guidance, and training to use data effectively, and that they understand the importance of effective use of data. A nationally representative survey of district leaders found nearly all superintendents and three fourths of board members regarded the frequent use of assessment data as an important instructional strategy.[29] The most common approaches to building school capacity for data use according to a nationwide survey are professional development, providing staff for data system setup and support, and developing tools for generating and acting on data.[30]

Given that teachers are the most important in-school factor contributing to student achievement, teachers' use of data is critical.[31,32] School boards can make it a priority for the district to make relevant and timely data available to teachers, along with providing them the flexibility to adapt lessons and curriculum in response to student, classroom, and school learning needs.[33] Principals also influence how teachers use data by implementing data examination activities, establishing a climate in which data is used as a resource for learning and improving practice, and setting an example through their own use of data to inform site-level decisions.

Data to support equity. Data analysis with a focus on equity can help district leaders identify opportunity and achievement gaps, and determine which resources can be used to close these gaps. Data can also help district leaders communicate with parents and other stakeholders about how and why resources are being used to address challenges. Using data for equity at the classroom level means looking at multiple factors to address individual student needs.[34] Research has shown that teachers in schools that are narrowing achievement gaps are more likely to receive professional development on understanding data, linking it to instructional strategies, and applying what they learn to address the instructional needs of low-achieving students.[35]

Factor 4: Culture of Support

District culture consists of the predominant norms, values, and attitudes that drive the behavior of the board, administrators, educators, other personnel, students, and families.[36] Boards can model and communicate norms and values for professional behavior that foster effective teaching and learning. Moreover, boards can work with central office administrators to develop policies that support collaboration and professional learning. In our review of the research, the following themes are essential to a culture that contributes to student achievement:

Trust is important. Successful implementation of strategies cannot happen without trust—including trust between principals and their staff; peers, parents and schools; and the central office and schools.[37,38,39,40] Board members can support a culture of trust by engaging with the community, modeling positive and professional relationships,

making decisions with transparency, and fostering mutual accountability.

Attitudes and beliefs shape culture. District culture is influenced by the attitudes and beliefs of staff at all levels—three beliefs that shape a positive culture and appear throughout the research are highlighted below:

1. **All students can learn.** Boards in high-achieving districts report significantly more positive opinions about their students' potential than in low-achieving districts with similar students.[41]

2. **Teachers and schools make a difference.** Effective boards—those in districts that successfully implement policies that lead to improved student achievement—believe in their districts' collective ability to improve student achievement, while less-effective boards are more likely to blame external factors and students.[42]

3. **Everyone is responsible for student learning.** Shared responsibility ensures that staff at all levels support each other to improve student outcomes.[43] In successful districts, educators: 1) take responsibility for their contributions to improving teaching and 2) receive support from boards, superintendents, central office staff, principals, and others.[44]

Community engagement is essential for success. Research identifies strong community connections as a characteristic of high-achieving districts.[45] Therefore, leaders can enhance the success of district initiatives by investing in meaningful community engagement.

Partnerships enhance impact. One of the frequently cited characteristics of effective boards is a positive relationship with external agencies, local and state government, and the general public.[46,47] Partnerships with external agencies can often bring additional resources and capacity to schools.[48]

Factor 5: Investing in Capacity at All Levels

Districts and schools need qualified staff to deliver educational programs that meet the learning needs of all students. Furthermore, as districts seek to improve student achievement through new initiatives, outcomes depend on highly skilled staff, including district leaders and school personnel.

District leaders play an important role in developing staff capacity. Evidence indicates that districts that invest in professional learning for teachers, school leaders, and district leaders can achieve improvements in student outcomes. Board members and superintendents understand this: They identify professional learning as the most important approach to improving student learning.[49]

Research indicates that boards that are successful at implementing and sustaining initiatives invest in extensive professional development, even in tough financial times, while boards that dramatically cut professional development have proven less successful in seeing their initiatives to completion.[50] In addition, researchers have found that training for board members can strengthen their beliefs that adults can have a positive impact on student achievement and that professional learning is essential to improving teaching and learning.[51]

School staff capacity is critical to site coherence and autonomy. The capacity of school staff is essential to maintaining a balance between districtwide coherence and site autonomy. While site autonomy is part of an effective system, staff—teachers and principals, in particular—need appropriate training and support to meet goals established by district leaders.

» **Teacher capacity.** Research has shown that teachers are the most important in-school contributors to a range of student outcomes[52] and that the quality of teachers' subject matter knowledge and pedagogical understanding have an impact on student learning.[53] Teacher professional development on the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, differentiation for diverse students, using assessment data, and making time for collaboration are all associated with improvements in teaching and learning.[54] Effectively structured collaboration, in particular, can help teachers improve their instructional skills and improve student academic achievement.[55]

» **Principal capacity.** Principals have a substantial impact on the support provided to school staff and in how instructional time is invested, with research indicating positive connections between student learning and specific principal behaviors; teachers' understanding of what to do to improve teaching and learning;[56] and the conditions that attract and retain skilled teachers.[57,58,59,60]

Factor 6: Planning for Leadership Turnover

Since ambitious reforms operate on timelines that often outlast board terms and superintendent tenure, experts observe that districts should explicitly plan for evolving teams and implement systems to uphold major initiatives through transitions.[61]

Boards can support successful transitions. Strong support throughout the system makes longevity of initiatives more likely. As previously mentioned, board members play a key role in community engagement, establishing partnerships, and creating a shared vision and goals.[62] Together these form a foundation that helps boards incorporate new leaders into ongoing improvement efforts.

