



Education Writers Association
SPECIAL REPORT

Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards

Finding The Right Fit

“School boards are looking for God — on a good day.”

Atlanta-based superintendent recruiter, as quoted in the New York Times

“The hero-superintendent is an ideal seldom realized. The whole governance structure is tilted against strong executive leadership.”

From “School Boards,” a report by Paul Hill

OVERVIEW

Just what should the public expect from the leadership at the school district level?

Why does it seem to be eternally controversial in many places, especially in urban districts? What difference could achieving “the right fit” between superintendents and school boards make in the learning of children?

Currently, most of the attention on reforming schools focuses on classrooms. The reasoning is that dedicated, well-qualified teachers can boost student achievement despite the chaos swirling outside their classroom doors. Ideally, they work under a principal who provides them with the right mix of support and autonomy.

Reform efforts that rely solely on the work of individual teachers or even exemplary principals, however, are not enough. For most of the past two decades of change in K-12 education, researchers and policymakers also have acknowledged the importance of the system — the district and the state — to moving reforms ahead. Systemic change may have been background noise for all the attention to teacher quality and high standards, but it never left the agenda of education researchers and policy gurus. The knowledge base about what makes for good district leadership is expanding. The quality of leadership provided — or not provided — by local superintendents and school

boards can be explored with more than anecdotes and war stories.

“School reform ultimately has to happen in the classroom,” says Paul Hill, acting dean of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. “But the odds that you’re going to get spontaneous improvement in the classroom without changing the broader, regulatory environment are pretty low. Classrooms are the way they are in large part because of what happens at the district level.” That point is not always appreciated by the public or in reporting about schools. The public and parents probably don’t yet associate better outcomes for students with what a superintendent or school board does, points out Marla Ucelli, director of a district redesign effort for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Similarly, in recent years states have tended to make an end-run around districts and deal directly with school sites. They rarely consider, she says, “the impact of districts beyond their potential to do harm.”

A TRADITION on Trial

This questioning of the role of local leadership has not always existed. For most of the history

of K-12 education in this country, school boards enjoyed close ties with parents and smooth relationships with superintendents. In the early history of the education system, families and neighbors banded together to pay for the education of their children. In the early 1800s, they agreed to pay taxes for the education of all children in a community, provided control remained in local hands. School committees, then boards, were created to make important decisions. When the number of schools began to grow, school committees organized into districts or county systems. The role of administrator grew from “principal teacher” for each school, hence the term “principal,” to an overall administrator, the superintendent.

The role of the superintendent during the early years of districts and county systems was almost entirely instructional and tightly controlled by the school committees. Some education leaders, particularly Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, argued for even greater centralization, especially in the cities, partly to wrest control of schools away from ward politics. This was accomplished by the early 1900s. Centralized city school boards were run more like corporate boards of directors, with



board members responsible for setting overall policy, and professional superintendents – resembling corporate chief

“What you have are traditional, superintendent-run districts with supportive school boards working very much in the background and a strong community consensus to keep it going. They’re getting good results, and it’s because of the quality of the district leadership.”

Mike Kirst, Stanford University

administrative officers – responsible for the district’s day-to-day operation, according to Deborah Land, a post doctorate fellow at the Center for Organization of Schools at John Hopkins University and author of a

report on the role of local school boards. In non-urban areas, school districts adopted the same management model, but the smallness of most schools and districts kept the organization more personal.

Even though consolidation of schools and districts began in the 1870s, at the middle of the 20th century there still were almost 84,000 separate school districts in this country, each usually with at least five school board members. Today, there are fewer than 13,500 districts; the National

School Boards Association claims more than 95,000 members, a far cry from the several hundred thousand citizens involved in schools when there

were more than 200,000 schools or districts with separate boards. Other than small, rural districts, most now are more bureaucratic than community-based. Many are mired in relationships that often pit local lay leaders against

Superintendent leaders say their role is in a state of crisis

Findings of a survey of 175 superintendents judged nationally by their peers to be outstanding:

- **71 percent** agree that the superintendency is in a state of crisis.
- **93 percent** say they have a collaborative relationship with the school board
- **88 percent** feel their board is effective
- **30 percent** believe the current model should continue as it exists (52 percent believe it should be seriously restructured; 16 percent say it needs to be completely replaced.)
- **37 percent** report that insignificant, time-consuming demands limits their effectiveness.
- **35.1 percent** say they would be more aggressive in pursuing school reform initiatives if given six-year contracts.
- **29 percent** feel they were hired because of their ability to be an instructional leader.

