Moving Beyond the Killer B's

The Role of School Boards in
School Accountability and Transformation

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Information Tools Training

Positive results for student achievement will come from changes in the knowledge, skill, practice, and ultimate behavior of their teachers and parents. State and district policies and programs must provide the opportunity, support, incentive, and expectation for all adults close to the lives of children to make wise decisions.

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Executive Summary

Locally controlled public schools are one of the cornerstones of our nation's democracy, yet many schools are not preparing students for success. Far too many students are not graduating, and many of those who do graduate are woefully unprepared for college or a meaningful career. Successfully initiating and sustaining meaningful improvements in the lowest-performing public schools is a pressing challenge for policy leaders and practitioners nationwide. Local school boards sit at the intersection of federal and state policy and local implementation of reform initiatives. Yet, ongoing efforts to improve public education focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents, as well as state and federal policymakers. Missing from this debate is a robust discussion or examination of the role of local school boards. In light of this disconnect, we sought to examine the research available regarding the role of local school boards in targeted improvement efforts and explore emerging practice through interviews with key practitioners in districts engaged in such efforts.

Our inquiry did not seek to examine the merits of elected school board governance compared to other structures (e.g. mayoral control or charter schools). While it is important to acknowledge that school boards as the central governance tool may be outdated and, by definition, a potential barrier to changes necessary if all students are to compete successfully in the global economy, local school boards remain an ingrained, if not beloved, entity. And, as the dominant form of school governance for the foreseeable future, it is critical that we consider strategies to leverage their authority to improve student outcomes. This report outlines our methods and key findings and identifies strategies we propose to more effectively leverage local school boards' potential to play a leading role in catalyzing and sustaining meaningful change that will lead to better outcomes for students.

Findings

Existing literature on school boards tracks their history, composition, responsibility, and practice. There is an established link between effective boards and effective schools and districts, but it is unclear whether the link is causal or correlational. School boards work within parameters established by state and federal laws and are charged with establishing the conditions that will ideally position school districts to successfully educate all students. It is not the job of school boards to run schools; in fact, attempts to do so often result in a level of dysfunction that can be a significant contributor to district decline. A board's most important role is to establish a district vision and mission, and thereafter select, supervise, and evaluate a chief executive officer—the superintendent—who is charged with leading the district and ensuring that policies and budget decisions align with an effective vision and mission.

The challenge facing school districts striving to improve is figuring out how to leverage largely volunteer boards of lay citizens, generally with limited time to devote to board work, to develop coherent and innovative policies in a climate that frequently reduces their role to that of tracking the "killer B's" (e.g., buildings, buses, books, and budgets). Factors that impede boards' substantive contributions include, but are not limited to, politics, a dysfunctional relationship between board members and a superintendent, board member and administrative turnover, lack of knowledge, single-agenda bias, interest-group politics, and financial insecurities.

Efforts to optimize boards' contributions to targeted improvement efforts hinge on cultivating effective board leadership, board induction, and ongoing training regarding board operations and education policy. State education agencies, professional associations such as state and national school board associations, and external vendors specializing in leadership development are positioned to play a central role in developing these conditions and assisting board members to realize and leverage their authority to improve schools.

Key Recommendations

Based on our review of the literature, interviews, and our own experience, we developed detailed recommendations according to specific levels of the public education system. The following is a synthesis of the key recommendations we propose could uncap the potential of school boards to function as central catalysts driving meaningful and sustainable school reform efforts. While some of these recommendations carry a cost, we propose that these investments would add value and potentially reduce other costs (e.g., cost of superintendent churn accelerated by dysfunctional boards and budget inefficiencies exacerbated by uninformed board members).

National Level

- Integrate funding to support highly focused school board training related to superintendent relations, roles and responsibilities, and governance into existing federal funding programs.

- Encourage board engagement in applications, and related guidance, for federal initiatives such as Race to the Top State and District, School Improvement Grants, 21st Century Schools, and Promise Neighborhoods.

- Incubate innovative school board capacity building strategies through federal programs such as the Investing in Innovation Fund (i.e., "I3").

- Offer grants or develop competitions to spur on entrepreneurial approaches to board capacity building.

- Foster partnerships between national organizations that support superintendents and school boards (e.g., American Association of School Administrators and National School Boards Association) to develop model school board evaluation rubrics and hold local school boards accountable for their performance through public disclosure of board evaluations.

- Establish state interventions to address serious board mismanagement and inattention to low district performance.

Regional Level (Across States and Within States)

- Encourage federally funded technical assistance centers—Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs)—to advocate for school board training and engagement as essential to successful implementation of bold change initiatives on an accelerated timeline.

- Incorporate school board training, coaching, support, and self-evaluation in state technical assistance plans developed by RCCs.

State Level

- Establish a state-level school board liaison charged with developing a statewide strategy for building local board capacity.

- Allocate funding to support school-board coaches to work with low-performing districts.

- Develop baseline training requirements for new and experienced school board members focused on process as well as substantive issues critical to establishing conditions for district and school success. These requirements should be coupled with clear accountability structures to ensure meaningful implementation.

- Provide experienced board members, and especially board chairpersons, access to high quality, relevant, and timely leadership training to ensure it adds value to their practice.

- Maintain a separate budget line item for board training to ensure it is preserved, even in difficult financial climates, and leverage the funds to hold training providers accountable for providing relevant and high quality training opportunities. This may include online training options.

- Develop tools to track and publish board training and capacity building efforts to inform school board elections. These data could be incorporated into district report cards (e.g., create a board capacity index).

- Create intentional collaborative training opportunities between national and state school board associations and their counterpart superintendent associations related to building productive relationships and targeted school change efforts (e.g., school turnaround).

- Create school board member recruitment pipelines that introduce community members to board service and provide basic training related to board member responsibilities.

- Incubate executive education opportunities with local institutions of higher education (e.g., colleges of education and colleges of business) to secure leadership-training opportunities for new and experienced board members.

Local School Board/Superintendent Level

- Engage local school board members as critical stakeholders positioned to shepherd coherent, effective, and sustainable implementation of federal interventions designed to improve public schools as well as state and district initiatives.

- Establish a culture of board professionalism that includes paying stipends to board members who assume greater positions of responsibility and allocating financial support for individual and group training opportunities.

- Establish policies that facilitate board professionalism (e.g., structured strategic planning, board evaluations, and board member self-evaluations) and integrate them into the standard board calendar.

- Seek mentoring relationships between new and experienced board members. These relationships can extend beyond school board members to include board members working in other nonprofits in the community (e.g., local college, hospital, or social support organization).

- Challenge and encourage board members to strategically question assumptions when it comes to district and school performance and student outcomes.

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"It will come as no surprise to most readers that America's primary and secondary schools are widely seen as failing. High school graduation rates, while improving, are still far too low, and there are steep gaps in achievement between middle-class and poor students. Even in the midst of high unemployment rates, business owners are struggling to find graduates with sufficient skills in reading, math, and science to fill today's jobs. School districts, teachers' unions, and parents are engaged in fierce debates over the best way to rein in climbing costs and improve standards. Meanwhile, progress is frustratingly slow, if in fact what is taking place represents progress at all."

(Council on Foreign Relations, 2012, Foreword)

"Many of the chronic obstacles to continuous, sustained improvement of student learning and performance in schools can be traced to dysfunctions of local governance structures, including highly fractionalized boards, members more interested in building their individual political careers than in learning the complexities of the work, instability in leadership caused in part by the short electoral cycles of school boards in comparison to longer-term work of school improvement, and seemingly arbitrary shifts in temperament, focus, and purpose of school boards accompanying shifts in board membership."

(Elmore, 2009, June, Foreword)

Introduction

Locally controlled public schools are a cornerstone of our nation's democracy, yet many schools are not preparing students for success: Far too many students are not graduating, and many of those who do graduate are woefully unprepared for college or a career (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal, 2012). Successfully initiating and sustaining meaningful improvements in the lowest-performing public schools in the U.S. is a pressing challenge for policy leaders and practitioners nationwide. We simply cannot afford, morally or economically, to continue to undereducate generations of students (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.). Traditional school reform initiatives designed to incrementally improve schools in three to five years are incongruous with the urgency driving federal and state policies focused on turning around the lowest performing schools—schools that in some instances have failed to educate generations of students and are characterized as "drop out factories" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Duncan, 2009). Ongoing efforts to improve public education, specifically to close the achievement gap between our most and least affluent students, focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents, as well as state and federal policymakers.[1] ***Largely missing from this debate is a robust discussion of the role or potential of local school boards to advance school reform goals.*** As the federal government allocates millions of dollars to district-level change efforts through programs such as Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants, local school boards sit at the intersection of these initiatives and the preferences and priorities of their local constituents. If we want to gain traction on scale, school boards have to play an intentional and strategic role in school improvement efforts.

As outlined in state constitutions, school boards are agents of the state charged with fulfilling responsibilities related to operating schools delegated to them by the state (Kirst, 2008; Yudoff, Kirp, Levin, & Moran, 2001). Within specific parameters, local school boards have the legal authority to craft the conditions for districts to operate successfully. Yet, historically, they have focused mainly on the "killer B's," (e.g., books, budgets, buildings, and buses)[2] and not academic achievement. Efforts to transform schools and districts in a meaningful and sustainable way will necessitate engaging local school boards to look beyond the "killer b's" to more strategic work—with a laser-like focus on improving student outcomes—while simultaneously remaining responsive to their local communities and associated idiosyncratic priorities.

On an encouraging note, there are signs that school boards are increasingly concerned with improving student outcomes. A recent national survey of school boards documented an explicit focus on academic achievement absent

[1] See, for example, U.S. Department of Education guidance pertaining to federal School Improvement Grants: http://www.ed.gov/category/program/school-improvement-grants

[2] Attributed to Paul Houston, former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, in Hess, F., & Meeks, O. (2011). *School boards circa 2010: Governance in the accountability era*. Washington, DC: National School Boards Association, p. 32.

from earlier surveys (Hess & Meeks, 2011). Yet much work remains to fully leverage and document the role of local school boards to ensure that their policies and practices align with the pressing need to ensure that all students are provided a high-quality education, enabling them to succeed in college and post-graduation careers.

