Washington Central Unified Union School District

WCUUSD exists to nurture and inspire in all students the passion, creativity and power to contribute to their local and global communities.

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Washington Central Unified Union
School Board Meeting
11.4.26
6:15-9:15 PM
(In-Person & Virtual)
Doty Elementary School
24 Calais Rd.
Worcester, VT

Virtual Meeting Information
https://tinyurl.com/5n7488ch
Meeting ID: 897 1183 4955
Password: 736519
Dial by Your Location: 1-929-205-6099

1. Call to Order

2. Welcome and Invitation for Community Engagement — 90 minutes
   2.1. Collaborative Conversation - pg. 3

3. Board Learning
   3.1 School Board Roles/Responsibilities, VSBA - pg. 4

4. Adjourn

NOTE: To ensure the board has time to conduct its business, the board will adhere to a strict 1.5 minute public comment time limit per person. Microphones will be muted when time is up. If there is not enough time on the agenda for all members of the public wishing to comment at the beginning of the meeting, there is additional public comment at the end of the meeting.

WCUUSD Board Norms - Adopted 9.17.25

- ***Public input*** *–Notify the community about public forums and opportunities for public comment at board meetings, and the ability to always submit written input.*
- ***Community involvement during regular meetings of the board*** *– Every meeting will include at least one opportunity for public comment. Public comment is an opportunity for board members to listen. If a board member feels a concern raised in public comment warrants further board discussion, they may request that the steering committee discuss and decide how the issue should be added to a future agenda.*
- ***Community dialogue*** *– The board will periodically schedule community forums that allow for dialogue, questions and answers from the board or the district leadership team.*
- ***Stay on time*** *– Start and end on time. The chair may appoint a time-keeper.*
- ***Inclusive time for thoughtful decisions*** *- The chair and agenda steering committee will plan time for complex or contentious issues to be discussed at more than one meeting before the board votes, except where a decision is urgent.*
- ***Prepare for meetings and Receive materials in advance****-Board members come prepared, having reviewed the agenda and materials in advance*
- ***Announcements in reports*** *– Announcements from the administration will appear in the reports and not as discussion items.*
- ***Respect each other*** *– Listen, allow others to be heard, share concerns, assume positive intentions, be present, focus on shared solutions and celebrate successes.*
- ***All voices will be heard****- Every board member gets a chance to speak. Some topics warrant having each board member speak in turn to ensure full representation.* Board members will address the topics up for debate and not the person.
- ***Governance Reflection*** *- At the end of each board meeting, reflect on whether the board adhered to agreed protocols, processes, and policies.*
- ***Reflection*** *–At the end of each board meeting, board members will be allowed time to share their general reflections on the meeting.*

AGENDA KEY

Agenda Section	Examples	Role/ Responsibility	Description
Call to Order	n/a	Board Chair or designee	Formal opening to meeting. Superintendent calls to order during annual reorganization
Public Comment			Opportunity for public comment on items not on the agenda. Board will adhere to a strict 1.5 minute public comment time limit per person. Microphones will be muted when time is up. If there is not enough time on the agenda for all members of the public wishing to comment at the beginning of the meeting, there is additional public comment at the end of the meeting.
Executive Session	Personnel Student Matter Negotiations		Only for discussion of items covered in VSA §313. Formal actions not taken in Executive Session
Reports to the Board	Superintendent/ COLT Student Report	Administration	Both regular/recurring reports and one-time reports happen here. One-time reports are determined by the Board workplan or requested by the will of the Board. Generally, reports invite clarifying questions but not formal discussion/action
Committee Reports	Finance Policy Education Quality	Board	Chair of the committee reports on substance of most recent committee meeting. Generally, reports invite clarifying questions; any discussion or action items would be listed in the respective section of the agenda
Discussion Items		Board with input from administration	Items on the agenda specifically for discussion of the Board. Chair can seek input from audience during discussions. Generally not intended for action (although nothing prevents the Board from taking an action)
Action Items	Personnel approvals	Board	Items formally on the agenda for Board action. Discussion can occur after a motion is on the table
Consent Agenda	Board Orders Minutes	Board	Designed for items that need proforma approval and/or are sufficiently routine. Board acts on all items in the Consent agenda and does not discuss any item unless it is pulled out during Agenda Adjustments

WCUUSD School Board - Measuring Student Success

Ursula Stanley | Vice-Chair, WCUUSD School Board | Chair, Education Quality Committee
ustanley@u32.org

The School Board maintains a district-wide perspective by setting policy, establishing priorities, monitoring student outcomes, allocating resources, and evaluating progress toward district goals.

How do we know how our students are doing?

- Student Achievement Monitoring plan (adopted 2023)
- Education Quality Committee reviews student outcome data throughout the year
- Full Board receives report on:
    - Math and Reading performance and growth
    - Postsecondary readiness and multiple pathways
    - Student Learning Outcomes
- Review outcome data for different groups of students
- Review multiple measures of student achievement including state and local assessments and graduation outcomes.
- Monitor Continuous Improvement Plan reports from our schools and the district

What are we doing to improve how our students are doing?