— Education Commission of the States survey of superintendents, conducted by **Thomas Glass**, *University of Memphis*

professional managers. Sometimes this works. Sometimes the arrangement is so controversial that some policymakers, researchers and members of the public are calling for new structures.

Dissatisfaction with the way many local school districts are governed — by an elected school board and an appointed or elected superintendent — runs deep. In fact, 52 percent of superintendents judged to be outstanding by their peers and polled by the Education Commission of the States, said the model needs to be “seriously restructured,” although they did not specify how it should change. Another 16 percent called for the model to be replaced. A national survey by Public Agenda found that nearly seven of 10 superintendents say their boards interfere where they shouldn’t, and two-thirds believe “too many school boards would rather hire a superintendent they can control.”

Yet, despite the dissatisfaction with the school board/superintendent model, Michael Kirst, Stanford University education professor, says it can be effective. “Of course it can work,” says Kirst. “There are districts

out there where school boards have chosen good superintendents and stuck with them. And where, as a result, classroom instruction has improved in a large number of schools. That’s my measure of success, and it wouldn’t happen without good leaders.” Kirst cites school districts in Long Beach and Elk Grove, Calif., as examples. “What

you have are traditional, superintendent-run districts with supportive school boards working very much in the background and a strong community consensus to keep it going,” says Kirst. “They’re getting good results, and it’s because of the quality of the district leadership.”

School Board presidents say system works

Findings of a survey of 2,096 school board presidents from across the country:

- **64.2 percent** reported turnover of three or more superintendents in the past 10 years.
- Boards were dissatisfied with the performance of the previous superintendent **42.7 percent** of the time.
- **73 percent** said that at least half of the applicants were “well-qualified.”
- **One-third** claimed their board works well together “all” of the time
- **60 percent** believe their board works well together “most” of the time.
- **30 percent** said they would not run again for a board position.
- Nearly **75 percent** say there is no need to change the present model of school board governance.

— Education Commission of the States survey of school board presidents, conducted by **Thomas Glass**, *University of Memphis*

What is EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP?

The heightened interest in school district leadership comes at a time when demands on local school leaders — superintendents and school boards — have never been greater. This, at a time when the majority face budget shortages, growing numbers of at-risk students, and federal and state mandates — frequently unfunded — that determine much of what happens in the classroom. The need for enlightened policymaking stretches the capacities of school boards, which are, after all, voluntary jobs. Except in urban districts, board members rarely receive compensation. At the same time, superintendents are expected to be efficient managers and instructional leaders.

The issues at the district level are more demanding than ever. District leaders must distribute resources according to equity and fairness without alienating major constituencies. They must be good data analyzers. They must push good practice and eliminate what isn't working. They determine how capacities to deliver high-quality instruction can be boosted. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation has placed specific deadlines on district leadership for getting all of these things done in ways that assure that all children achieve at high levels. District leaders are under pressure to align local standards for teaching and learning with state standards. The federal law makes school district leadership transparent. The public must be informed regularly of progress under the Act's requirements.

All of this points to a more urgent need than ever to clarify just what

defines an “effective” superintendent and “effective” board, and how their roles and responsibilities can mesh so that entire districts perform at the levels demanded.

Effective Superintendents

Effective superintendents, according to Mike Kirst, have a vision of what good instruction is and know how to execute programs that will improve teaching and learning. “It’s not about getting a bond issue passed. It’s about improving classroom instruction.” Still, research on superintendent effectiveness “remains sparse and leaves much to be desired,” says Janet Thomas, a researcher with the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. Studies of the role of school districts’ chief executive officers, she adds, offer vague suggestions of effective leadership characteristics and have not linked leadership styles to district or student performance.

One study, however, made a connection between attributes of superintendents and improvement of student test scores. George Petersen of the University of Missouri collected data from superintendents, school boards, and principals in five California districts that had the largest percentile growth on state assessments in the late 1980s (they were mid-sized districts, with 5,500 to 9,500 students). The superintendents showed instructional leadership by:

- articulating a vision for children’s education and weaving that vision into the mission of the districts;
- organizing support for that vision through personnel moves, shared

decision making, board member involvement and use of key instructional strategies; and

- evaluating and assessing personnel and programs.

All of the superintendents in the study were highly visible in their districts, visiting classrooms regularly and reporting their observations to principals. They kept the focus on the districts’ goals for students, putting a high premium on intensive staff development that supported the goals. Petersen also found an organizational structure supporting the superintendents’ leadership. The superintendents could replace principals and other administrators, the districts had fiscal stability, and the school boards gave the superintendents latitude to make decisions.