Historical Context

To understand the potential influence of local school boards, it is important to look at their authority within the broader context of state and federal education policy. Dating back to the founding of the nation, public education has been the responsibility of the state. In turn, states have delegated this responsibility to locally elected school boards charged with overseeing the operations of specific schools. Over time, this responsibility has evolved to the oversight of clusters of schools organized under the administrative umbrella of central district offices operating as part of a larger system guided by state-specific education code and influenced by federal statute (Yack, James, & Benavot, 1987).

Elected school boards are a legacy of our origins as a nation of small rural communities (Land, 2002; Maeroff, 2011). Supporters of this governance model see local school boards as an essential reflection of our commitment to representative democratic government and local control (Alsbury, 2008; Walser, 2009). Yet many contemporary critics hold them in disdain and see them as a hindrance to both equity and quality (See for example, Keegan & Finn, 2004; Maeroff, 2011; Miller, 2008). They cite a history of low expectations, inequitable funding, and segregation by race and

> ### THE CRISIS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS
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> - 66% of eighth graders are not proficient in mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009. p. 4).
> - 68% of eighth graders are not proficient in reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 10).
> - 1,424 high schools in America, enrolling a total of 1,5 million students, are characterized as 'drop-out' factories in which fewer than 60% of their students graduate. (Balfanz et al., 2013)
> - 20% of students who do graduate require remedial course in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013)
> - 75% of the population in state prisons are high school dropouts (Harlow, 2003).

economic status as evidence that local control can lead to institutions that do not reflect our broader national values and commitment to equal opportunity (Maeroff, 2011).

Beginning in the 1960s and building on sentiments embodied in *Brown v. Board of Education 1954*, the federal government began playing a growing role in public education through federal legislation and categorical funding such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHCA). Both of these watershed laws were designed to provide resources to students marginalized in existing school systems largely due to policies developed by state and local school boards (e.g., policies that segregated students by race or due to a disability and funding structures that led to substantial inequities). Subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA and EHCA—the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) respectively—further expanded the role of the federal government. These Acts make funding available to provide additional support for specific groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities and students living in poverty). The particularly influential NCLB and associated regulations target persistently low-performing schools and support initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards aimed at ensuring that all states strive to teach a high level curriculum and administer rigorous assessments.

Contemporary Policy Context

As the federal government expands its influence over public schools, the role of local school boards is evolving (Land, 2002; Ziebarth, 2002). Yet, little attention has been paid to crafting and aligning the work of school boards with these initiatives. For instance, local school boards appear to be largely absent from the scholarly literature about targeted improvement efforts, as well as the federal program guidance related to efforts such as federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Waivers, School Improvement Grants (SIG), and Race to the Top (RTTT). For example, the initial guidance associated with the $400 million RTTT District grant competition included language regarding evaluating school boards, but this language was dropped from the final regulations. Given their central role in policy development, budget allocation, and superintendent hiring and oversight, the lack of an intentional means to engage school boards in efforts to dramatically improve student outcomes is problematic. If the efforts to turn around low-performing schools that are the intense focus of federal and state school transformation

initiatives are going to gain traction and be scalable within current governance parameters, local school boards need to be part of the equation.

In light of this apparent disconnect, we sought to examine the research available regarding the role of local school boards in targeted improvement efforts and explore emerging practice through interviews with key practitioners in districts engaged in such efforts. This report outlines our methods and key findings and identifies strategies we propose to more effectively leverage local school boards to improve fidelity of implementation of key reform initiatives such as school turnaround, transformation, restart, and closure under the federal SIG program.

Proposed Race to the Top District School Board Evaluation

The original Race to the Top guidelines for school districts included a requirement that districts formally evaluate school boards by the 2014-2015 academic year. The requirement was dropped due to public objection, but its initial inclusion in the guidelines reflected a growing sense of awareness on the part of the federal government that local school boards had a role to play in improving schools. The requirement both championed broader accountability for school boards, and presented an interesting approach to engaging them. These preliminary guidelines defined school board evaluation as:

...an assessment of the LEA [local education agency] school board that both evaluates performance and encourages professional growth. This evaluation system rating should reflect both (1) the feedback of many stakeholders, including but not limited to educators and parents; and (2) student outcomes performance in order to provide a detailed and accurate picture of the board's performance (U.S. Department of Education, p. 18).

While laudable, these initial guidelines did not specifically map out how districts would use evaluations, given that school boards are elected or appointed by elected officials, and therefore raised questions about the potential value of the evaluations in actually influencing board behavior or triggering specific action. In instances where board evaluations might indicate that, based on student performance, boards were not meeting performance expectations, it is unclear what steps local communities could take to hold boards accountable.

"The Panasonic foundation has found that effective boards operate at a higher level—the board level. They govern a school district. Their time is limited and valuable, so they don't waste it doing what staff members do. The other characteristic of effective boards is their willingness to take on tough challenges. They will "chew on the big bones"—issues that feel overwhelming but are critical to students' success. Other boards avoid the big bones and go for the little ones, chomping through details and staff-level decisions with relish. Such boards may feel productive. They are making decisions at every meeting and telling staff what they must do. Such boards are not governing; they are supervising, which means that they are not fulfilling their board duties."

(Mitchell, Gelber, Sa, & Thompson, 2009, p. 2)

Findings

Our analysis consisted of a review of the contemporary literature regarding school boards, along with interviews with 19 purposefully selected school board members and superintendents.[3] In identifying our sample, we sought representatives from geographically diverse districts that were actively engaged in focused school improvement efforts. For instance, we interviewed school board members from districts with large cohorts of schools receiving federal SIG funding and districts that were recent finalists or winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education.[4] The literature review provided an overview of the key research conducted on school boards and their roles and factors that influence their effectiveness. Augmenting the literature, the interviews provided a picture of how school boards approach their work and specifically targeted school improvement efforts. Our findings reflect practices and perceptions in districts actively engaged in targeted improvement efforts and therefore are not generalizable to all districts. Our analysis documented notable diversity in school boards' roles, responsibilities, and capacity and indicates that many school boards are not being fully leveraged relative to their position and power. The following sections outline the key findings that emerged from the literature and the interviews.

Characteristics of Local School Boards

There are approximately 14,000 school boards governing school districts that enroll a total of 53 million students in the U.S. In aggregate, these boards manage upwards of $600 billion in revenues and 6 million employees (Hess & Meeks, 2011). In 2010, the National School Board Association (NSBA) partnered with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Iowa School Boards Association to conduct a national survey as a follow-up to a survey they had conducted in 2002. In 2010, the partners surveyed a sample from NSBA's database of districts with an enrollment of 1,000 students or more. A total of 900 board members and 120 superintendents responded to the NSBA survey. The following characteristics of school boards are drawn largely from the survey NSBA conducted in 2010 (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

School Board Member Selection

School board members are typically elected, with a small minority appointed by either mayors or, as in the case of state takeovers (e.g., Philadelphia and Detroit), appointed by the governor or state board of education. When a board member resigns prior to the end of his or her term, sitting board members may collectively solicit and appoint new members. Of the board members responding to the NSBA survey, 95% reported having been elected to office. The remaining 5% reported having been appointed. The length of board members' terms were generally four years (61% of those responding). Terms were often staggered to ensure board stability as board members departed and new ones arrived.

With a few exceptions, voter turnout for school board races that are separate from general elections in November are very low, and school board elections were generally not heavily contested (Hess & Meeks, 2002, 2010, 2011; Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012). For instance, a board member we interviewed from an urban

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[3] For more information about study methodology, see Appendix.

[4] Established in 2002, the Broad Prize for Urban Education is a $1 million dollar award given to an urban district recognized for overall performance and improvement. For more information about The Broad Prize, see http://www.broadprize.org/about/overview.html

district enrolling more than 16,000 students reflected that while his district was located in a midsize city, less than 600 people typically voted in the school board elections. He explained that school board elections are not held at the same time as the general election in November; instead they are held in May to avoid school board elections becoming "too political."

Given the number of low-performing schools nationwide, it would be reasonable to expect that community dissatisfaction might lead to more turnover and more contested school board races. In fact, much of the scholarly literature regarding the merits of local school boards rest on the importance of citizens exercising their degree of satisfaction with their schools through school board elections (Lutz & Iannaconne, 2008). Yet nationwide, most board members remain on their boards until their terms expired and/or they departed by choice. For instance, when NSBA surveyed superintendents regarding incumbent board members losing to challengers, 43% could not recall this ever occurring, and 21% reported that it had happened only once in the past five years (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

> "School board members serve their local communities as stewards of public trust charged with making decisions that ensure all students have access to high quality learning experiences in efficient and well managed environments."
>
> (Nation School Board Association, 2011, p. 3)

The NSBA survey also documented that 68% of the board members surveyed characterized their most recent election as "easy" or "very easy," while 20% characterized it as "difficult" or "very difficult." Serving as a proxy for the extent to which campaigns were contested and involved active campaigning, 74% of the respondents to the NSBA survey reported that they spent less than $1,000 on their last school board campaign, with fewer than 3% spending more than $25,000. Our interviews with board members and superintendents reflected NSBA's survey results. Most board members we interviewed reported that they had initially and subsequently run without much opposition and that voter turnout during school boards elections was chronically low.

School Board Member Characteristics

When compared to the 2002 data, the 2010 NSBA survey documented that school boards are becoming more diverse along both gender and racial lines. In 2010, 56% of the board members surveyed were male, and 44% were female. In contrast, the breakdown was 61% and 39% respectively in 2002 (Hess & Meeks, 2011). While the majority of board members nationwide was white, the NSBA survey documented that since the 2002 survey, more minorities have joined boards in large, urban districts. For instance, while only 12% of the NSBA survey respondents in 2010 were African Americans, they represented 22% of the respondents from urban districts compared to 8% in 2002.

The majority of the NSBA survey respondents was between 40–59 years old, and generally had completed more years of education than the national average: 74% of these board members had a bachelor's degree, compared to 30% of adults over the age of 25. In line with data that indicate a correlation between education and income,[5] board members completing the NSBA survey generally had higher household incomes relative to the general public. The two most common occupations of board members were education (27%) and business (18%) (Hess & Meeks, 2011). While controversy can spur board turnover, board membership is relatively stable, with most members serving at least five years (Hess, 2008; Hess & Meeks, 2011; Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012).