- Keep student outcomes at the center of Board discussions and decision-making
- Implement and refine the Student Monitoring Plan
- Consider recommendations from district leadership regarding student needs and improvement strategies
- Support district priorities through policy and budget decisions
- Conduct annual Superintendent evaluation
- Reflect on and improve Board effectiveness through ongoing governance review and board learning

What will success look like?

- More students meeting or exceeding expectations
- More students demonstrating strong academic growth
- Improved outcomes across multiple measures of student success
- Reduced differences in outcomes among student groups
- More students graduating prepared for future learning, work and life
- Continuous improvement across the district over time

How will we know we are making progress?

- Sustained improvement in student achievement
- Sustained improvement in student growth
- Positive trends across multiple measures of student success
- Reduction in performance differences among student groups
- Regular incremental improvement towards the goals identified in the Continuous Improvement plans

Thank you to all who have shared feedback with us so far. Please stay in touch!

Washington Central Unified Union SD

Board Training

MAY 6, 2026



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Session Goals

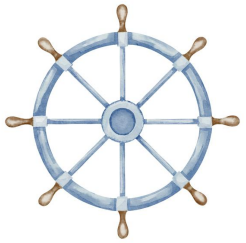
Achieve a common level of understanding of…

- Board Roles & Responsibilities
- Board Oversight
- Board Decision-Making:
  - Types of Information

WCUUSD exists to nurture and inspire in all students the passion, creativity and power to contribute to their local and global communities.

Washington Central Unified Union School District Mission

Governance ≠ Management



GOVERNANCE (Steering)

- Addresses strategic direction, decision-making, and oversight of the organization as a whole
- Emphasizes external accountability, compliance, and stakeholder value
- Provides a framework for responsible and ethical decision-making

MANAGEMENT (Hand)



- Manages day-to-day operations and execution of tasks
- Focuses on internal efficiency and productivity
- Ensures operational effectiveness

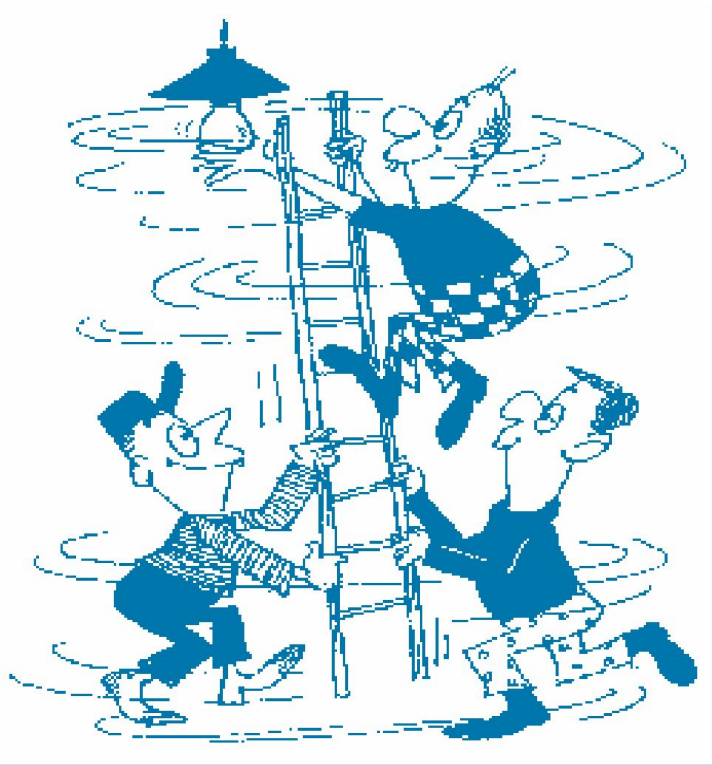
How many school board members does it take to screw in a light bulb?



None!

It's up to the board to say *“we need light".*

How many school board members does it take to screw in a light bulb?



It's up to the superintendent to decide if it will be incandescent, fluorescent, candle, solar, neon or LED (and designate his/her staff to screw in the light bulb).

How many school board members does it take to screw in a light bulb?



It’s up to the board to evaluate the quality of lighting.

Should the Board Try to Influence the Hiring (Firing) Decisions?

A former board member applies for an open staff position. During a board meeting, some board members “inform” (with subtle pressure) the superintendent “what a great choice they’d be”. The superintendent conveys that he does not believe that pressure is appropriate and that it falls outside the board’s role.

What action, if any, should the board take?

What action, if any, should the superintendent take?

The Role of the School Board

The school board acts as **trustees** on behalf of the community to provide strong **oversight** of public education.

- High quality education for every student in the district
- The public gets good return on its investment
- The system operates efficiently, effectively and ethically

Who Makes the Unpopular Choices?