The new and unfamiliar challenges facing public education today require school leaders to be flexible and collaborative, rather than authoritative, says Ron Heifetz, founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. “Authority relationships function beautifully until the environment changes.” But confronting complex and often unanticipated problems calls for flexible thinking, collaboration and shared decision-making. Broad-based leadership can also help districts maintain the impetus for reform even in districts experiencing high rates of superintendent and/or school board turnover. And the more people who are involved in formulating a district’s reform agenda, the more people there are with a stake in its success, Heifetz says.

Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, summarizes the changing roles and expectations of superintendents this way. Superintendents once were considered successful if they could manage the “B’s” of district leadership: buildings, buses, books, budgets and bonds. Today, he says, the challenge is to shift the focus of district leadership to the

What Kind of School Board Do You Have?

— By Anne Lewis

Reporters can look at this criteria to determine how well their school boards operate.

FUNCTIONAL

Focused on clear set of beliefs, a plan to carry them out, and constant monitoring

Established process to orient new board members, provide continuous training, and build collaboration

All about improving student achievement of all students

Differences are never personal in public and are about important issues related to student achievement and well being

Members work together to represent the whole district; do not play interest group game

Board keeps regulations to a minimum

Board does work through the superintendent

Board operates in the open, involves community in decisionmaking

Board communicates as one body and works with the media in an ethical manner

Board shares expectations with community before hiring a superintendent, sets goals, monitors and provides feedback frequently

DYSFUNCTIONAL

Disagreement among members on goals and process

No coherent orientation for new board members, no investment in training for board members

Unfocused agenda that wastes time on unimportant, peripheral issues

Disagreements get personal in public

Members represent special interest groups or only certain areas of the district

Board over manages with regulations, petty matters

Board members play to other district staff, go around superintendent

Board avoids transparency, prefers to make big decisions in closed committees

Board plays favorites with press

Board hires superintendents under unclear expectations, then changes its mind frequently

“C’s”: “things like connection, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices,” that lead to academic progress for all children.

Managing The Politics

The current clamor may be for “instructional leadership,” but district leaders also must effectively manage change in highly complex, politically charged and often contentious system. If they are to survive and thrive in their role as superintendents, they need to understand, and be adept at, the politics of these jobs.

A former superintendent, Houston contends most of his colleagues enjoy their work and find it challenging. Still, “there is much about the current role that is dysfunctional,” he says. “Expectations and resources are mismatched. Accountability and authority are misaligned.” The work is now conducted in an environment that over time has grown increasingly political and downright abusive.

A study commissioned by ECS found that 71% of superintendents surveyed believe the superintendency itself is in a state of “crisis,” characterized by poor school board/superintendent

relations, long working hours and stressful working conditions. Some former superintendents explain why. Ronald Ross, who served as superintendent for four years in Mt. Vernon, N.Y., was always “walking a tightrope, having to play politics.” Now a senior fellow at the National Urban League, he retired primarily because of the major reason for superintendent turnover: a poor relationship with his school board. Spence Korte resigned in the summer of 2002 after three years in the Milwaukee superintendency out of frustration with a politically fractured school board. “The reality is, you have to think about urban schools within a context that’s largely political,” says Korte. The dissension “makes it impossible for leaders to be effective.”

Other superintendents see negotiating the political complexities of a school board as part of the job. Pascal “Pat” Forgione, superintendent of the Austin, Texas, school district, attributes his success in earning the superintendency to his willingness to campaign for it. School leaders must be political players, he says. “Leadership has to be effective within a political context,” according to Forgione, who is Austin’s seventh superintendent in 10 years. “You have to design your leadership for your district’s politics.”

Effective School Boards

If many school superintendents, urban in particular, are working under stress, so are many school boards. Although still vested with financial oversight and policy-making authority, today’s board members are far less responsive to local community values than their predecessors, according to Jim Cibulka, dean of the School of Education at the University of Kentucky. Especially in large districts, local control has been eroded by a combination of voter apathy and growing state and federal influence over school issues, Cibulka says. Board members also lack sufficient information or are too divided politically to effectively set

school district policy or priorities, he says. As a result, boards often are dominated by superintendents or special interest groups. The boards, says Cibulka, “are not setting the reform agenda.”