School Board Size and Scope of Responsibility

Local school boards typically range in size from five to nine members, with just over three percent of the superintendents responding to the NSBA survey reporting that their board was larger than nine members. Board size and structure relative to district size and enrollment varies considerably. For instance, one of the board members we interviewed was part of the Addison Rutland Supervisory Union in Vermont—a consolidated supervisory union board of 23 members making decisions about 5 schools enrolling a total of fewer than 1,000 students. Another board member we interviewed was part of a 9-member board charged with overseeing 392 schools enrolling 350,000 students in Miami-Dade, Florida. Based on scale alone, the roles and responsibilities of boards are significantly different.

The scope of board responsibility also appears to vary according to broader state-by-state public school governance structures. For instance, many states have systems that include intermediate districts that are under the direct

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[5] According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, male high school dropouts earned an average of $421 a week, while college graduates earn $1,089 per week. United States Department of Labor, the Editor's Desk. Earnings by educational attainment and sex, 1979 and 2002. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2003/oct/wk3/art04.htm

or indirect (via the superintendent) purview of elected boards (e.g., Cooperative School Districts in Massachusetts, Education Service Centers in Texas, and Intermediate School Districts in Michigan) with varying levels of responsibility. Adding to the complexities in governance structures, 42 states have charter schools laws that permit the creation of public schools operating with varying degrees of autonomy from the local school districts. In 36 states, local school boards are not only responsible for the traditional public schools but are also responsible for semi-autonomous charter schools that operate under the district governance structure (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012).

Our interviews revealed variability in the role board members play in governance and, specifically, the degree of on-the-ground management. School board members in small, rural districts appeared to be more involved with managerial tasks than their peers in large, urban districts. For instance, one board member from a rural community with a K–12 total enrollment of just over 300 reported that as board chairwoman, she participated in all district employment interviews and decisions in her district. Similarly, a board member from another rural district, total K–12 enrollment 1,600, expressed detailed knowledge about his district's evolving use of data and about initiatives such as the SIG and adoption of specific reading programs.

At the other end of the spectrum, a board member from a large, urban district shared that much of her board work related to approving contracts valued at $250,000 and above. When asked about the greatest challenges associated with being a board member, she reflected that obtaining enough information about the complex issues facing the district to enable board members to have ownership of major decisions was an ongoing struggle. Another board member from an urban district equated board membership to being a "legislator representing constituents on matters related to education and academic programs and management of all facets of school district administration and operations." These diverse responsibilities and far-ranging perspectives demonstrate the heterogeneity of school boards' roles.

> ## Unique Characteristics of Rural Boards: Pittsfield Vermont, Population 425
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> Of the nearly 14,000 school boards in the United States, just over 50% administer districts serving fewer than 1,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). These boards are typically located in rural communities and include many with idiosyncratic situations—situations that raise questions regarding the efficacy of any one approach to engaging members or building board capacity in an effort to affect school improvement. For instance, in the town of Pittsfield, Vermont, the three elected members of the local school board oversee a school district that does not actually operate any schools. Pittsfield closed its elementary school in 1969. Since 1985, Pittsfield residents have been permitted to attend any public school in Vermont "or beyond, at taxpayer expense." In practice, the Pittsfield School Board allocates funds to pay the cost of sending its students to other school districts.
>
> Pittsfield taxpayers pay the full tuition, set by the receiving district based on an allocation of per-pupil expenses, if students—68 in 2010—attend a public school. Should the student elect to attend a private school, taxpayers pay the average per-pupil allocation of state primary or secondary public schools. The local supervisory union (SU)—a structure created in 1886 to allow towns to partner to "supervise" schools—is responsible for, among other things, additional costs associated with providing special education services, and the local school board is represented on the SU board. The Pittsfield School Board's primary responsibility is to oversee the community's relationships with other communities that enroll Pittsfield students and with the SU (The Pittsfield School Board, 2010).

School Board Member Time Commitment and Compensation

Serving as a school board member requires a significant amount of time. According to the survey conducted by NSBA, members of large district boards dedicated 15–40 hours per month to board responsibilities. Reflecting the differences in scale and scope of responsibilities in small versus large districts, upwards of 40% of board members from large districts reported that they devote more than 40 hours per month to board business. Members of small district boards, on the other hand, generally dedicated fewer than 15 hours a month to board responsibilities (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

Board members typically attend one or two formal meetings a month and participate in a variety of committee meetings and work sessions. In addition, members we interviewed reported devoting significant time to participating in school and community events to stay abreast of issues related to the constituents' interests (e.g., sporting events, award ceremonies, and school fundraisers).

Separate from formal commitments, board members also allocate time to reading background materials before meetings and generally trying to stay abreast of educational issues. While some—generally large urban and suburban—boards have staff to assist them with a variety of tasks such as scheduling and research (Hess & Meeks, 2011), most board members interact directly with constituents and are responsible for collecting and analyzing information independently.

Board members by and large receive minimal, if any, compensation. Of the 885 board members responding to the NSBA survey, 63% reported receiving no compensation for their service. Among the smallest districts surveyed, the percentage was 74%. Eighteen responding members representing districts with enrollments above 15,000 students reported that they receive $15,000 or more a year in compensation for board service. At the upper end of the scale, board members in Miami-Dade County are compensated $41,000 a year (Flaglerlive, 2011) and those in Los Angeles receive upwards of $48,000 (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2011).

Key Responsibilities of Local School Boards

Research on school boards indicates that communities have ownership and faith in public schools in part because they are governed by—and presumably responsive to—local constituents (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Lutz & Iannaconne, 2008). Dating back to the 1800s, boards—generally referred to as "committees"—were responsible for both policy and administration. School boards hired teachers to work in one-room schools, and their primary concerns were building or securing facilities, developing curricula, and hiring teachers (Land, 2002; Maeroff, 2011; Tyack, 1974). Professional educators charged with administrating schools did not become mainstream until the mid-1800s.

"Elected school boards are often seen as a reflection of America's commitment to democracy, providing a way for local community members to have a say in how their children's schools are run. Yet, these locally elected boards also face challenges that can lead to dysfunction. It is difficult for local voters to hold school board members accountable. Voters often do not know their elected school board member's name or responsibilities, and turnout in local school board elections—particularly those that occur "off-cycle," separate from elections for state and national offices—is very low. In Austin, Texas, for example, less than 3% of eligible voters voted in the most recent school board election."

(Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012, p. 3)

Having locally elected officials govern public schools presumably ensured that the individuals hired to run and teach in the schools, as well as the content that was taught, reflected the norms and values of that community. Yet, one of the factors that influenced the shift to professional executive educators leading school districts was a concern that corruption and politics were too heavily influencing school board decisions (McCurdy & Hymes, 1992).

Schools have evolved significantly since the early days of the New England colonies when public schools were an arm of the church and as such were charged with educating students about Christianity. Today, public schools are charged with preparing the next generation to enter college or develop a marketable skill. They are expected to meet specific performance objectives in a system heavily influenced by federal and state policy and related accountability systems.

As the role of schools has shifted, so has the role of school boards (Walser, 2009). School boards' responsibilities have morphed from administering basic operations to aligning federal, state, and local policies, crafting and shepherding complex budgets, and hiring and evaluating superintendents responsible for leading districts within a high-stakes accountability environment (Kirst, 2008).

The central work of contemporary school boards is codified in the *Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* produced by the NSBA in collaboration with state school board associations (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2009). The eight key areas of focus are vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaboration and community engagement, and continuous improvement. These are the specific areas that effective boards have been found to prioritize. However, if the role of the school board can be boiled down to a single critical action, it would be the hiring and supervising of the superintendent (Maeroff, 2011). The key areas outlined by NSBA in the *Guidebook* arguably promote ideal conditions for local boards to make rational hiring decisions and thereafter forge a productive relationship with their superintendent—a superintendent who makes student outcomes a priority and can withstand any distractions that threaten to undermine this critical relationship.

Our interviews with board members and superintendents confirmed that there is near-universal agreement regarding a school board's responsibilities. Whereas a few board members we interviewed commented that policies are increasingly being dictated by federal and state statutes, all agreed that their governance role is operationalized through their work in developing policies, constructing and overseeing district budgets, and hiring and evaluating the superintendent. However, though there was agreement regarding key responsibilities, there were differences in how board members actually allocated time to each board activity and the methods through which they made decisions.

Allocation of School Board Time

The board members and superintendents we interviewed commented that the quantity of time devoted to specific tasks generally did not reflect key priorities. For instance, they expressed frustration about limited time and attention given to evaluating the superintendent. One superintendent commented that their board devoted too much time to micro-level issues such

> **Key Work of School Boards**
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> The National School Board Association has developed a framework of eight critical areas that school boards should prioritize in order to be effective in improving student achievement. First published in 2000, the key works were updated in 2009. While not intended to be addressed in any specific sequence, the areas are to be considered and implemented as a whole to create optimal conditions for student success. The key works are:
>
> - Identify vision and mission
> - Develop standards for performance
> - Support assessment of performance
> - Implement accountability for performance
> - Align resources to support performance
> - Prioritize climate and culture
> - Develop collaborative relationships and engage community, and
> - Commit to continuous improvement (Germberling, Smith, & Villani, 2009).

as specific constituent complaints (e.g., the length of cheerleaders' skirts)—issues more appropriately dealt with at the school administrator level. A board member from an urban district commented that developing and reviewing policies is the most time-consuming responsibility, yet the task they have the least time to address. Expressing frustration with the practical reality that boards frequently do not devote enough time to the most critical tasks, a board member from a small suburban district noted that his board spends "the greatest amount of time on the least important issues such as athletics and busing."

Literature on the political nature of school boards documents that instead of being guided by the community at-large, agendas are frequently driven by those with the greatest vested interest (i.e., district personnel) (Hess, 2008; Howell, 2005; Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012). A board member from a rural community noted that it is critical for board members to remember that they represent the broader community. This can be particularly difficult when only those with the most knowledge and interest in the issues generally attend meetings. Reflecting on attendance at board meetings during a recent teacher strike, the board member noted that board meetings were "packed with teachers and others with a vested interest, and these attendees would be interpreted as 'representative of the community' when they were not. They were representative of *those with an interest.*" Other board members we interviewed noted that their meeting agendas were often influenced by whomever actually attended meetings.