A school board is aware that the superintendent is about to reduce the number of Pre-K hours that will be offered in the district. It knows some parents will be unhappy with this decision.

What action, if any, should the board with a “trustee” orientation take?

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What Is Oversight?

Perspectives on the board's governing role

1

Hire & Policy

Some believe board oversight is limited to two core actions: hiring the superintendent and approving policy.

2

Set Goals & Measure

Others expand oversight to include setting measurable student outcome goals and using test scores to monitor progress toward those goals.

3

Inquire & Engage

A third view holds that oversight requires the board to actively inquire (of the superintendent) about strategies for improving outcomes and ensuring accountability for results.

Effective governance begins with clarity about what oversight truly means.

The BIG Governance Questions

1. How are our students doing?
2. How do we know how our students are doing?
3. What is our district doing to improve how our students are doing?
4. What will success look like?
5. How will we know whether we are making progress?

Informed Oversight

Definition: Understanding what the problems are in a general way and expecting an explanation of how the new program or approach will address a specific need.

Asking questions of how a new program or approach will address specific needs.

Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach, Chapter 7, "Assessing Individual Board Members" pp. 94-98

Decision Making: What is this Information for?

Decision Information – forward looking content

Monitoring Information – retrospective content

Incidental Information – everything else; FYI

- Decision
- Monitoring
- Incidental

Exercise

Think of a recent question you have asked the superintendent. Would you say you needed the information to:

1. Make an informed decision?
2. Monitor something?
3. Fulfill your curiosity?

Was the information you were seeking to increase your knowledge so you could practice "informed oversight"?

If Community Members are Upset, Does this Mean the Superintendent is Wrong?

The superintendent has made a major change to the district's programming, to the consternation of some community members. Community members ask how the board could have allowed the superintendent to make that decision.

What action, if any, should the board now take?

Center for Public Education

Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards

Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien

AN nsba PUBLICATION

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Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards

More than 90,000 men and women are members of local school boards in the United States, all serving as important trustees of the nation's public education systems. According to the National School Boards Association, these public officials serve on 13,809 elected or appointed boards in the U.S.

Most of the public knows that school boards do things like set the budgets, establish school boundaries and set school policies. But does school boards' work affect student achievement? The higher media visibility of teachers and principals in the push for better learning, while important, has led some to question whether school boards matter.

From a research perspective, it's a complex question. Isolating what makes an effective board—that is, one that impacts student achievement—involves evaluating virtually all functions of a board, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators, and the public.

But the answer is: Yes, they do. In this research brief, NSBA's Center for Public Education looks at indicators of school board effectiveness. From this research, it is clear that school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts. In the most dramatic examples from this research, scholars compared districts with similar levels of poverty and disadvantage to determine factors that separate high-performing districts from those with low performance. In many cases, these differences included the approaches taken by local school boards.

So what do these boards do? Here are some examples:

- Boards in high-achieving districts are more likely to engage in goal setting and monitoring their progress.
- They are increasingly data savvy—identifying student needs and justifying decisions based on data.

- Board members possess detailed knowledge of their district, including initiatives to jump-start success.
- Board members have crafted a working relationship with superintendents, teachers, and administrators based on mutual respect, collegiality and a joint commitment to student success.

For the full list of eight characteristics of effective school boards, keep reading.

Background on the studies

Despite the pivotal role of school boards in the nation's educational framework, comparatively few studies focused on the practices and effectiveness of elected or appointed boards. As Sam Stringfield and Deborah Land noted in their 2002 study, *Educating At-Risk Students*, "quantitative and qualitative studies of board effectiveness are virtually non-existent," (Land and Stringfield, National Society for the Study of Education, 2002). Nonetheless, while there may be no magic bullet to assess boards comprised of individuals with divergent views, there is a consistent body of research examining the characteristics and practices of effective school boards. (For the purpose of this paper, effective boards are those operating in high-achieving districts, particularly those that are making significant strides despite serving large numbers of disadvantaged students.)

Much of the research cited here focuses on school board/district practices and approaches gleaned through interviews, surveys, observations and qualitative measures rather than in-depth quantitative information. Several studies also date back to the early 2000s or earlier; as a result, the data have limitations.

Nonetheless, the research base now includes notable studies comparing the practices of boards in high-achieving districts and contrasting those with practices of boards in lower-achieving districts. Several of these include detailed case studies exploring the evolution of districts from low performing to high achieving—a process that includes discussion of the school board role. In addition, scholars have used quantitative methods to assess the effect of district leadership on student achievement; often, this assessment includes data and trends related to school board operation, thus providing rich details on the evolution and, in some cases, transformation of local boards.

Taken together, these reports provide a sound basis to explore the role played by school boards in student achievement. The pertinent studies for this paper fall into three general areas:

- Meta-analyses of education research, with a focus on the practices of boards, superintendents, and other school leaders;
- Case studies of high-achieving districts, with a focus on the evolving role of school boards; and
- Studies that compare school board practices in districts with similar demographics but substantially different student outcomes as reflected by annual assessments and other factors.