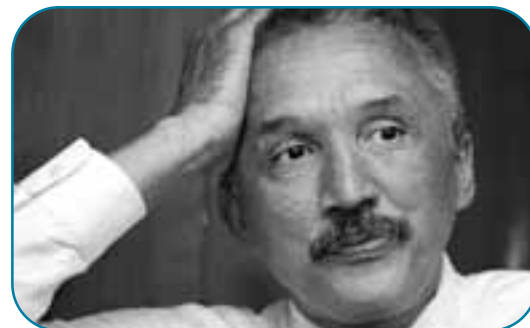
In smaller communities, however, school boards still retain their traditional roots. In most such communities, residents consider their school boards important, according to Christy Coleman, president of the Illinois School Boards Association and a member of the rural Geneseo, Ill., school board. She notes that the vast majority of school board members are unpaid, and therefore, “really have no agenda other than to make local schools better, which in turn makes their local communities more attractive and valuable.” Coleman concedes, however, that not all school board members are effective though most try to put a high priority on student achievement.

Nothing is more predictable than annual panels of school board and superintendent leaders at their respective national conferences, exchanging compliments and pledges to get along. They write policies and statements to guide local leadership, which, if followed, would seem to assure respectful relationships. School boards need to be convinced to focus on achievement, contends Deborah Land of Johns Hopkins University. A survey by the National School Boards Association found that only 21 percent of superintendents believed it was very important to hold school boards accountable for raising student achievement, but if they accepted this responsibility, their effectiveness would improve, she predicted.

High-performing urban districts almost always have strong boards, in the opinion of Donald McAdams, president of the Center for Reform of School Systems and former Houston school board member. He cites as examples Charlotte-Mecklenberg, N.C., and Houston, Texas. McAdams dismisses the image of superintendent heroes “who ride in on a white horse with

Ronald Ross, (right) former superintendent of Mount Vernon, N.Y. and senior scholar at the National Urban League

Pasqual "Pat" Forgione, (with kids below) superintendent of Austin Independent school district,



shining armor and overcome local politics where these wretched school board members are just screwing things up.” As a former member of the much-praised Houston school board, he says the dynamic of district leadership is much more complicated. The Houston school board, for example, adopted a detailed statement on beliefs and visions and decided on a brief plan for a new district structure, directing the superintendent “to initiate a process for the development of a plan to implement the beliefs...” For instance, board members set as a priority improving overall achievement of students, declared the dropout rate as unacceptably high and stipulated that schools were overly regulated.

Another urban district that is managing to avoid superintendent turnover and major controversy is Boston, according to Marla Ucelli of the Annenberg Institute. The superintend-

ent, Tom Payzant, accepted the position only after an agreement from the mayor, who controls the school system, that he would be given at least five years to enact reforms. The average tenure of all public school superintendents is about seven years. Yet, most prominent urban districts like New York City, Dallas, and Kansas City made at least three or four appointments between 1992 and 2002. Thomas Glass of the University of Memphis says chronic superintendent turnover, or “churn,” is indicative of a board’s inability to function effectively, and that the results of bringing a new superintendent on board every few years can be disastrous. “It not only confuses and discourages district staff, but also conjures up a public image of a district in turmoil,” he says. Often overlooked is how superintendent turnover usually derails ongoing reform initiatives — initiatives that generally take four to five years to take

effect and bring about results, he notes. (Payzant completed the five years and was given a new contract.)

Although little, if any, statistical evidence exists to prove that the leadership quality at the district level affects student achievement, Glass believes a strong link exists. For example, in districts where superintendents and

principals know their boards are going to support them, they are more likely to take risks aimed at bringing about reform. But superintendents unsure of what their board members want or insecure about how they will respond to controversy, are reluctant to stick their necks out in an effort to bring about change.

One of the few attempts to study the link between school board performance and student achievement was undertaken by the Iowa Association of School Boards in 2000. The association's *Lighthouse Study* compared school boards and superintendents in unusually high- and unusually low-achieving districts of similar size. The study controlled for differences in the districts' demographics.

The study found that board members in both the high- and low-achieving districts maintained good relationships with their superintendents and had positive opinions of them. Board members in all the districts studied also exhibited a caring for children. However, in the high-achieving districts, board members and superintendents consistently said their job was to "release each student's potential." They also were constantly seeking ways to improve the district and viewed social or economic problems as challenges. In the low-achieving districts, board members and superintendents were more likely to simply accept shortcomings in the students or in the district. Their emphasis was on managing the district rather than changing or improving it.

Board members in the successful districts also knew more about school reform initiatives and the board's role in supporting them than their peers in the low-achieving districts. And in the high-achieving districts, board members' knowledge and beliefs were translated into initiatives at the classroom level.