When charged with implementing controversial decisions (e.g., removing long-serving principals or closing schools), school board members are not always prepared to navigate the influence of those with a vested interest in or the loudest voices relative to the broader community. A scan of articles in mainstream media reveals that school board meetings are frequently the epicenter of contentious debates regarding school closures, district consolidations, and restructuring—initiatives frequently introduced in an attempt to improve student outcomes and maximize shrinking resources (See for example, Vevea, 2012; Waller, 2012). In these instances, school board members are forced to make decisions with lasting implications for students, frequently with limited information or rational discussion.

Board Decision Making

In accordance with state statutes, school boards must follow laws requiring open meetings and transact their business transparently to the greatest extent possible. Within these parameters, boards approach decision making

in diverse ways. Whereas some boards largely defer to their respective superintendents to set the board agenda and introduce new initiatives, some of the boards in our sample relied on individual board members or board committees to develop new policies and introduce initiatives. This committee structure allowed multiple board members to take leadership roles in areas where they had an interest or expertise, created space for members to obtain more detailed knowledge on specific topics, and engaged board members while ideally avoiding micromanagement of the superintendent (Hall, 2008; Radakovich, 1999).

In determining an appropriate process, boards must balance the efficiency of relying on committees and the development of expertise on the part of individual members regarding specific issues—and potentially limiting the voice of some board members on some topics—against the benefits of having full board involvement. One board chairman indicated that he valued individual board members' acquisition of more in-depth knowledge about specific topics (e.g., state education funding formulas, state building codes, or curriculum); he noted that such leveraging of committees ensured that at least some board members would develop a level of expertise in specific areas, rather than all board members being generalists having to rely on district staff for in-depth information. However, some board members cautioned that decision-making by committees and board member specialization can foster micromanagement of district professionals.

Research on board committee structures has documented that to improve communication and be productive, an individual committee should focus on a major issue or critical area (e.g., curriculum or finance) and have a clearly defined role for the committee chair. Further, a successful committee also shares reports with the full board on a regular basis (Radakovich, 1999).

The Unique Role of School Board Chairpersons

School board chairpersons are typically charged with setting agendas and running orderly meetings in compliance with state open-meeting requirements. However, as the board member who generally has the most interaction with the superintendent and often serves as the spokesperson for the entire board, the chairperson is positioned to play a far more substantive role. Other than general information about board behavior, the literature is surprisingly devoid of information regarding the potential impact of effective—and conversely ineffective—board chairpersons. Our interviews documented diverse perspectives regarding board chairpersons' power and authority, with some chairpersons seeing their roles limited to process and others seeing themselves as central to building a focused and functional board.

"As a board chair, I think school boards in general are a thing of the past. Many of the board members are not educators by trade. We have to allow the professionals that we hire to make decisions. [Instead, we have] board meetings that frequently go from 6-12 p.m."

School board chairperson

At one end of the spectrum, a board chairperson explained that it was his role to set the culture and define expectations for the board. He noted that since he had become chair, the culture was "much more disciplined." "I describe a mission statement for the board and discuss our primary functions," he explained. "Our responsibility is fiduciary. I would not pretend to know how to teach third grade. We are there for overview, not details." This board chairman appeared to be intentionally leveraging his position, his personal authority, and the relationships he had with other board members and the superintendent.

At the other extreme, another board chairman we interviewed lamented that neither he, nor anyone else on his board, had much inherent power or authority. He explained that there was a "huge disconnect" between the perception that "the board has power, but the board has no power… the superintendent sets the agenda." In spite of the practical reality that his board had been explicitly charged with hiring and evaluating the superintendent, this individual felt unable to exert either the power that should have come with his position as chairperson or his own sense of personal authority.

Our interviews documented that school board chairpersons can and sometimes do play a central role in setting board identity and functionality, strong or otherwise. Indeed, effective board leadership can maximize the value contributed by all board members (not just the chair), while an ineffective chairperson can stymie a board's operations, as well as a boards' relationship with the superintendent. Based on our interviews, the variance appeared to be driven largely by individual board chairpersons' leadership styles and competence, as well as by internal board politics.

Managing the Board–Superintendent Relationship

The relationship between school board members and the district superintendent is critically important to the productive governance of a school district (Crane, 2005; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Walser, 2009). A functional board that is able to set priorities and select and thereafter support a superintendent is more likely to be able to attract and retain a high-quality candidate who is able to successfully lead the district. Conversely, a dysfunctional board that experiences ongoing discord may have a more frequent turnover of administrators and have difficulty setting an agenda and supporting the superintendent (Walser, 2009). These challenges can be especially difficult when superintendents are charged with making difficult, and potentially unpopular, decisions (e.g., school closures, district consolidations, and staff replacements) associated with focused school improvement efforts.

> "There is a disconnect between our priorities and how we spend our time. We are very involved in athletics, for example, and things that involve buildings and grounds. For some board members, that is what they know. They do not have much experience with academics."
>
> *District Superintendent*

Reflecting on the dividing line between the role of boards versus that of superintendents and other professional staff, a superintendent from an urban district explained it this way: "The majority of the [boards'] time should be spent on setting the 'whats' of the district such as vision and mission, while allowing the staff to develop and carry out the 'hows' of implementing the vision and mission." He went on to note that it can be challenging when there is disconnect in the "trustee's ability to separate the 'whats' from the 'hows.'" "It's hard for them to operate from a 30,000-foot level. They want to get into the work when they really need to trust and verify and hold staff accountable."

Overall, our interviews revealed an inherent tension in board members' need to obtain enough information to make good decisions, while at the same time being mindful not to micromanage the superintendent. Further, the literature on effective boards, along with our interviews, confirms that productive board–superintendent relationships are central to realizing effective policy development and decision-making that drive improvements in schools (Bjork, 2008; Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2002; Peterson & Fusarelli, 2008). Multiple factors (e.g., personality conflicts, narrow agendas, or role confusion) can undermine the building and sustaining of this relationship. Anecdotally, one of the superintendents we interviewed reported that he had seen school boards approve and reject critical educational initiatives based on the tenor of the relationship between the superintendent and individual board members rather than the merits of the actual issue.

Even if a school board functions well, the board–superintendent relationship is potentially fraught with inherent tensions: The superintendent generally has the greatest educational expertise, but the board is charged with evaluating the superintendent's performance. The evaluation process requires the board to assess decision making related to topics about which board members may have very limited expertise (e.g., retaining or dismissing an administrator or teacher based on performance). The superintendent is, in fact, frequently the most consistent source of training and information on such matters.

While some districts have a formal structure with which to evaluate their superintendent, others we interviewed reported that they did not. For instance, a board member from a large urban district explained, "There is not a formal evaluation mechanism in place. As a member of the board, I meet with the superintendent on a regular basis and have the opportunity to address concerns and bestow praise and encouragement as appropriate." Similarly, a board member from a rural district characterized the superintendent evaluation process, relative to other evaluations, as the "most shorthanded and informal." There is literature in the field of education as well as private enterprise that indicates a notable knowledge gap between the chief executive and the board members can hinder a board's ability to conduct robust evaluations and hold executives accountable (Mordaunt, 2006).

Correlation Between School Board Actions and Student Outcomes

Superintendents are charged with the day-to-day operations of school districts, but decisions made by school boards create the conditions in which the superintendent operates. To create optimal conditions for student outcomes, local boards must understand how their macro-level decisions impact principals, teachers, and students, and then align resources accordingly (Gremberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000). Heavily influencing the local context are

federal and state statutes that increasingly play a role in shaping local policy. For instance, while curriculum decisions have historically been made at the local level, they are increasingly being influenced by state and federal policy as exemplified by the development of the Common Core State Standards Initiative and NCLB Flexibility Waivers designed in large part to introduce rigorous standards nationwide and improve student outcomes.[6]

> "School boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers throughout the districts."
>
> (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000, p. 4)

The literature examining the correlation between school board behavior and student outcomes is limited and somewhat dated given our current policy context. Nevertheless, the seminal multiyear Lighthouse Inquiry Project conducted by the Iowa School Boards Foundation from 1998–2000 documented a correlation between student achievement and the actions and beliefs of board members that has potential relevance today (Delagardelle, 2008). The original study and subsequent follow-up projects demonstrated that particular school board actions and beliefs transfer to district personnel and lead to better student outcomes even in high poverty districts. Specifically, the Lighthouse study found the following board characteristics present in high performing, high poverty districts and missing in low performing, high poverty districts:

- Elevating vs accepting belief systems (e.g., board members see schools as elevating students' potential as opposed to seeing students' potential as fixed);

- Understanding and focusing on school renewal (e.g., board members understand improvement initiatives); and

- Action in buildings and classrooms (e.g., board members are knowledgeable about schools and specific goals). (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000)

The study identified general categories of actions and belief systems that helped boards create the conditions for school districts to succeed. These attributes may be informative for states and districts striving to craft relevant school board trainings and technical assistance.

The Lighthouse study is seminal in the school board canon because it documented the correlation between school board attributes and actions and student outcomes. While school and district performance is influenced by multiple complex, external factors, school board members are positioned to make a difference. Of note, individual board member's belief systems that shape their decisions and actions influence the quality of schools. Furthermore, board members' level of knowledge of the schools and the initiatives designed to improve student learning can make a qualitative difference in outcomes. The challenge for board members is to obtain enough knowledge to make informed decisions, while guarding against using this knowledge to micromanage the superintendent and staff.

School Board Training

To be effective managers overall, and specifically to initiate, support, and sustain targeted school improvement efforts (e.g., turnaround and transformation), local school board members require a clear understanding of their role in district governance and substantive knowledge about what changes are required to improve schools (Walser, 2009). Training provides school board members opportunities to learn about their key roles and responsibilities, as well as more substantive content related to education policy and practice (Carr, 2012).

Training of board members emerged as a critical aspect of building board capacity in both the literature and our interviews. It is seen as an area where boards are under-investing both in terms of time and resources.

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[6] The Common Core is a set of standards developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. While voluntary, 45 states have adopted the Common Core and are currently in the process of integrating the standards into their curriculum. The federal government did not play an official role in the development of the Common Core but has actively supported state adoption by including it as a component of the federal ESEA waivers. To date, 33 of the 34 states that have been granted ESEA waivers included a commitment to adopt Common Core standards.