Meta-Analysis: In 2006, J. Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano of Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) examined 27 studies since 1970 that, they concluded, included rigorous quantitative methods to assess the effect of school district leadership on student achievement. Their analysis, *School District Leadership That Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement: Meta-analysis of Influence of District Administrators on Student Achievement*, looked at more than two

dozen studies covering more than 2,800 districts and 3.4 million students. Of the 27 studies examined, 14 had information about the relationship between district leadership and average student academic achievement.

Case Studies: Several studies on district leadership focus at least in part on board activities. The Learning First Alliance study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*, (Togneri and Anderson, 2003), examined the practices in five school districts with high student test scores despite moderate to high student poverty levels. Districts in the study were Aldine, Tex., Independent School District; Chula Vista, Calif., Elementary School District; Kent County Public Schools in Maryland; Minneapolis, Minn., Public Schools, and Providence, R.I., Public Schools.

Also, a study of 10 districts in five states, *Getting There from Here* (Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman, 1997), sought to identify the effect of quality governance on student achievement. Included in the analysis was an examination of the relationship between school board and superintendent and characteristics of effective board leadership. Researchers selected the districts to reflect diversity in size, geography, student achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, board/superintendent relations and race/ethnic factors.

EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision
2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Studies with Comparison Districts: One of the richest data sets available is the Lighthouse I study of the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB). Looking at similar districts with either unusually high or unusually low records on student achievement, the project examined the role of boards and how they relate to student achievement. In studying Georgia districts, Lighthouse I contrasted the knowledge, beliefs, and actions of school board members from high- and low performing districts. Since conducting this original study in 1998-2000, IASB has expanded the project into an action research approach, identifying pilot districts in Iowa for further testing of this concept (Lighthouse II) and launching a multi-state project focused on board leadership (Lighthouse III). Multiple Lighthouse research papers were cited in this report, including *The Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement* (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2001), *The Lighthouse Re-*

search: Past, Present and Future: School Board Leadership for Improving Student Achievement (Iowa School Boards Foundation, 2007) and in the Thomas Alsbury-edited *The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation* (2008).

In addition, *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement* (MDRC for Council of Great City Schools, 2002) examined what it termed "fast-moving" urban districts and compared them with slower-moving districts of similar size and demographics. In selecting the districts, researchers looked for cities with improvement in reading and math in more than half of their grades through spring 2001. Districts also had to achieve growth rates faster than their respective states and narrow racial achievement gaps. The project ultimately focused on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the Houston Independent School District, the Sacramento, Calif., United School District, and a subset of New York City schools known as the Chancellor's District. One key research question was to examine district-level strategies used to improve student achievement and reduce racial achievement disparities. Several of these strategies involved school boards.

Finally, a 1993 report on school leadership in British Columbia, Canada, *The Politics of Excellence: Trustee Leadership and School District Ethos*, concluded that districts with a productive "ethos" produced higher-than-expected student achievement and lower-than-expected costs over time (LaRocque and Coleman, 1993). The role of the board was part of this district "ethos."

In reviewing these studies, it is reasonable to conclude that school boards in high-achieving school districts look different, and that they often feature characteristics and approaches that differ, from those in lower-achieving districts.

Eight characteristics of effective boards

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.

In comparing district leadership and student achievement, Waters and Marzano (2006) identified five specific district leadership responsibilities that positively correlated with student achievement:

- Establishing a collaborative process to set goals;
- Establishing "non-negotiable goals" (that is, goals all staff must act upon once set by the board) in at least two areas: student achievement and classroom instruction;
- Having the board align with and support district goals;
- Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and
- Using resources to support achievement and instruction goals.

"Publicly adopting broad five-year goals for achievement and instruction and consistently supporting these goals, both publicly and privately, are examples of board-level actions that we found to be positively correlated with student achievement," they said. Typically, they adopted the goals with specific achievement targets and benchmarks. "The board ensures that these goals remain the top priorities in the district and that no

other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals." The districts also provided professional development to board members and examined the effectiveness of such training.

In *Beyond Islands of Excellence*, Togneri and Anderson (2003) provided examples of the positive effects of goal setting. In its case studies, the majority of high-achieving districts adopted specific goals and boards adopted policies to consistently support them. At three case study sites—Kent County, Md., Minneapolis, and Providence—boards adopted broad strategic plans that contained both goals and the action steps needed to attain them. To assess progress on a regular basis, Kent County and Minneapolis also added indicators of success to the plan so board members could review gains or address challenges.

Each district also adopted what Togneri and Anderson termed a simply stated vision of student success. For goals on student achievement, board members identified brief, one-line vision statements such as "All our students will achieve on grade level" and used them in public and staff presentations. Significantly, the report said, school boards and superintendents also carefully examined how to stretch limited dollars to focus sufficient funding on the goals.

