NEWSLETTER

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VOICES FROM THE FIELD
How School Boards Can Support Districtwide School Improvement Efforts

Leadership is crucial for effective, lasting school improvement. Although research has established that strong, competent principals are vital for high-performing schools (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 1994), attention is turning increasingly to the importance of effective district leadership, including school boards and their contributions to school improvement.

During 2008 and 2009, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement has focused much of its effort on central office leadership and reform. The focus shifts in this newsletter as we explore the role of the highest level of school governance, the community school board, and the impact of its leadership on school improvement.

The Role of School Boards

The role of school boards has changed over time as the structure of public education has changed. The earliest school boards were appointed by city or county officials and given responsibility for managing local schools. During the early part of the 20th century, as school districts became increasingly autonomous, school boards moved from appointed to elected membership. Today, most school boards are elected at large, with only a few states allowing members to represent a local subdistrict or geographic constituency.

During the 1940s and 1950s, as populations grew and school districts became larger and more complex, school boards began to hire professional education administrators (i.e., superintendents) to handle the day-to-day management of the schools. During the same period, state governments took on greater policy and budgetary responsibilities. These two changes, the introduction of superintendents as managers and increased state control of policies and budgets, ultimately reduced the local boards' direct management of schools and required that school board members act as enforcers of state regulations (Land, 2002).

Today, the role of school boards varies from state to state and even from district to district. Some ambiguity exists: Should the school board directly manage the school district, or should its role be limited to setting local policy and budgets? How involved should a school board be in holding district and school leaders accountable for responsible management and for student achievement? This ambiguity in the role of school boards has been exacerbated by the initiation of site-based management models, charter schools, and mayoral takeovers of urban districts; however, school boards continue to be the main form of governance across public school districts.

Although many school boards have limited their responsibilities to making budgetary decisions, complying with legislation, setting policy, and responding to local concerns, both the National School Boards Foundation and the National School Boards Association have called for local boards to set student achievement as their primary goal. For this newsletter, we asked state association members of the National School Boards Association to recommend school boards that have focused on school improvement and student achievement.[1] We talked to four board members, one each from four diverse school districts (see Table 1), to ascertain how they define their role and how they collaborate with their superintendents to carry out activities focused on student achievement.

We also used the findings from a review of the literature on school boards by Land (2002) to define the characteristics of school boards that have been effective in supporting school improvement while delegating the administrative responsibilities of the school districts to their superintendents. In addition, we used specific examples provided by each of the four board members we interviewed to show how these characteristics are put into practice.

According to Land's (2002) review of the research, effective school boards have assumed the following roles:

- Providing support for quality leadership

- Developing and maintaining positive relationships

- Providing policymaking and budgetary decisions that support district improvement

- Engaging in ongoing evaluation of the administration as well as self-evaluation

- Engaging in board training and professional development

[1] The Center thanks the Georgia School Boards Association, the Virginia School Boards Association, and the Associated School Boards of South Dakota for their recommendations for this publication.

Table 1. Characteristics of School Boards Consulted for This Newsletter

Characteristic	Sisseton School District	Floyd County Schools	Fairfax County Public Schools	Hopewell Public Schools
Locale	Rural	Suburban	Suburban	Rural
Number of Students	990	10,647	168,807	4,190
Number of Schools	5	20	206	8
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian	52%	–	–	–
Caucasian	46%	84%	48%	39%
Hispanic	–	6%	17%	6%
African-American	–	3%	11%	55%
Asian	–	–	19%	–
Other	2%	7%	5%	–
Economically Disadvantaged	48%	47%	21%	65%

Source: GreatSchools Inc. (n.d.). *Find a school* [website]. Retrieved June 30, 2009, from http://www.greatschools.net

Action Steps of Effective School Boards

Providing Support for Quality Leadership

According to the National School Boards Association (2009), school boards should provide leadership for the school district by assessing the community's values and interests and translating them into a vision to guide policymaking and strategic planning. The literature points to this role as pivotal in creating a climate that fosters excellence in a school system (Land, 2002). Following this vision of excellence, effective school boards hire high-quality superintendents and support them in the administration of the school district, while leaving the details to the superintendent (Land, 2002). Superintendents, in turn, hire district staff and provide oversight for the district's operations.

Leroy Hellwig, a board member for the Sisseton (South Dakota) School District, told The Center staff that the most important tasks of a school board are to "set the tone" for the district's priorities and to promote communication between the school system and the public. David Johnson, a board member for Floyd County (Georgia) Schools, stated that his school board adopts a new strategic plan every five years; the board stays informed about progress made on school improvement and uses the data and information gathered to challenge the superintendent to address the weak areas. Stuart Gibson, a board member for the Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools, emphasized the importance of the school board's leadership in setting annual goals and identifying progress indicators for the district.

The research of Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997) supports the idea of separate roles for school boards and superintendents. The authors have claimed that school board members who micromanage their superintendents and get involved in school administration issues run the risk of impeding student achievement. In order to provide effective leadership, school board members must be clear on the difference between their responsibilities and those of the superintendent. These roles must be clearly defined and articulated. Sisseton board member Hellwig explained that "the [Sisseton] school board provides oversight and sets policy, but the superintendent is the chief operating officer." Ann Williams, a board member from Hopewell (Virginia) Public Schools, stated, "The most important job a school board has is to hire the superintendent. Pick [strong leaders] and give them the opportunity to lead without micromanaging. In Hopewell, we hold the superintendent accountable, and we allow him to lead."

Developing and Maintaining Positive Relationships

The relationships that school board members establish with the superintendent as well as with the community and each other are vital in achieving successful schools (Land, 2002). Each of these relationships should be built on respect, trust, confidence, support, and open communication.