Common core state standards. (2012). *In the states.* Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states; U.S. Department of Education. (2012). *ESEA Flexibility*. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/esea/flexiblity; Center on Education Policy (2012). NCLB/ESEA waivers. Retrieved from http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentSubTopicID=48

Of note, training board members about how to use data is a priority for the NSBA and affiliated state associations. These groups promote data use as the foundation of meaningful planning and holding superintendents accountable (National School Boards Association, 2011). Individual board members' ability to devote adequate time to obtaining training is a practical challenge that is difficult to overcome, especially in the majority of districts in which board members are essentially volunteers (i.e., paid less than $1,000 a year for board service) and district budgets are perpetually tight.

Training Requirements

Twenty-three states require school board members to obtain training with varying levels of prescription, rigor, and compliance (National School Boards Association, 2010). The state of Maine, for instance, requires new board members to participate in a single, two-hour orientation about freedom of information laws, while Texas requires new board members to complete at least 16 hours of training, specifies the focus (e.g., initial district orientation, orientation to state education code, and team building), and requires that experienced board members complete at least eight hours each year. In New York, newly elected members are required to complete six hours of training regarding fiscal oversight and governance skills. Of the states that require training, most allow both the state school board association as well as other approved external vendors to provide the training.

Requirements, however, only have meaning if the training is high quality, compliance is tracked, and there are consequences for noncompliance. For instance, while acknowledging that training is offered, some of the board members we interviewed commented that it was relatively limited and narrow in focus. One board member characterized the required training as "useless."

The enforcement provisions range from the state simply requiring that districts report information about training to the state and the local community to the authority to remove board members who have not obtained the required training (e.g., Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Virginia). A NSBA survey regarding training requirements documented that it was extremely rare for the state commissioner or state board to actually exercise their authority related to the training requirement (National School Board Association, 2010).

"School boards have untapped power. They have been overlooked as partners in reform, and yet, when they are involved constructively and appropriately in focusing the attention of the district on student achievement, great things can happen."

(Walser, 2009 p. xix)

By way of example, following a school board scandal in Georgia, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the state has the authority to withhold funding from districts in which board members fail to comply with training requirements, but the state has never exercised this option (Badertscher & Salzer, 2010). Due to concern about local school board capacity and a resulting crisis (e.g., loss of district accreditation), in 2012 the Georgia legislature added language that now permits the state to bar members from running for reelection if they have not completed their required training. Holding up compliance with the training requirement as a criteria for reelection presumably infuses a degree of accountability to the requirement. However, research has not been conducted regarding the actual impact of training requirements or implementation of consequences for failure to fulfill the requirements.

School Board Member Training: The Texas Approach

Under Texas Education Code 19, Section 61.1, school board members are required to complete annual continuing education training. The Texas code articulates specific hours and the content of this training. Board members that fail to complete the required training are subject to sanctions by the Texas Education Agency.

Type of Training	New Members	Experienced Members	Provider
Local district orientation	Required, no time specified	Not required	Local district
Orientation to the Texas Education Code	3 hours	3 hours	Regional Education Service Center
Update to the Texas Education Code	Sufficient time to address changes	Sufficient time to address changes	Regional Education Service Center or other registered provider
Team-building/assessment of continuing education needs of Board-Superintendent team	At least 3 hours	At least 3 hours	Regional Education Service Center or other registered provider
Additional continuing education based on assessed need and state Framework for School Board Development	At least 10 hours	At least 5 hours	Regional Education Service Center or other registered provider
Total Minimum Number of Hours	16 hours plus district orientation and Education Code update	11 hours plus district Education Code update	

Source: Texas Education Agency: http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4aspx?id=4327

Training Approaches

Our interviews revealed different approaches to training ranging from very structured and recurring training for boards and superintendents to relatively unstructured individual professional development. For instance, Memphis participated in the Broad Foundation's Board Training offered by the Center for Reform of School Systems over the course of a year, and their chairperson credited the training with significantly improving board capacity. Board members in Alexandria, Virginia obtained board training through a national executive search firm. Building on findings from the Lighthouse Project documenting the correlation between effective school boards and student achievement, the state of Idaho provides ongoing intensive training to local school boards.[7] The Lighthouse framework focuses on preparing board members to communicate a sense of urgency, focus on improvement, create conditions for district and school success, track progress, develop effective policies, and cultivate leaders (Delegardelle, 2008; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007).

Taking a different approach, the state of Montana hired school board coaches for its three lowest-performing districts to build rural school board members' capacity. The coaches work directly with school boards and provide them with guidance related to running effective meetings and maintaining a productive relationship with the superintendent as well as on more technical issues such as using data to inform policy. After two years of implementation, Montana officials have seen a dramatic switch in board agendas and a rise in levels of board involvement—a switch that is seen as positive and is credited with helping schools make notable academic improvements. The coaches have facilitated a shift to a more intentional discussion of academics (Rhim & Redding, 2011). Reflecting on the potent impact of intentionally building school board capacity, one official from the Montana Office of Public Instruction noted, "I have seen a huge switch from boards just talking about sports to talking about academics and following policies and procedures. They see that they set the tone for everything." A second official explained, "We had been hearing for years and years that the board is the decision-maker, and they need to set the right tone. We heard cries

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[7] For more information about the Iowa Lighthouse Project, see http://www.schoolboardresearch.org/section/projects_services/lighthouse

from across the state that they, the boards, were the biggest problem, but also could be the heart of the solution" (Rhim & Redding, p. 25).

While nearly all of the board members we interviewed stressed the need for and value of board training, one board chairperson from a rural community cautioned against too much training for school board members because additional information might foster micromanagement by board members. Training board members and superintendents together may be a strategy to diminish over-stepping of roles. In reflecting on the value of the board training, a board chairperson explained, "The critical piece was that we all had the same training and discussion during the training about the role of the superintendent and the expectations for each individual school board member. This led to a collective understanding of what we wanted to do and accomplish and our roles."

Training is generally funded at the local level, although some states fund their training through a combination of state and local funds. Although we documented near universal support of training, allocating adequate time and resources are a persistent challenge for school boards. Specialized training can be cost-prohibitive and, consequently, limited to large districts with correspondingly large budgets. Board member turnover can also be a challenge; it can be hard to justify the return on investment in training when board members cycle out of office every few years. Presumably reflecting these challenges, nearly half of the board members we interviewed stated that they had received either no training or minimal training from district officials when they joined the board. Most board

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Examples of School Board Training and Support Programs

California School Boards Association: Institute for New and First-Term Board Members
CSBA offers a two-day intensive seminar for school board members which focuses on effective governance, finance, human resources, and student learning. CSBA encourages superintendents to attend with their board members and waives the registration fee as an incentive.
Source: http://www.csba.org/~/link.aspx?_id=CC6E104299944A2A89F7C56B9F1F202F&_z=z

Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS)
CRSS provides multiple training programs for local school board members. The most intense training is the Reform Governance in Action® program developed in partnership with The Broad Foundation and offered to urban board members on an invitation only basis. Modeled after training programs for governors and members of congress at the Harvard's Kennedy Schools, the training entails intensive and ongoing instruction and support to urban school board members on leadership, board operations, and education policy focused on improving educational opportunities for students.
Source: http://www.crss.org/ and http://broadeducation.org/about/broad_institute.html

Hazard, Young, Attea, and Associates
Primarily an executive search firm, HYA also provides board workshops and retreats designed to build successful board/ superintendent relationships. Workshops focus on accountability, board governance, evaluation, goal setting, and teamwork development.
Source: http://www.hyasearch.com/

Montana Office of Public Instruction
In recognition of school boards' influence on targeted school improvement efforts and recognition by the state education agency personnel that many board members in rural communities have limited training opportunities, Montana developed an approach to building school board capacity: School Board Coaches. The coaches are part of the state-directed school improvement teams that work with schools that receive School Improvement Grants (SIG), all of which are located on Native American reservations. Coaches attend all board meetings to provide resources and direct training to individual members to build their capacity to be strong leaders and develop sound district policy.
Source: http://opi.mt.gov/Programs/Promise/index.html

National School Boards Association
NSBA hosts an annual conference that includes multiple training opportunities for new and experienced board members. For instance, the 2013 conference agenda includes a pre-meeting "New Board Member Boot Camp" and other offerings such as "Key Work of School Boards," "Basic Parliamentary Procedures," and "The Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind."
Source: http://annualconference.nsba.org/wp-content/uploads/NSBA-2013-Conference-Brochure.pdf

Texas Association of School Boards: Online Learning Center
On-demand training available to Texas school board members. Hour-long classes cover a range of topics and meet state training requirements for new and experienced school board members.
Source: http://www.tasb.org/services/lts/training/online_learning.aspx

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members explained that they had "learned on the job" and that they had gleaned much of their substantive knowledge from presentations by district personnel.

School board members we interviewed reported that self-directed learning is a key means whereby they stay informed about their practice and emerging education issues. This type of training is highly individualized and relatively inexpensive given the divers array of information available online, but depends on board members proactively seeking relevant and accurate information.

Local School Boards' Role in Targeted Improvement Efforts

Given their broad responsibilities, school boards are positioned to have a notable impact on targeted district and school improvement efforts. However, the research indicates that their role is largely "untapped" (Walser, 2009, p. xix). Our interviews with board members and superintendents in districts selected due to their school improvement efforts also indicated that boards are not being fully leveraged. Newspaper reports and accounts from state officials charged with working with districts to implement RTTT and SIG initiatives also indicated that boards are often left out of planning and implementation (Rhim & Redding, 2011). This exclusion can lead to school board members not understanding and potentially resisting unpopular changes (e.g., school closures or removal of popular but ineffective school leaders or teachers; Mussoni, 2011; Rhim & Redding, 2011).

Our interviews documented divers levels of knowledge and engagement in specific improvement efforts. The role of boards in our small and non-random sample, and specifically the extent to which they tapped their potential to drive change, varied and appeared to be influenced by multiple factors such as level of expertise, interest, relationships with superintendents, and time. Reflecting this sentiment, one board member commented, "school boards do not have much of a role in improving teachers" and attributed this powerlessness to the role of teachers unions who are more organized and sophisticated than local boards of education. Yet, school boards are the entities that negotiate with the unions and are therefore arguably the *only entity* that can potentially address policies that could improve teacher quality. Overall, the board members we interviewed expressed varied levels of awareness of improvement efforts, but none expressed particular ownership or deep personal commitment to the change efforts.