The Lighthouse I studies (2001, 2007) also offer important details about the importance of identifying goals. In high-achieving districts, board members adopted goals and had detailed knowledge about their relationship to curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. As a result, these public officials could identify not only the purposes and processes behind school improvement initiatives but also the board's role in supporting these efforts. By comparison in low-achieving districts, board members were "only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives," researchers noted. "They were sometimes aware of goals, but seldom able to describe actions being taken by staff members to improve learning."

Notably, these differences extended down to the staff level. In high-achieving districts, staff members could link the school board's goals to building-level goals for student learning and explain how the goals impacted classrooms. "Staff members identified clear goals for improvement, described how staff development supported the goals, and how they were monitoring progress based on data about student learning." By comparison in the low-achieving districts, "There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level."

2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.

In the Lighthouse I studies (2001, 2007), board members consistently expressed their belief in the learning ability of all children and gave specific examples of ways that learning had improved as a result of district initiatives. Poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors were described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members expected to see improvements in student achievement quickly as a result of initiatives. Comments made by board members in Lighthouse were indicative of the differences. In a high-achieving district, one board member noted, "This is a place for all kids to excel." Another board member noted, "Sometimes people say the poor students have limits. I say all kids have limits. I believe we have not reached the limits of any of the kids in our system."

Yet in low-achieving districts, board members frequently referred to external pressures as the main rea-

sons for lack of student success. Board members often focused on factors that they believed kept students from learning, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation. Board members expected it would take years to see any improvements in student achievement. For these board members, the reasons for pursuing change often were simple ones—to meet state mandates (and avoid sanctions) and a desire to not "have the lowest test scores" in the state.

In addition, board members in low-achieving districts offered many negative comments about students and teachers when they were interviewed by Lighthouse researchers. Said one, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink. This applies to both students and staff."

In one low-performing district, teachers made 67 negative comments about students and their parents during Lighthouse interviews. In a similar number of interviews in a high-performing district, there were only four such comments.

3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.

According to Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997), another characteristic of quality governance is the ability to focus on student achievement while spending comparatively little time on day-to-day operational issues. In interviews with hundreds of board members and staff across the districts, they found that high-performing boards focus on establishing a vision supported by policies that target student achievement. Yet poor governance is characterized by factors such as micro-management by the board; confusion of the appropriate roles for the board member and superintendent; interpersonal conflict between board chair and superintendent; and board member disregard for the agenda process and the chain of command.

Case studies of individual districts in other studies support many of these findings. In Chula Vista, Calif., the board took its policy role seriously and developed policies that supported instructional reform. As profiled in Togneri and Anderson (2003), the focus began when top administrators recognized a need for a new cadre of exceptional principals and asked the school board for help. In response, the board approved a policy with higher salaries for principals, giving the district more leverage to attract quality candidates to the district. Later, the board granted the central office greater flexibility to provide principal raises and bonuses. Members also supported the superintendent in dismissing principals who did not meet performance standards; this smaller but still significant action reflected the policy and partnership approach adopted earlier by the board.

Other case studies in this report were replete with examples of board commitment to policy and accountability, something often reflected through visions and strategic plans. In Aldine, Tex., board members made sure to adopt strategic plans that placed children's learning needs front and center. As one Aldine board member explained, "Everything we do is based on what's best for the children, period. Whether you are dealing with an administrative issue or a student issue, we ask, 'What's best for the children?'"

With everyone on board to promote achievement, boards encouraged their staffs to tackle difficult issues and seek innovative solutions. As a result, the districts engaged in a collegial policy-making process that emphasized the need to find solutions. An administrator in Kent County, Md., summed up the board's work as follows: "The board recognizes its role as a policy-maker. [Board members] are very professional.

They never humiliate each other. They have no hidden agendas. The goal is what is best for the children."

Boards held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of schools. Explained one board member: "I am not a professional educator.… [The superintendent and her staff] are the professionals, and we say to them, 'These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.'"

Likewise, Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy's case studies (2002) include similar findings. The groups concluded that fast-moving districts had developed a consensus among board members and other leaders on the identification and implementation of improvement strategies. This required a new role for the school board, which focused on decisions "that support improved student achievement rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district."

In Lighthouse II (2007), researchers identified five pilot school districts and provided technical assistance and support to the boards based on research findings documented in Lighthouse I.

Results from this study also showed that districts made gains when they were able to focus on achievement rather than administrative issues. In the majority of districts, boards spent more than double the amount of time on policy and student achievement than they did prior to Lighthouse II. It was also common for these districts to schedule additional work sessions on student achievement. (More information on Lighthouse II is in the sidebar on the next page).