Greater public support for school board and district initiatives can be garnered when open communication is maintained between the board and the community and when the community is included in setting goals for strategic plans. The research also indicates that cultivating interorganizational collaboration and creating linkages to local and state governments are good practices for school boards seeking to build positive relationships with the wider community (Land, 2002). Hellwig emphasized the importance of communication between the school board and the public, citing the "cumulative voting" system that the Sisseton board enacted when the Native American community challenged the school board elections. With cumulative voting, each voter receives three ballots, all of which may be cast for a single candidate. This system has increased the chances that a Native American candidate, or one who Native Americans feel will

represent them well, will be elected. According to Hellwig, this "leveling of the playing field" also has had a positive impact on communication and on the relationship between the Sisseton School District and its Native American constituents.

Likewise, school board members must work together to reach consensus on their activities. A first step is to agree on their appropriate role in the district. Although most school board members represent the entire district, some may represent specific constituents with special interests. In these cases, it is especially important that school boards establish operating norms and consensus-building strategies to guide their decision making. The school board must operate in a way that represents the collective interests and needs of the community. Even when individual members are at odds with ideas or issues, it is important in the overall interest of school improvement that they negotiate consensus.

Providing Policymaking and Budgetary Decisions That Support District Improvement

Setting policy at the local school district level and developing and approving an annual budget for the district are primary functions of a school board. Effective school boards set policies that emphasize school improvement initiatives and then provide adequate resources to support them. Through their policies and budgetary decisions, school boards also should make decisions and allocations that support continuous increases in student achievement. Hellwig calls the budget the "architecture of the organization." He said that in Sisseton, the board "sets policy and, through the approval of the budget, we set priorities" for the direction of the school district. Fairfax County board member Gibson described the use of "a group decision-making system to arrive at priorities" in his school district. The school board uses a three-tiered approach when setting its annual agenda to allow for the possibility of reduced revenue from local and state sources. According to Gibson, the first tier includes items such as extracurricular programs

that are the first to be dropped when there is a budget crunch. These programs are considered minor cuts. Tier two contains programs such as summer school that are eliminated if deeper cuts must be made to the budget. Tier three contains the highest priority items, including transportation and instructional programs. These are areas that the Fairfax County School Board works hard to keep safe. This system allows for transparency among board members, district staff, and the community if cuts have to be made in the budget. According to Williams, the board of Hopewell Public Schools has budgeted for "an assistant superintendent for instruction; a director of mathematics, science, and technology; a director of language arts; and a director of special education, which is unusual for a district our size, but it provides strong central support for instruction." These types of budgetary allocations show the board's support for improved academic achievement and continuous school improvement.

Engaging in Ongoing Evaluation of the Administration as Well as Self-Evaluation

Land (2002) pointed to the need for school boards to engage in evaluations to guide their activities, hold staff at the district and school levels accountable, and hold themselves accountable for their own overall performance as well as the district's performance. School boards participate in the evaluation of the superintendent and the overall success of the district by monitoring standardized test scores and other data, such as attendance records and high school graduation rates.

School boards are less apt to engage in self-evaluation, according to Land's (2002) review of the literature. Land noted that school board members tend to view their election or re-election as validation of their positive performance. Nevertheless, research suggests that self-evaluation by school board members can help to build trust with administrators, teachers, parents, and the community (Land,

2002). According to the research, the criteria for school board self-evaluation are wide-ranging and include conducting meetings that are conducive to the public's participation and paying attention to the progress made on long-term and short-term goals for student achievement. In Hopewell City, the superintendent attends a summer retreat with school board members where they jointly evaluate how well the goals from the previous year have been met and set goals for the upcoming year. In the spring of each school year, the superintendent reports to the board on progress made toward the annual goals. According to board member Williams, "We view the evaluation process as an opportunity for dialogue and growth, and the process we use helps us to identify our successes and future goals and strategies." In Floyd County, Georgia, the school board conducts an annual formal self-evaluation that is open to the public. According to Johnson, each board member completes a questionnaire on how well the board is meeting its goals, working together, maintaining ethics, and staying current with school district issues. "Then we talk about the answers with a monitor from the Georgia School Board Association," he added.

Engaging in Board Training and Professional Development

The research suggests that school board members need training and ongoing professional development in order to surmount challenges that limit their ability to make sound policy and budgetary decisions. These challenges include insufficient time, confusion over policy, lack of knowledge of school programs, and state or federally mandated policies and laws (Land, 2002). All four of the school board members interviewed for this newsletter are aware of the programs being implemented in their districts and have knowledge of state education policies. They also understand the principles of strategic planning and budgeting as well as the importance of high-quality instruction for student achievement. Williams said that all incoming

Hopewell school board members are required to participate in a training program that "deals with personnel, curriculum, and current educational issues." Gibson talked about the training on strategic planning that the Fairfax County school board has received. Johnson stated that all new Floyd County school board members are required to attend 12 hours of training, and every continuing board member must complete six hours of training annually. The program covers legislation and aspects of law, policy, and finance and is offered twice a year through the Georgia School Boards Association.

Conclusion

Effective school boards can enhance the success of a school district. The research highlights some important factors that boards should consider when making decisions about school improvement efforts. The interviews with board members show how some of these factors are being successfully implemented. Effective school boards provide support for quality leadership, establish positive relationships with community and school stakeholders, set policies and budgets that support district improvement, engage in ongoing evaluation, and participate in professional development. In addition, school board members must understand their role in hiring talented superintendents and then supporting their efforts to make improvements, generally through policymaking and budgetary decision making. School board members must also be able to determine the needs of the community they serve and communicate the initiatives they have undertaken. This task requires collaboration with the superintendent in order to stay abreast of the issues and engagement with community members. School boards are more likely to succeed if their actions are transparent and if they seek input and information from district staff and from the community at large.

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