For instance, when asked about implementation of their SIG plan in a failing high school, one board chairperson reflected, "I am mystified about how this is supposed to work." Another board member explained that the state department of education was relatively prescriptive regarding implementation of SIG awards, and that while some decisions and recommendations came to the board, "most were directly from the district superintendent."

When asked to characterize his board's role, one superintendent explained, "The board has a very small role in school improvement in terms of a 'how to improve it' perspective." However, he noted that they "have a large role in holding the superintendent and staff accountable for improving student learning and outcomes that are tied to their strategic plan."

From the perspective of a superintendent striving to guide his board through a targeted improvement effort, one superintendent explained that it is an ongoing challenge to keep the board focused on big picture issues that support improved instruction. He noted that if not guided, his board can "get into the weeds." In particular, he commented that training his board how to understand and use data, including short-cycle assessment data, to drive decisions has been an ongoing priority. He explained that he saw the board as central to his effort to turnaround the schools in his district, but shared that he needed to devote a great deal of time to keeping the board educated about the difficult decisions that had to be made to drive the change required for targeted school improvement efforts.

Reflecting on the impact a lack of knowledge can have on their ability to shepherd the district and support school improvement, one board chairperson raised special education as an example of "one of the areas we have no control over. We do not make the decisions, and we can't ask questions because federal law limits policies and privacy issues limit the board's role." Given the importance of special education, both in terms of financial implications as well as instructional impact, the board member's perception of powerlessness is problematic. While an example of one strategy as opposed to a panacea, a more in-depth knowledge of federal and state special education policies would equip the board to be more discerning policy makers (Frank & Miles, 2012). For instance, although decisions regarding individual students are in fact clearly protected by federal statute, broad philosophical approaches to special education (e.g., positions regarding inclusion and investments in quality intervention programs and incentives to encourage team teaching) are rightfully within the purvue of school boards and appropriately communicated

through the superintendent. In fact, deep analyses of district resource allocation practices have documented that decisions related to specialized programs such as special education and English as a second language need to be carefully examined due to their high costs, problematic performance measures, and generally less than stellar outcomes (Frank & Miles, 2012).

One of the superintendents we interviewed explained that he has very intentionally broken district norms and engaged board members, including encouraging them to visit schools. In alignment with the findings from the Lighthouse Inquiry Project, he explained that he sees his board as an asset to his targeted school improvement efforts but that in order to leverage their authority, he needs to make certain they understand what is occurring academically in the schools. This information is crucial when faced with difficult choices. For instance, when faced with looming budget cuts, informed board members armed with the knowledge regarding what programs are adding value in light of the district's priorities regarding student achievement are better able to make meaningful decisions. He explained that this knowledge also helps individual board members see beyond specific, narrow agendas.

Some board members with knowledge of targeted improvement efforts such as RTTT and SIG saw federal initiatives as opportunities, whereas others expressed resentment over perceived federal mandates and degrees of prescription (e.g., turnaround and transformation). A challenge noted by three of the board members interviewed was their own resistance to change, along with that of their fellow board members—this in spite of clear evidence (e.g., low performance in multiple schools) of the need to change. In these instances, board members blamed accountability systems for incorrectly stigmatizing schools or expressed defensiveness about state and federal accountability systems perceived to hold schools accountable for broader social issues (e.g., poverty).

Reflecting on the relationship between boards and school improvement planning, one superintendent noted, "The district improvement plan was approved each fall and then never discussed again. It was an expensive doorstop. The board did not discuss district improvement except a discussion of the parts of NCLB that it did not like."

Factors Influencing a School Board's Ability to Support School Improvement

Based on our review of the literature and the interviews we conducted, we identified two primary factors that appear to influence board engagement and ability to support school improvement efforts: strategic focus and resources.

Strategic Focus

Intentional, goal-oriented, strategic planning was identified as foundational to effective improvement efforts by the NSBA, in the school board literature, and by a few of the board members and superintendents we interviewed. For instance, a board member noted that, assuming districts have adequate funding, a "strategic plan that identifies priorities is critical to moving the needle on student achievement." She explained that a strategic plan has a two-fold benefit: "it allows you to make sure the budget and resources are appropriately allocated and enables you to hold the superintendent accountable for the key priorities rather than lauding the ongoing successes that are there."

Conversely, absence of a clear strategic focus and competing agendas were identified as barriers to coherent board action related to student achievement. Board members noted that narrow agendas could motivate individual members; particular constituent issues could also sidetrack members. When asked to identify the greatest challenge he faces, one board chairperson explained that parents could divert board focus. He noted that parents "have a different view about how we should educate their kids," and they may prioritize "sports and activities over school."

At the other end of the line of authority, some board members shared that their roles were limited because the superintendent intentionally minimized them. A board member explained that the "district sees the board as something that needs to be managed" and to "validate what the district does," rather than a partner that adds value on substantive issues. Another board member identified "bureaucratic inertia" as an impediment to change and specifically the fact that not only does the board not want to change, but also there is "hubris among the district leaders and central office staff who do not see the need to improve or change things."

Developing a coherent district mission and vision along with a well-aligned strategic plan can ensure that school board and district personnel have a clear understanding of priorities and a road map to achieve goals (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000; Walser, 2009). A growing body of literature pertaining to effective school turnaround stresses the importance of school districts, as opposed to just individual schools, in achieving sustainable

turnaround at scale (Education Resource Strategies, 2011). Districts, starting with their school boards and superintendents, need to set agendas and thereafter allocate resources and develop policies to support the agenda.

Providing a tangible example of how he works to keep his board engaged and on task, one superintendent explained that he and his staff "developed a robust protocol, tied to a yearly calendar, that is aligned to their strategic plan. I meet weekly with the chair, vice-chair, and clerk and pre-report out on agenda items set for the next meeting. This is mostly for clarification and understanding. These issues are then reported to the entire board and deliberated in open meeting for motions and decisions. Everything we focus on is aligned to our strategic plan."

Another board chairperson shared a relatively sophisticated approach to developing a comprehensive strategic plan that aligned resources with student achievement goals in accordance with the state RTTT grant. She explained, "As a board, it is our role to develop the policy framework that places student achievement squarely at the center of all we do and to craft and adopt a budget that aligns revenue and resources with the needs of our students. As such, the board has been supportive of efforts to implement reform necessary to improve achievement, particularly in our lowest performing schools."

Fiscal Resources

A lack of resources is an ongoing challenge in public education further exacerbated in times of economic downturn. While the federal government has made unprecedented investments in public education, across the nation states and local districts are coping with flat, if not reduced, annual budgets. Accordingly, the NSBA survey in 2010 documented that the majority of board members (90%) identified budget and finance issues to be urgent board issues, and 75% see lack of resources as a barrier to improving outcomes for students (Hess & Meeks, 2011). Our interviews with board members and superintendents also revealed ongoing concerns regarding adequacy of resources relative to expectations of public schools. Multiple board members cited lack of resources as a barrier to achieving goals related to delivering quality education services. Yet, interestingly, other board members (including those from high poverty districts) did not identify lack of resources areas a primary concern but reported they face ongoing challenges due to multiple competing demands associated with internal and external structures (e.g., federal and state department of education requirements) that dictate how they allocate the limited resources they have.

While resource limitations have long-reaching implications for instruction, in terms of board capacity, they can have an exponential impact when boards are forced to make decisions regarding allocation of resources. In difficult budget climates it can be hard to allocate time and funding to board development, yet when resources are stretched, it is arguably the time boards could most benefit from a more in-depth understanding of their role, the external factors influencing their decisions (e.g., federal and state accountability requirements), and a nuanced understanding of how to optimize district resources to maximize student outcomes.

School Board Accountability

Accountability to local constituents is a leading argument regarding the merits of local school boards; local communities elect board members and therefore board members will be responsive and accountable to local communities. Yet, data regarding the extent to which board elections are generally contested, average duration of five or more years in office, and low voter turnout raise questions regarding whether there is actually real accountability for board members (Kowalski, 2002). In other words, the notion that local school board governance ensures a high level of accountability to local communities appears to be more façade than fact. While each year there are highly contested school board races, as noted previously, the vast majority of school board members who wish to continue to ostensibly volunteer significant quantities of time to govern local schools run unopposed and remain in office until they decide to leave (Kowalski, 2002; Samuels, 2011).

> "We tend to assume that their rightful evaluation happens at the ballot box. And true though that is on one level, the average voter may have no idea whether their elected representatives are empowering district leadership and staff to do great things or hamstringing them. Indeed, the list of innovative superintendents who stood up to corrupt or obstructionist board members only to find themselves suddenly deemed poor performers is too long to print here."
>
> Hawkins (2012, June 5)

In spite of these factors, which could point to erosion in accountability, board members we interviewed reported that they indeed felt accountable to their constituents. For instance, when asked how they evaluate their own performance as board members, most identified community satisfaction and reelection as their metrics for success. In addition, they identified adequate preparation for meetings and their ability to contribute to meaningful policymaking as measures of their contribution. Interestingly, while two board members noted they assess their own performance based on progress according to the district strategic plan, *none* of the board members we interviewed explicitly identified student performance as the metric they use to assess their performance.

Efforts to infuse accountability into school governance include shifts from school board governance to mayoral control and a variety of school choice initiatives (e.g., charter schools and vouchers) that shift control to individual parents. An example of ultimate school board accountability is local or state statutes authorizing removal of elected boards or reconfiguration of their purview under dire circumstances. For instance, multiple cities have shifted from elected boards to mayoral control in an effort to improve district financial or operational health (e.g., Cleveland, New York, and Washington, DC). Multiple states (e.g., Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania) have passed legislation authorizing removal of elected boards and replacing them with appointed boards or emergency managers charged with turning around the district's fiscal operations. These efforts are generally heavily contested by key interest groups such as teachers' unions and have had generally mixed effects (Maeroff, 2010; Rhee & Fenty, 2010; Wong & Shen, 2008).

Ultimate School Board Accountability

State Takeover of School Districts

As elected officials, local school board members are accountable to their communities. However, multiple states have statutes that authorize the state department of education to take over local school districts in instances of financial or academic failure. Shifting from an elected to an appointed board is another strategy states, under explicit legislative mandates (e.g., California, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania), have implemented to improve individual schools or entire districts. While the leading trigger of takeovers is financial mismanagement, concerns about student performance are generally highly correlated with poor fiscal performance (e.g., Baltimore; Chester Upland, Philadelphia; Newark; New York City; and Washington, DC).