A DOZEN DANGER SIGNS

While this paper did not specifically focus on characteristics of ineffective school boards, it may be helpful to review some of the descriptions of ineffective boards mentioned in the research:

1. Only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning
2. Focused on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation
3. Offer negative comments about students and teachers
4. Micro-manage day-to-day operations
5. Disregard the agenda process and the chain of command
6. Left out the information flow; little communication between board and superintendent
7. Quick to describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach
8. Looked at data from a "blaming" perspective, describing teachers, students, and families as major causes for low performance
9. Little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers
10. Slow to define a vision
11. Did not hire a superintendent who agreed with their vision
12. Little professional development together as aboard

4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

The Lighthouse I studies are particularly relevant in conveying this theme. Looking across high- and low-achieving districts in Georgia, school board members in high achieving districts had strong communication between the superintendent, staff, and each other. They received information from many sources including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals, teachers, and sources outside the district. While the superintendent was a primary source of information, he or she was not the only source. In addition, findings and research were shared among all board members. By comparison, in low-achieving districts, board members expressed concern that not all information was shared or shared equally. As a result, researchers said, "Some felt left out of the information flow."

In high-achieving districts, school board members could provide specific examples of how they connected and listened to the community, and were able to identify concrete ways they promoted this involvement. Likewise, staff members in these districts described the boards as supportive, noting that these public officials "would respect and listen to them." In interviews, board members were quick to note how they communicated actions and goals to staff. One strategy was to schedule post-board meetings to provide teachers and administrators with in-depth briefings on policy decisions.

By comparison, school boards in

CONVERTING RESEARCH TO ACTION: LIGHTHOUSE II

Building on the success of Lighthouse I—which identified the different knowledge, beliefs and actions of school boards in high-achieving districts—the Iowa Association of School Boards expanded the initiative to begin embedding these ideas in other jurisdictions.

Under Lighthouse II, from 2002 to 2007, IASB identified five pilot districts in Iowa and offered technical assistance and support to the board, superintendent, and, at some sites, district leadership teams. The goal was to move entire districts from one set of assumptions, beliefs and practices to another: the set possessed by the high-achieving districts in Lighthouse I. After five years of work, the project showed significant gains:

- In three of the five districts, the time spent on policy and student achievement during regular board meetings increased from 16 percent to 37 percent.
- By the end of the project, boards in all five districts regularly scheduled extra time for boards to focus on student achievement.
- Four of the sites showed significant increases—some as high as 90 percent—in the number of staff and board members who could consistently describe the district's school improvement goals.
- At all sites, 83 percent to 100 percent of all staff and board members reported a clear, district-wide focus on improving literacy.
- All districts, by year 3 of the project, agreed strongly that local school boards can positively affect student achievement.
- By year 3, significant gains on a measure of reading comprehension were seen at every grade level in one district. In addition, in the fourth year of the study, four of the five sites showed statistically significant gains in student reading and/or math for at least two grade levels on the statewide norm-referenced measure of achievement.

Starting in 2008, IASB launched the Lighthouse III project, through which the association is working with several states to outline best practices for school boards and state school board associations.

low-achieving districts were likely to cite communication and outreach barriers. They were quick to describe a lack of parent interest in education; in fact, they were able to list only a few efforts to solicit community involvement. Compared with board members from high-achieving districts, they frequently noted frustration with the lack of community involvement and said there was little they could do about it. As for relationships within the district, staff members from the comparison low-achieving districts contacted for the research often said they didn't know the board members at all.

While such findings perhaps could be limited to high- and low-achieving districts in Georgia, other research highlights similar findings. Similar factors were evident in Waters and Marzano's 2006 meta-analysis of 27 studies. In this study, the authors found that high-achieving districts actively involved board members and community stakeholders in setting goals.

While individual board members did pursue their own issues, the researchers said, there was a reluctance to place these issues at center stage. "When individual board member interests and expectations distract from board-adopted achievement and instructional goals, they are not contributing to district success, but in fact, may be working in opposition to that end." School board members realized, the authors noted, that these issues can be a distraction from core district goals.

5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.

In the Lighthouse I study, board members in high-achieving districts identified specific student needs through data, and justified decisions based on that data. In addition, board members were not shy about discussing trends on dropout rates, test scores, and student needs, with many seeking such information on a regular or monthly basis.

By comparison, board members in low-achieving districts tended to greet data with a "blaming" perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance. In one district, the superintendent "controls the reaction of the board to recommendations by limiting the information he gives to them." The Lighthouse I study contrasts this with the policy of a high-performance district, where the superintendent "believes sharing information will get them to react and encourage engagement." Board members in this district view data as a diagnostic tool, without the emotional response of assessing blame.

Board members in lower-performing districts also provided little evidence of considering data in the decision making process. In these districts, board members frequently discussed their decisions through anecdotes and personal experiences rather than by citing data. In many cases, the study noted, "The board talked very generally about test scores and relied on the interpretation made by the superintendent." As a result, board members believed the superintendent "owned" information, leaving it to the top administrator to interpret the data and recommend solutions.