» **Superintendents.** A shared vision and goals guide boards as they fulfill one of their major responsibilities—hiring and supervising a superintendent. The board and community can set the expectation for a superintendent to maintain district initiatives to achieve a district's vision and goals.

» **New board members.** Boards can ensure a careful onboarding process that shortens the learning curve for new members and fosters ongoing productive collaboration. This training can focus on key areas, such as the appropriate board role.[63] Boards can also schedule study sessions that address the vision and goals established by the board, and a summary of prior work and progress.

Superintendent turnover. Superintendents are crucial to implementing board priorities, yet turnover can challenge the sustainability of initiatives. Understanding why superintendents leave can help boards address recruitment and retention effectively.

There is a common misconception that superintendents often leave their districts due to poor relations with their boards—research in California found this to be one of the less common reasons for superintendent attrition. Retirement was the most common reason and moving to a district that was larger or that offered better compensation was a close second. While poor board relations were a more prevalent impetus for turnover decisions in large and low-income districts in both California and nationwide, most board members and superintendents in the California study said that their districts had high-functioning boards and positive board–superintendent relationships.[64,65]

Board member turnover. Though more predictable given the nature of election cycles, very little research has addressed factors related to board turnover. However, there is some evidence of the impact of board member turnover on student achievement. For example, a study of board turnover in Washington state found a statistically significant relationship between increasing board turnover and declining achievement scores, especially in cases in which turnover was motivated by personal circumstances as opposed to electoral defeat.[66]

The Impact of Board Relationships and Roles

Districts and county offices of education are complex organizations. To be effective, they require clearly defined responsibilities and positive relationships between leadership and staff. In these organizations, board members and the superintendent form the leadership team and entrust central office and school staff with carrying out their shared vision. Understanding the parameters of each district role is central to maintaining effective working relationships.

CSBA Outlines Five Board Responsibilities:

1. Set direction for the district or county office of education.

2. Establish structure through policy.

3. Provide support for implementation.

4. Ensure accountability through oversight and monitoring.

5. Act as community leaders.

These functions are so fundamental to a system's accountability to the public that only an elected board can fulfill them.

Research identifies the following board roles as having a positive impact on student outcomes:

Establishing a shared vision and goals. As stated earlier, evidence points to boards and district leaders working together to establish and share common goals as a condition for district success.[67] Research also indicates that when the board and superintendent share common goals, principals feel more supported in their work.[68]

Working collaboratively. The importance of collaboration extends beyond the board and superintendent—it includes collaboration between the board and other district staff, as well as among individual board members. A National School Boards Association report found that "effective boards lead as a united team, with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust."[69] This is supported by observations of over 100 board meetings, where researchers found that board members in low-performing districts focused on advancing their own agendas more often than those in high-performing districts.[70]

Engaging the community. Positive community relations are essential to sustainable improvement, and research supports that board members have an important role in fostering this relationship.[71] There is also evidence that board members from high-performing districts engage more with government and community agencies.[72]

Empowering staff. Understanding the role of boards as vision-setters and policymakers, and of superintendents and other staff as implementers, is important. This is supported by the Council of the Great City Schools, which identified the board's ability to focus on "policy level decisions" and not "the day-to-day operations" as a precondition for success.[73] Successful boards set higher expectations for superintendents, but they also empower their superintendents as leaders that contribute guidance and expertise.[74]

Training and Professional Learning for Board Members

Professional learning for board members can enhance their ability to support the factors associated with improving student achievement. Research on effective boards and district leadership supports the conclusion that professional learning is essential.[75] Evidence suggests that boards benefit from training in the following areas:

1. **The basics of the job**. Bringing board members up to speed on policies and regulations that help them meet their fiduciary responsibilities.

2. **Effective governance practices.** Ensuring that meetings are run efficiently and that effective protocols are in place, so that meetings can focus on student achievement.[76]

3. **The role of the board and that of the superintendent and staff.** Ensuring that the board supports district efforts effectively and focuses on working collaboratively to set policies and direction.[77]

4. **Ways to improve student outcomes and close achievement gaps.** Ensuring that board members are champions of student learning and equity in how they set goals and policies, and that they make investments that support effective teaching and learning.

5. **Community engagement and public leadership.** Ensuring that board members can communicate effectively with and advocate for the needs of their schools and communities.

As champions of public education, board members can model the value of lifelong learning for their county offices of education, school districts, schools, and communities. In addition to the professional development topics covered in this section, board training on each of the six factors linked to school district improvement explored in this report can also support student achievement. For this reason, boards may wish to incorporate periodic self-assessments to identify areas that warrant additional attention.

With the changing education landscape in California, there will always be a need for board professional development about evolving standards, assessments, regulations, and legislation that can affect the operations of their school districts and county offices of education. Informed board members are better stewards of public education—more effectively communicating with the community about the importance of public education and the challenges and opportunities faced by public schools.

CSBA is strongly committed to providing quality professional learning, research, and information on important topics, and to ensuring that board members continue to advocate for equity and closing achievement gaps. As one of the 26 states where board training is not currently mandated,[78] we will continue to fill the important role of ensuring that board members can be among the most effective supporters of public education.

Conclusion

This brief is a summary of the CSBA report *The School Board Role in Creating the Conditions for Student Achievement*. For more about the research that serves as the foundation for each of the six factors that support student achievement, an annotated bibliography of board-specific research, and a detailed list of professional development opportunities for board members, the full report is available at http://bit.ly/2ilfZb3.

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Mary Briggs is an Education Policy Analyst for the California School Boards Association.

Manuel Buenrostro is an Education Policy Analyst for the California School Boards Association.