This study is reinforced by other research. Richard H. Goodman, project director at the New England School Development Council, examined 10 school districts in five states. He found

that well-run districts had lower dropout rates, a higher percentage of students going on to college, and higher aptitude test scores than poorly run districts. For the purposes of the study, "quality governance" included a focus by the board on student achievement, a positive relationship between the board and superintendent, and the ability of the superintendent to function as the CEO and instructional leader. "Poor governance" was characterized by micro-management by board members, conflict and poor communication between board members and the superintendent, and confusion over their respective roles. (See sidebar on p. 9)

The most recent study by MDRC, released in 2002 and commissioned by the Council of the Great City Schools, shows similar results. Once again, a shared vision was key for the more successful urban districts among the case studies. Student achievement was the highest priority as well as focusing on achievable goals and the lowest performing schools. The districts reformed to serve and support schools. In comparison, the typical districts lacked consensus among their leaders, lacked concrete goals and took little responsibility for improving instruction.

Glass provides clues as to other behaviors that indicate an ineffective school board: members who ran on a platform reflecting narrow interests or special interest groups; boards that are out of touch with the electorate; and boards that lack experienced leaders from other sectors in the community such as business and civic groups and who do not understand the process of consensus building.

The traditional district governance model needs a redesign, not a replacement, according to Goodman and fellow researcher William Zimmerman. Advised by a broad-based board in a year-long study, they developed a consensus on the roles of school boards, superintendents, and board/superintendent teams that ought to be established in state law.



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Trying SOMETHING DIFFERENT

While the vast majority of public school districts in this country are not ready to throw out the traditional governance structure, some are turning to alternatives. These are strategies to watch:

- In districts that practice site-based management, principals, teachers and parents are given some of the authority for decision-making that has traditionally rested with school board

members and superintendents. Chicago was an early example of the shift to individual school control after it was named the worst school system in the nation in 1987 by then-U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett. It has since reverted back to a more centralized model. Many districts have adopted versions of site-based decision-making.

- Charter school legislation allows teachers, parents or other citizens to open and operate their own public

schools under “charters” that free them from the constraints of traditional school district policies and regulations.

- Under school choice programs, the traditional role of the school board is eliminated as parents send their children to any school they wish and funding follows each child. A panel put together by Education Commission of the States recommended a model where school boards contract with every school instead of running entire systems themselves. Paul Hill of the University of Washington has proposed that districts operate charters for each school and that both the school board and the charters meet performance standards or lose their authority.
- Some have proposed that local schools be incorporated as a separate municipal or county

Richard H. Goodman, William G. Zimmerman,

From New England School Development Council

Responsibilities of Board/Superintendent Team:

- Having as its top priority the creation of teamwork and advocacy for the high achievement and healthy development of all children in the community
- Providing education leadership for the community, including the development and implementation of the community vision and long range plan, in close collaboration with principals, teachers, other staff and parents.
- Creating strong linkages with social service, health and other community organizations and agencies to provide community wide support and services for healthy development and high achievement for all children.
- Setting districtwide policies and annual goals, tied directly to the community’s vision and long-range plan for education.
- Approving an annual school district budget, developed by the superintendent and adopted by the board
- Ensuring the safety and adequacy of all school facilities.
- Providing resources for the professional development of teachers, principals and other staff
- Periodically evaluating its own leadership, governance and teamwork for children.
- Overseeing negotiations with employee groups.

Responsibilities of School Board:

- Selecting, working with and evaluating superintendent
- Serving as advocates for all children teachers, and other staff by adopting “kids-first” goals, policies and budget
- Maintaining fiscal responsibility and fiscal autonomy, with the authority to appropriate local funds necessary to support the board-approved budget
- Delegating to the superintendent the day to day administration of the school district, including student discipline and all personnel matters

Responsibilities of Superintendent:

- Serving as chief executive officer to the board of education, including recommending all policies and the annual budget.
- Supporting the board of education by providing good information for decision-making
- Overseeing the educational program
- Taking responsibility for all personnel matters
- Developing and administering the budget
- Managing business and financial matters, bids and contracts, facilities, transportation, etc.
- Developing and supporting districtwide teams of teachers and other staff working to improve teaching and learning and supporting local school councils of staff, parents and students
- Taking care of day to day management and administrative tasks including student discipline and personnel issues.

department, or run by a group that would oversee comprehensive education, health and social services for children and families.