Togneri and Anderson (2003) also emphasized how effective school boards embraced data. Boards in high-achieving districts were not afraid to confront negative data and, in fact, used it as a basis to improve teaching and learning. In Minneapolis, a renewed emphasis on data has helped drive improvement. Yet back in the mid-1990s, the district showed a wide achievement gap between white and minority students and posted a high school graduation rate barely above 40 percent. When the city's Chamber of Commerce

failed to support the school board's request for a tax increase, the board began a fundamental rethinking based on goals and data. It hired a new superintendent with a strong foundation in instructional improvement. Together, the board and superintendent developed goals and performance indicators to rank and monitor school progress. This process ultimately helped build trust among school and community leaders, eventually leading to district progress and, later, successful new tax proposals beneficial to schools.

Minneapolis was typical of the report's study districts, which "had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions." With the board, superintendent and community supporting the new process, the district developed a vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement with system-wide curricula connected to state standards with clear expectations for teachers.

6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.

Successful boards recognize the need to support high priorities even during times of fiscal uncertainty. One leading example is in providing professional development for teachers, administrators and other staff. According to LaRocque and Coleman (1993), effective boards saw a responsibility to maintain high standards even in the midst of budget challenges. "To this end, the successful boards supported extensive professional development programs for administrators and teachers, even during times of [fiscal] restraint," they wrote in *The Politics of Excellence: Trustee Leadership and School District Ethos*.

Lighthouse I researchers (2001, 2007) also identified research-based professional development for staff as one of seven "conditions for improvement" typically evident in high-achieving districts. From the board's perspective, members did not simply provide funding for such professional development – they could cite specific examples of activities and their link to improvement plans. "In high-achieving districts, board members described staff development activities in the district and could describe the link between teacher training and board or district goals for students," the study noted. "Board members described a belief in the importance of staff development activities focused on student needs."

In low-achieving districts, however, board members said teachers made their own decisions on staff development based on perceived needs in the classroom or for certification. "Board members knew there was a budget for staff development but were unsure whether there was a plan for staff development," the study noted. In fact, board members frequently made "disparaging remarks" about staff development, calling it an ineffective strategy.

Lighthouse II, as noted in Alsbury (2008) further reinforced this point. Boards not only took an active interest in professional development but also provided the infrastructure for such programming to succeed. "For most boards, this required significant changes in the allocation of resources (people, time and money) and would not have happened without a clear understanding of the characteristics of quality professional development and a belief in the importance of improving the knowledge and skills of educators in order to improve student outcomes."

Additional evidence is available in the Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy's 2002 analysis of high- and low-achieving districts. In high-achieving districts, the board and superintendent support uniform professional development built on curriculum. In lower-achieving districts, professional development may vary extensively

from school to school. One example was in Sacramento, Calif., where teachers received at least 18 hours of in-service training per year based on uniform curricula. New teachers also received six full days of instructional training, and teachers had common planning periods to encourage collaboration on lesson plans and strategies to address student needs. In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., schools, weeklong seminars for Advanced Placement teachers, leadership retreats for principals and financial support for attaining national board certification were among effective strategies by the district to improve curriculum.

Waters and Marzano (2006) also touts the importance of professional development. While not specifically examining the school board role in this process, this study on leadership notes that "a meaningful commitment of funding must be dedicated to professional development for teachers and principals. This professional development should be focused on building the knowledge, skills and competencies teachers and principals need to accomplish a district's goals."

7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

In *Getting There from Here*, Goodman and colleagues (1997) concluded that those with a strong board/superintendent relationship had greater student achievement as measured by dropout rates, the percentage of students going to college, and aptitude test scores. Goodman's review of characteristics of quality governance included several that were directly related to school boards and their relationships:

- A trusting and collaborative relationship between the board and superintendent;
- Creation by the board of conditions and organizational structures that allowed the superintendent to function as the chief executive officer and instructional leader of the district;
- Evaluation of the superintendent according to mutually agreed upon procedures; and
- Effective communication between the board chair and superintendent and among board members.

Likewise, Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002) also emphasizes the importance of these factors. In successful districts, boards defined an initial vision for the district and sought a superintendent who matched this vision. Nowhere was this truer than in Sacramento, Calif., one of the case study sites. In 1996, a mayor's commission concluded that the city schools, beset with high superintendent turnover and other problems, had "a lack of accountability and deplorable building conditions." A group of individuals focused on progress won seats on the school board, and they quickly bought out the contract of the old superintendent and hired one sharing their views. The new superintendent and board sought input from thousands of community stakeholders and ultimately adopted an action plan with specific achievement benchmarks based on student assessments such as the SAT-9. The board and superintendent also established seven "vital signs" of success, including high rates of kindergarten readiness; a student attendance rate of at least 95 percent; increased proficiency of English Language Learners; and objectives that at least 90 percent of students attain math and reading proficiency and graduate high school. Within four years, the district saw consistent gains in math and reading plus a drop in the disparity between white and Hispanic student achievement.