Evidence from state takeovers (e.g., replacing the elected board with an appointed board and then initiating substantive financial, governance, and operational changes) raises significant political as well as practical questions about the potential merits of this approach and findings are contextual. Research on Baltimore, Maryland and Chester Upland and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania as well as emerging lessons from Detroit and Highland Park, Michigan indicate that while takeovers can dramatically improve the fiscal health of a district, sustainable changes to the academic performance of schools is far more challenging (Pratt Dawsey, 2012; Rhim, 2007; Scott, 2012; Stringfield, 2008).

A less explored option is state or district initiated school board accountability. Initial guidance regarding the federal RTTT Districts grant competition included a requirement that districts conduct school board evaluations, but lacked details regarding meaningful implementation. While dropped from the final requirement, it spurred a preliminary discussion of the potential value and logistics of school board evaluations. Reflecting on the need for substantive means to hold school boards accountable, journalist Beth Hawkins reflected that, "We tend to assume that their rightful evaluation happens at the ballot box. And true though that is on one level, the average voter may have no idea whether their elected representatives are empowering district leadership and staff to do great things or hamstringing them. Indeed, the list of innovative superintendents who stood up to corrupt or obstructionist board members only to find themselves suddenly deemed poor performers is too long to print here" (Hawkins, 2012).

The biggest challenge associated with regulatory attempts to introduce school board accountability measures is the previously mentioned conviction that locally elected school boards are a critical reflection of our democracy; infusing regulations into the selection process fundamentally conflicts with our notion of representative democracy. Consequently, while school boards are representative of their community, with the exception of a few extreme examples, it is unclear the extent to which they are actually held accountable for the performance of the schools they oversee.

Conclusions, Questions, and Recommendations

Local school board governance is a carryover reflecting our nation's development rather than an intentional structure designed to produce optimal results in dynamic organizations charged with preparing students to compete in the 21st Century (Maeroff, 2010). Whereas it was rational to elect local citizens to run small public schools to ensure that the schools reflected the community's values and distinct economy in the 18th century, today's complex policy context and global economy could arguably benefit from a different structure. While our inquiry did not seek to examine the merits of elected school board governance compared to other structures (e.g. mayoral control or charter schools), it is important to acknowledge that school boards as the central governance tool may be outdated and, by definition, a potential barrier to changes necessary if all students are to compete successfully in the global economy. Yet, local school boards remain an ingrained, if not beloved, entity. And, as the dominant form of school governance for the foreseeable future, it is critical that we consider strategies to leverage their authority to improve student outcomes.

Existing literature on school boards tracks their history, composition, responsibility, and practice. There is an established link between effective boards and effective schools and districts, but it is unclear whether the link is causal or correlational (i.e., Are high performing districts able to recruit and sustain effective boards, or do effective boards lead to high performance?). School boards work within parameters established by state and federal laws and are charged with establishing the conditions that will ideally position school districts to successfully educate all students. It is not the job of school boards to run schools; in fact, attempts to do so often result in a level of dysfunction that can be a significant contributor to district decline. A board's most important role is to establish a district vision and mission, and thereafter select, supervise, and evaluate a chief executive officer who is charged with leading the district and ensuring that policies and budget decisions align with an effective vision and mission.

In districts with low-performing schools, school boards can, and arguably should, play a central role in creating the right conditions to initiate, support, and sustain bold improvement efforts. To assume this important role, boards need to move past focusing on the "killer B's" (e.g., books, budgets, buildings, and buses) to a more sophisticated leadership model in which they intentionally set priorities, develop strategic plans, align resources, and hold key actors accountable for actions required to sustain a laser sharp focus on student outcomes.

The challenge facing school districts striving to improve is figuring out how to leverage largely volunteer boards of lay citizens to develop coherent and innovative policies and practices in a climate that frequently reduces their role to that of budget hawks or single-issue politicians. Factors that impede a board's positive contribution include, but are not limited to, politics, a contentious relationship between board members and superintendent, board member and chief executive officer turnover, lack of knowledge, single-agenda bias, and financial insecurities. Based on our review of the literature and interviews with a purposeful sample of board members and superintendents, efforts to optimize a board's contribution to targeted improvement efforts hinge on cultivating effective board leadership, board induction and ongoing training regarding board operations, and education policy. State education agencies, professional associations such as state and national school board associations, and external vendors specializing in leadership development are positioned to play a central role in developing these conditions and assisting board members to optimize their potential to improve schools.

Striving to improve the lowest performing schools remains a national priority. As policy leaders at the federal, state, and local level continue to devote increasingly scarce resources to improving schools and districts, local school boards must be part of the conversation if there is hope for dramatic and sustainable change. Rather than dismiss school boards from the conversations as antiquated holdovers from a different time and short of a massive overhaul of how school districts are governed, local school boards are positioned to play a critical role in school improvement interventions, especially as the conversation evolves from change to sustainability.

Recommendations

Based on our review of the literature, interviews, and our own experience, we developed recommendations according to specific levels of the public education system. We propose these actions could uncap the potential of school boards to function as central catalysts driving meaningful and sustainable school reform efforts. While some of these recommendations carry a cost, we propose that these investments would add value and potentially reduce

other costs (e.g., cost of superintendent churn accelerated by dysfunctional boards and budget inefficiencies exacerbated by uninformed board members).

National Level

- Integrate funding to support highly focused school board training related to superintendent relations, roles and responsibilities, and governance (e.g., effective teams, data-driven decision making, school improvement and turnaround strategies, and human-capital management) into existing funding streams (e.g., ESEA and IDEA).

- Encourage substantive local board engagement in applications, and related guidance, for federal initiatives such as Race to the Top state and district, School Improvement Grants, 21st Century Schools, and Promise Neighborhoods.

- Incubate innovative school board capacity building strategies (e.g., produce and publish free high quality online curricula analogous to Khan Academy that would allow board members to access relevant and high quality content when convenient to their schedule and location) through federal programs such as the Investing in Innovation Fund (i.e., "I3").

- Incentivize states and districts to be creative when developing technical assistance and support structures for school boards that go beyond basic board functions and focus on district performance (e.g., offer grants or develop competitions to spur on entrepreneurial approaches to board capacity building).

- Integrate incentives into existing postsecondary funding streams (e.g., grants awarded under the auspices of the Higher Education Opportunity Act) to incorporate board relations into school and district administrator training programs, highlighting the value of leveraging board members to drive, support, and sustain school change efforts.

- Foster partnerships between national organizations that support superintendents and school boards (e.g., American Association of School Administrators and NSBA) to develop model school board evaluation rubrics to guide training decisions, facilitate board self-assessments, and potentially hold school boards accountable for their performance through public disclosure of board evaluations.

- Establish state interventions to address serious board mismanagement and inattention to low district performance.

Regional Level (Across States and Within States)

- Encourage federally funded technical assistance centers—Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs)—and relevant nonprofits to advocate for school board training and engagement as essential to successful implementation of bold change initiatives on an accelerated timeline (e.g., turnaround) that rely on policy level changes such as effective teacher and leader evaluation.

- Develop practical technical assistance tools to 1) demonstrate why engagement of local school board members is critical to effective and sustainable school improvement efforts, and 2) identify strategies for districts to engage boards without fostering micromanagement.

- Incorporate school board training, coaching, support, and self-evaluation in state technical assistance plans developed by RCCs.

State Level

- Establish a state-level school board liaison charged with developing a statewide strategy for building local board capacity.

- Allocate funding to support school board coaches to work with low-performing districts.

- Develop baseline training requirements for new and experienced school board members focused on process as well as substantive issues critical to establishing conditions for district and school success (e.g., effective superintendent hiring, supervision, and evaluation; understanding data; understanding district and school improvement strategies; and negotiating for performance-based teacher assessment systems). These requirements should be coupled with clear accountability structures to ensure meaningful implementation.

- Provide experienced board members, and especially board chairpersons, access to high quality, relevant, and timely leadership training to ensure it adds value to their practice.

- Maintain a separate budget line item for board training to ensure it is preserved, even in difficult financial climates, and leverage the funds to hold training providers accountable for providing relevant and high quality training opportunities. This may include online training options.

- Develop tools to track and publish board training and capacity building efforts to inform school board elections. These data could be incorporated into district report cards (e.g., create a board capacity index).

- Create intentional collaborative training opportunities between national and state school board associations and their counterpart superintendent associations related to building productive relationships and targeted school change efforts (e.g., school turnaround).

- Develop inter-district board relationships that would provide a structure for board members to observe other boards' operations and share best practices (e.g., invite a board chair struggling with long board meetings and micro-managing or inattention to district performance to observe a board chair leading a well-run meeting or observe how the superintendent shares data with the board).

- Engage charter school board members in training opportunities and encourage cross-pollination of ideas between traditional and charter school board members (e.g., efficient use of time, people, and money; innovative programs for students with disabilities and English learners; and creative allocation of resources to support key priorities).

- Create school board member recruitment pipelines that introduce community members to board service and provide basic training related to board member responsibilities.

- Examine statewide school board member election policies to determine whether the timing of the board member elections (i.e., occurring separate from general elections) is diminishing accountability and whether school board member term limits could lead to beneficial board member turnover.

- Incubate executive education opportunities with local institutions of higher education (e.g., colleges of education and colleges of business) to secure leadership training opportunities for new and experienced board members.

Local School Board/Superintendent Level

- Engage local school board members as critical stakeholders positioned to shepherd coherent, effective, and sustainable implementation of federal interventions designed to improve public schools (e.g., ESEA Flexibility waivers, Race to the Top for states and districts, School Improvement Grants, and 21st Century Schools) as well as state and district initiatives.

- Engage school boards and district leadership in development of shared and strategic goals with companion implementation plans to drive focused, bold change efforts and ensure that the budget process and priorities align with the strategic plan.

- Engage neighboring school boards with a track record of success to share best practices developed in similar policy environments.

- Establish a culture of board professionalism that includes paying stipends to board members who assume greater positions of responsibility and allocating financial support for individual and group training opportunities (e.g., attend state and national school board association meetings and participate in online training opportunities).