Some reforms focus on the superintendency itself, with boards opting to hire leaders with corporate or military experience rather than educational expertise. It is a trend gaining momentum, with Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City as prime examples. In still other cases, the traditional superintendent's role has been divided up, and its duties split between a chief executive officer, generally a non-educator, and chief educational officer. In San Diego, for example, Anthony Alvarado has served as chancellor for instruction with Alan Bersin, a former federal prosecutor, as chief education officer, although he planned to resign in September 2003 and scaled back his work with the district to part-time recently.

A big innovation to watch is mayoral control of school districts. Beginning in the mid-1990s, states have turned over at least partial control of urban school districts to mayors in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York City, Cleveland, Detroit, Oakland, and Boston.

Mayoral takeovers can be good for students and in the mayors' own best interests, according to Thomas Glass of the University of Memphis: "Large cities struggling hard to retain businesses, renew Although core areas, and attract new investments hardly need a highly publicized, failing school district." There is no evidence mayoral takeovers have yet increased student achievement, he believes school boards appointed by mayors are more stable than elected boards, and the districts they oversee, more efficiently managed.

Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst agrees that the model has potential. "These are typically school systems mired in bureaucracy with boards that cannot establish a clear directive for improvement," says Kirst. "What they need is a quick, large jolt,

and mayors have been able to deliver that in some cases." Kirst says mayors who take over schools need to have a lot of confidence in their leadership ability. "You have to be a pretty bold person to say, 'I'm willing to be held accountable for this system with all of its problems that's hard to turn around.'"

Schools in Chicago, Boston and Cleveland, where residents recently voted to continue mayoral control, have improved, according to Kirst. "They're not really high quality, but are on the right track," he says. The reason mayoral control has failed in cities such as

Detroit and Oakland is that the mayors there were not given, or were not willing to accept, full control, he says.

A study comparing mayoral-controlled school districts, completed in 2002, found different results but, in all three, no perceptible change in student achievement. Similarly, Baltimore changed its governance *from* mayoral control to a partnership between the state and the district, and only after more than four years and three superintendents (plus one interim) were there signs of improved student achievement.

Check the EFFECTIVENESS of the COMMUNITY

Just as schools depend on district leadership, districts depend on the strengths of their communities. "If I were thinking about reforming a school district, the first place I'd look is to the community," Glass says, noting that very few effective schools are found in what he calls "disorganized" communities — places where citizens fail to agree on major social and educational issues. "I'd ask, 'Does the community know where the district is in terms of achievement and program effectiveness? What are the community's educational priorities? What does the community want the school district to do? Is there support for those things? Are people willing to pay for them? To participate in the process?'"

The MDRC study notes that successful urban districts engage the community. Not only must the school board and superintendent agree that improved

student achievement is the top priority, but so must community leaders. The general public should be providing feedback as well, it concludes.

In his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz says that leaders "must challenge their communities to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions." And, successful reform efforts require long-term, committed support from outside the school system, says Hill in his book, *It Takes A City: Getting Serious about Urban School Reform*. "Superintendents are good sources of day-to-day leadership, but given their short tenures, their efforts are not enough," according to Hill. "Leadership must come from a longer-lasting source and one that is both more deeply rooted in the community than a superintendent and less protective of the status quo than a school board or central office."

Conclusion: LEADING for LEARNING

The ability of a superintendent or a school board to engage in community building and shared decision-making, or, for that matter, to adroitly navigate a school district's often-turbulent political waters, is meaningless unless such efforts improve student achievement.

The goal must be to become true instructional leaders focused on providing a school environment in which quality teaching and learning can flourish. How to get there? Demand that school board members and school

superintendents measure their own effectiveness by one and only one measure: according to how well their students achieve.

Focusing on school leadership without addressing other issues – i.e., the social conditions that put children at risk of doing poorly in school, teacher quality, or inadequate school financing – is indeed shortsighted. Yet, the emerging research suggests that improving student achievement across a district will only occur under leaders who are collaborative rather than confrontation-

al and know how to use politics to bring about change. Those leaders need a vision and plans to achieve that vision. Their decisions must be based on hard data rather than conjecture. And they must have the political will and personal commitment to stay the course rather than succumb to the lure of a quick fix.

Although no one is minimizing the impact that gifted teachers have on student performance, the Institute for Educational Leadership says teachers alone can't make better learning a reality for all students in a school system. "Real learning seldom takes place without sensitive yet forceful guidance from those who fill education's leadership positions – leaders who focus on the importance of developing high-performing organizations, enlightened public attitudes, and a realistic set of priorities."

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