In contrast to this "moving" district, comparison districts had no such impetus to work toward success. Boards were slow to define a vision and often recruited a superintendent with his or her own ideas and

platform. The differences between the districts only increased over time, as boards and superintendents in high-achieving districts jointly refined their visions over time, assessed district strengths and weaknesses and had all signs of a stable relationship. By comparison, less successful districts featured boards and superintendents that were not in alignment, as the superintendent "may develop solutions without board involvement." Such boards also may not hold superintendents accountable for goals.

8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Board member development and training is a clear theme within this research base. In high-achieving Lighthouse I study districts (2001), school board members said they regularly participated in activities in which they learned together as a group. They cited frequent work and study sessions with opportunities for inquiry and discussion prior to making a final decision. In low-achieving districts, however, board members said they did not learn together except when the superintendent or other staff members made presentations of data.

Other studies focused on this subject as well, sometimes within the context of the responsibilities of an effective superintendent. In the 2006 Waters and Marzano meta-analysis, for example, one key goal for superintendents is to produce an environment in which the board is aligned with and supportive of district goals. The study suggests that supporting board members' professional development is one of several ways that superintendents can help realize this goal.

In their study on effective governance, Goodman and colleagues (1997) emphasized in detail the importance of formal training for board members. They recommended orientation workshops for new members soon after their election. Their "sample policy statement" on orientation included a commitment by the board and administrative staff to help all new members learn board functions, policies and procedures. Chief responsibility for orientation should reside with the superintendent and board chair, they noted, but this work should include meetings with top administrative personnel to examine services, policies, and programs. As a guide, the report cited policies in Kentucky requiring a specific number of hours of training for board members based on their experience. This ranged from a high of 12 hours of annual training for board members with zero to three years experience to four hours a year for those with at least eight years of board service. Emphasizing the importance of the board/superintendent relationship, the study also recommended that superintendents participate in orientation and development workshops alongside their board members.

Elsewhere, two of the effective districts in the Togneri and Anderson (2003) study utilized formal training and professional development for school board members. In Kent County, Md., the board adopted the Baldrige in Education process, which created a strong working relationship among the central office, board, principal and teachers. In Minneapolis, the school board engaged in the Carver method, which emphasizes the board's role in establishing goals, setting indicators, aligning resources to goals, monitoring progress, and communicating with the public.

Finally, LaRocque and Coleman (1993) illustrated the value of both formal and informal learning activities for board members. According to these researchers, effective school districts in Canada offered a mixture of learning activities for their board members, or "trustees," including retreats, special meetings, work

sessions, school visits and even social events. As a result, the trustees had a "willingness to meet regularly with the professionals in the district to discuss what was happening and what should be happening." This commitment conveyed to staff the importance of district goals and the importance of the staff members' work in supporting them. In addition, they noted, "The successful boards did not just rely on district staff reports…They obtained information about programs in different ways and from different sources, and sought opportunities to interact directly with administrators and teachers."

Related finding: Stability of leadership

In the 2002 Snipes et. al study, researchers noted that fast-moving districts had political and organizational stability, as evidenced by low rates of school board and superintendent turnover. Goodman's research echoed all of these points, concluding two characteristics of high achieving districts were long tenures by superintendents and school board members and regular retreats by senior staff and board members for evaluation and goal setting purposes.

Similarly, Togneri and Anderson (2003) note the long tenure of board members and superintendents in high-achieving districts. "They set their courses and stayed with them for years," the study said. Among the five successful districts profiled, superintendents in three districts had been at their jobs for at least eight years. In most of those profiled, the majority of board members had been serving in that capacity for 10 or more years. "That continuity allowed superintendents and boards to grow together in their approaches to change and to better understand each other's work."

Conclusion

During the past 15 years, a number of research studies have begun to document the value that school boards and their members add to the development of an effective public education system. This fledgling base of research provides a foundation for boards and other policymakers. The research also is timely, since it coincides with a period in U.S. public policy that has focused substantially greater attention on accountability in public education. Much of this research has contrasted boards in low-performing and high-performing districts, thereby providing best practices for new and veteran board members nationwide. While there is a need for additional research—a study on boards in districts with mid-range achievement might be one useful step—it is increasingly clear that board members in high-performing districts have attitudes, knowledge and approaches that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts.

Based on the studies included in this report, it is clear that school boards in high-achieving districts hold a high, shared vision about the capabilities of both students and staff—they believe that more is possible and are motivated to improve results for students. They are policy and accountability driven, focusing their time and energy on governance-level actions related to student achievement and classroom instruction. They engage in goal-setting processes that can drive action in the district to improve. They align resources—including staff professional development—around those goals. They are data savvy—using data to both diagnose problems and to monitor and drive continuous improvement efforts. They communicate with and engage staff and community and work well together as a team and in collaborative leadership with their superintendents. And, they commit to their own learning, building the knowledge and skills it takes to govern during a period of educational reform.

In this era of fiscal constraints and a national environment focused on accountability, boards in high-performing districts can provide an important blueprint for success. In the process, they can offer a road map for boards in lower-achieving school districts nationwide.

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