- Establish policies that facilitate board professionalism (e.g., structured strategic planning, board evaluations, and board member self-evaluations) and integrate them into the standard board calendar.

- Seek mentoring relationships between new and experienced board members. These relationships can extend beyond school board members to include board members working in other nonprofits in the community (e.g., local college, hospital, or social support organization).

- Enlist superintendents, building administrators, and sitting board members to promote board service and recruit potential board members with diverse knowledge and skills.

- Sponsor public awareness campaigns to encourage more candidates to run for school board positions and for the public to more fully participate in board elections.

- Expect and encourage board members to strategically question assumptions when it comes to district and school performance and student outcomes.

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Appendix

Methodology

There is a broad and deep literature regarding the role of school boards and the value of having public school districts governed by elected citizens (See for example, Alsbury, 2008; Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1986; Danzberger et al, 1987; Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000; Land, 2002). However, the literature related to the board's role in targeted school improvement efforts in the current high-stakes NCLB-era accountability environment is limited. To understand the evolving role of school boards in our current context, we reviewed the literature and conducted interviews with a purposefully selected sample of school board chairs and superintendents regarding the role of school boards in dramatic school improvement efforts.

Research Questions

Our examination of the literature and interviews sought to address the following questions:

- What are the major characteristics of school boards?
- What are the key responsibilities of school boards in contemporary public education?
- How do board members build capacity to effectively govern districts?
- What role do local school boards play in targeted district and school improvement efforts driven by federal and state accountability frameworks?
- What policies and practices position or impede school boards to support school improvement?
- What steps can superintendents, state education agencies, or federal government take to build local school board capacity?

Interview Sample

In developing the sample, we sought to augment the literature review by interviewing a small sample of individuals representing "information rich cases" that would help us garner an understanding of the diverse factors that influence board behavior relative to school improvement (Patton, 1980). We used the following means to identify a diverse range of districts:

- participation in prescribed school improvement initiative developed by the Academic Development Institute (i.e., Academy of Pacesetting Districts)[8];
- districts receiving federal School Improvement Grants (SIG);
- districts in states receiving federal Race to the Top grants (RTTT); and,
- districts identified as engaging in progressive school reform initiatives in Education Week (e.g., finalists or winners of The Broad Prize for Urban Education).

Our selection criteria reflected our interest in interviewing representatives from districts actively engaged in targeted school change initiatives. The specific change approach was less important than the broader commitment, given our interest in discerning the board's role in the effort. Within this sample, we intentionally sought to identify

[8] The Academy of Pacesetting Districts (APD) was a year-long training and change management opportunity developed by the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) for executive-level leaders in self-selected local education agencies (LEAs) to explore their current district operations with a particular focus on district-level support for school improvement. Building on emerging literature regarding the central role of schools districts in effective school transformation efforts, the goal the goal of the APD was to support districts as they develop efficient and effective policies, programs, and practices to enhance growth in student learning – each tailored to a school's specific needs.

CII developed APD as a follow-up to a similar state level initiative; the Academy of Pacesetting States. After participating in the Academy of Pacesetting States, participants indicated that their efforts to support change at the individual school level could not reach all of the schools needing improvement. They proposed that LEAs are in the best position to provide such support and are ultimately accountable for student learning results. As a result, APD focused on the development of LEA capacity to affect school improvement.

By the end of the APD, District Pacesetter Teams emerged with a formal plan for employing practices proven to promote and support positive change at the school and classroom level – a plan mapped-out in an Operations Manual for a District System of Support. State APD teams attended an initial training and then, during the course of the year in which they participated, hosted kickoff meetings, organized district learning sessions and monthly working sessions, provided mentoring, and hosted district summit meetings.

For more information about APD, see: http://www.centerii.org/districts/

informants working in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. The sample is not representative but purposeful and information rich reflecting our interest in gathering information from a cross-section of school districts in line with the diversity between and within states.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our research team reviewed the literature and conducted the telephone interviews between December 2011 and July 2012. The literature review included relevant books, monographs, journal articles, research reports, and theoretical texts. We used an interview protocol to guide the interviews and took extensive notes during the interviews. The interviews lasted between 30–75 minutes based on informant availability and perspective. After the interviews, we each summarized our findings and reduced the data according to broad categories to facilitate analysis across the interviews. In analyzing the interview data we sought to identify recurring themes.

Interview Participants

Informant*	District	Characteristics
Eric M. Anderson	Christina School District, Board President Wilmington, Delaware (Resigned June 2012)	District in RTTT state Urban district
Margaret Atkinson	Brattleboro Union High School District #6, Board Chairman Brattleboro, Vermont	School Improvement Grant Academy of Pacesetting Districts Rural district
Lisa Bartusek	National School Boards Association Associate Executive Director Alexandria, Virginia	National Association Representative
June Bear Tusk	Lame Deer Public Schools, Board Chairwoman Lame Deer, Montana	School Improvement Grant Rural district
Ericka Ellis-Stewart	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Board Chairwoman Charlotte, North Carolina	District in RTTT state 2011 Broad Prize Winner Urban district
Stephen Manning	Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, Board President Wyoming, Michigan	School Improvement Grant Academy of Pacesetting Districts Rural district
Sheryl Gorsuch	Alexandria City Public Schools, Board Chairwoman Alexandria, Virginia	School Improvement Grant Urban district
Lornie Hach	McLaughlin School District 15-2, Board Chairwoman McLaughlin, South Dakota	School Improvement Grant Academy of Pacesetting Districts Rural district
Phillip Kelly	Boise School District, Board of Trustees member Boise, Idaho	School Improvement Grant Urban district
Betty Mallot	Memphis City Schools, Board of Commissioners member Memphis, Tennessee	District in RTTT state Urban district
Heath Morrison	Superintendent Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina Formerly Superintendent, Washoe Country School District, Nevada	AASA Superintendent of the Year
Keith Oliverira	Providence Public Schools, Board President Providence, Rhode Island	District in RTTT state Urban district
Candy Olson	Hillsborough County Schools, Board Chairperson Hillsborough, Florida	District in RTTT state Urban district
Brad Smith	Ogden School District, Superintendent and Former Board Chairperson Ogden, Utah	Superintendent, bold change
Susan Smith Bunting	Indian River School District, Superintendent Selbyville, Delaware	AASA Superintendent of the year finalist
Thomas Spangenberg	Addison Rutland Supervisory Union, Board Chairperson Castleton, Vermont	School Improvement Grant Academy of Pacesetting Districts Rural district
Perla Tabares Hantman	Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Board Chairperson Miami-Dade Public Schools, Florida	Board member bold change 2011 Broad Prize finalist
Elizabeth Torres	New Haven Public Schools, Board member New Haven, Connecticut	Board member bold change

All informants granted us permission to identify them and their respective school district.

Interview Protocol with Probes

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. As I mentioned when I initially contacted you, I am conducting an analysis for the Academic Development Institute on the role of school boards in school improvement efforts. I am going to ask you some basic descriptive questions, but I would like to devote most of our time to learning about how your board operates and its role in setting the district's agenda and, specifically, its role in initiating and supporting school improvement efforts.

The end product of our research will be a report to be published by the Academic Development Institute that will be disseminated to policymakers and practitioners at the state and district level. I would like permission to quote you. Are you comfortable with being quoted in the final report?

BASIC BACKGROUND DESCRIPTORS

How long have you served on the board?

☐ 0-2 years ☐ 2-5 years ☐ 5+ years

Process of joining board?

☐ Elected ☐ Appointed

Board Size:

☐ 3-5 members ☐ 6-9 members ☐ 10+ members

Role

☐ Chair ☐ Officer (e.g., vice chair, secretary, treasurer) ☐ Member

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Roles and Responsibilities

What do you see as your three primary responsibilities as a board member?

Probes: Identifying goals?
Overseeing district operations?
Developing and managing budgets?
Supervising the superintendent?
Other human resource issues?
Advocating for the district?
Monitoring data?
Driving reform?
Other?

In an average month, how do you divide your time associated with board-related responsibilities/activities?

If the time allocated to board work does not reflect stated priorities…

You identified 1, 2, 3 as your primary responsibilities, but you devote most of your time to 4, why is that?

What aspects of board work do you find the most challenging, and why?

How are decisions typically made by your board?

Probes: Superintendent generates recommendations to the board for approval?
Decisions formulated by committees and brought to board?
Full board examines issues and makes recommendations?
Other?

How does your board evaluate the superintendent?

Probe: Frequency of evaluations?
Process?
Consequences for positive and negative evaluations?

How do you personally measure your contribution and performance?

Role in School Improvement Efforts

Your district was selected because it is engaged in efforts to improve performance of district central office and/or specific schools (e.g., participation in APD, recipient of SIG, RTTT state, reputation for bold change initiatives); please tell me about your board's role in these efforts?

    Probe: Level of knowledge?
           Degree of ownership/commitment?
           Catalyst for reform?
           Board advocacy?
           Other?

What role does the district central office play in the efforts?

Has the initiative required you to change how you allocate people, time, or money in the district?

    Probe: Hire/assign/evaluate staff?
           Alter master schedule, length of school day or year?
           Redirect budget?

What, if anything additional, do you think needs to occur for the district to successfully improve student performance? Conversely, what barriers do you face as a board?

What, if any, external factors influence these improvement efforts?

    Probe: State accountability?
           Federal accountability?
           Parent/community?
           Business community?
           Philanthropic community?
           State or national school board association?

How do you track and evaluate the improvement efforts?

Induction/Training/Capacity Building

What if any training did you receive when you first joined the board and an on ongoing basis?

    Probes: Form/method?
            Focus?
            Value?

Where do you obtain information you need to make board decisions?

    Probes: Superintendent?
           School district website?
           State department of education?
           State school board association publications?
           National school board association publications?
           Reading (e.g., newspapers, journals, blogs)?
           Other?

What, if any, recommendations can you offer regarding how to effectively and efficiently build school board capacity to support district and school improvement efforts?

    Probe: Superintendent/School district?
           State education agency?
           State or national school board associations?
           U.S. Department of Education?
           Business community?
           Philanthropic community?

Thank you for your time. Do you have anything else that you would like to share with me regarding how your board operates and sets priorities?

For more information on
School Boards,
School Accountability, and Transformation
please visit
www.adi.org