

# IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The Washington State School Directors' Association has issued these guiding principles to highlight the important role school boards have in ensuring that all students achieve our state's high academic standards.



## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FROM WSSDA

Student achievement is the primary agenda for school boards.

As policymakers, school boards have a critical role in ensuring that students learn what they need to know to be prepared as productive citizens and that they are able to demonstrate that knowledge on state and local measures of achievement.

School boards are also responsible for how well schools meet federal achievement goals under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Boards set policies, create conditions, and distribute resources within their districts for improving student achievement. They provide the structure for public accountability and a way for local communities to participate in and influence important issues affecting student learning.

The leadership role school boards have in building public understanding and commitment to improvement within their own communities is paramount to sustaining increases in student achievement.



## BACKGROUND

School boards have always recognized the improvement of student achievement as central to their role in governing our public schools. The Washington State Education Reform Act and the Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have, however, significantly affected the way schools go about educating students and the way boards hold schools accountable for educating students. Both Acts raise expectations for districts and schools, with the goal of each student meeting or exceeding state standards.

With increased accountability for districts, the role of school boards in improving student achievement requires strategic policymaking that places an even greater emphasis on student learning.

Recent research, including research on school leadership, has contributed to an emerging understanding about the school board's role in improving student achievement. The research team of Tim Waters and Robert Marzano (2006), from the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), found a positive correlation between district leadership and student achievement. Their meta-analysis of 27 studies, examining the relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement, identified five leadership responsibilities or practices that have a statistically significant correlation with student achievement. All five of these responsibilities relate to setting goals and keeping districts focused on student learning, and one of the five speaks directly to the school board's role. Waters and Marzano reported that districts with higher levels of student achievement show clear alignment of board, district and school efforts in support of non-negotiable goals. In these districts, local school boards "ensure these goals remain the primary focus of the district's efforts and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals" (p. 4).



The Lighthouse Study (2001), commissioned by the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) and the National School Board Association's (NSBA) *Key Work of School Boards*, has highlighted the board's role in improving student achievement. The Lighthouse Study examined the role and impact of school boards in improving student achievement. Although the study was based on a small sample and did not lead to the conclusion that board action *caused* improved achievement, the study did suggest that school board actions are a key part of a "culture of improvement." By their nature, boards do not create learning; rather, they work through others by creating conditions that promote learning (IASB).

NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards* framework for leadership and governance promotes systems thinking around eight key actions that focus and guide boards in their efforts to improve student achievement: vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaborative relationships, and continuous improvement.

As these key works indicate, school board governance operates in a context broader than that of the individual classroom or school. School boards set a district-wide vision, focus on student learning needs and issues from a whole system perspective, provide a district structure for success, and advocate for all the students in their district. This broader context or system-level work of coordinating policies and practices to support student learning provides a coherent and sustained process of continuous improvement and is a role only the locally elected school board can fulfill.

## THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

Improving student achievement requires strong and effective leadership at the helm of every school district, with school directors working at the policy level,

and district and school administrators working at the operational level. Together, school directors and administrators work as a governance-management team to ensure continuous improvement.

### Setting the vision

In partnership with the community and staff, school boards set the vision for student learning and articulate the beliefs about students and learning that serve as the foundation for the district goals and direction for school improvement. School board governance reflects this vision, the beliefs and the goals, and in turn, impact multiple factors that contribute to student learning, including conditions in the learning environment that affect teaching and learning.

### Establishing goals

Boards are in the unique position as elected officials to work with the community and district staff to establish raising student achievement as the central, core belief of the district and to define what improving achievement means to their individual districts and communities. From a shared vision, the board's role expands to establishing strategic goals and success indicators for improvement. It is this board role that lays the foundation for all other board actions. Armed with these board-approved strategic goals and indicators, boards continually inquire whether the vision and goals are in fact driving every aspect of the school district's programs.

### Developing policy

Establishing a structure to support student achievement is a core function, and boards accomplish this by developing and adopting policies and making policy-level decisions that affect schools, staff and students and influence teaching practices and the culture of learning. In this policy role, they adopt curriculum frameworks and approve textbooks, establish assessment requirements that provide

performance data for monitoring student achievement goals, and establish human resource structures that reflect a commitment to the support of student learning. School boards are architects and drivers of school district policies that directly affect student achievement.

## Allocating resources

Boards establish budget priorities and allocate resources to maximize student learning. Boards make critical choices about the use of resources consistent with the strategic plan and target those limited dollars where they will have the greatest impact. Boards monitor district and school budgets to assure that resources are being used in support of reaching student achievement goals.

## Assuring accountability

School boards monitor district activities to ensure that annual progress is being made, achievement gaps are closing, and the public is kept informed about student progress. School boards are the link between the schools and the communities served by their schools. School improvement requires community will and support for improvement, which comes from effective linkages. Boards play a key role in establishing these linkages.

As publicly elected officials and members of their local communities, school board members are uniquely positioned to:

- create a community-wide, shared vision and set goals for how the district improves student achievement;
- create the conditions and direct the resources for accelerating improvement;
- hold the system accountable to high and equitable achievement for all students;
- communicate needs and progress of students to the community; and

- build the public will to improve achievement for all students and succeed in reaching the district's student achievement goals.

While school boards focus primarily on the work of their own districts, many local board members help shape state-level goals, systems, budgets and policies that impact academic achievement. These efforts also support improved student achievement.

## CONCLUSION

Washington state's school districts continue to make significant progress in raising student achievement levels, and school boards perform an essential role in ensuring that these improvements continue. Ensuring student achievement for all clearly requires a systems approach — all parts of the school district's system working in partnership and steered by a governance-management team of school directors and district administrators. Local school boards take their role seriously, as a failure in any part of the system could cause an impediment to the focus on student achievement.

The Washington State School Directors' Association, its Board of Directors, and its membership believe that effective school board leadership significantly influences student achievement. WSSDA will continue to work with school boards, providing training and statewide leadership to raise student achievement in Washington state, and local school boards will continue to impact what really matters in their local school districts.



## RESOURCES

Illinois Association of School Boards, and others. *Targeting Student Learning: The School Board's Role as Policymaker*. Springfield, Illinois: Illinois Association of School Boards, 1998.

Iowa Association of School Boards. *The Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, April 10-14, 2001. Online at [www.ia-sb.org/workarea/showcontent.aspx?id=568](http://www.ia-sb.org/workarea/showcontent.aspx?id=568).

National School Boards Association. *The No Child Left Behind Act: Policy Guidelines for Local School Boards*. Alexandria, Virginia: 2002. Online at [www.nsba.org/site/docs/5300/5212.pdf](http://www.nsba.org/site/docs/5300/5212.pdf).

Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., and McNulty, B. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement*. A working paper. McREL: Aurora, CO. Online at [www.mcrel.org/topics/products/244/](http://www.mcrel.org/topics/products/244/).



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