

School Board Governance and Student Achievement: School Board Members' Perceptions of Their Behaviors and Beliefs

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The intent of this study is to determine whether there was a difference between school board members' perceptions of their own behaviors and beliefs related to student achievement in California's high-performing poverty districts as opposed to such perceptions in low-performing poverty districts. Due to the findings of this study, the author calls on policymakers to place more attention and provide greater support to school boards for the good of public education.

School education in the 21st century requires strong and good decision-making in the country. Streshly and Frase (1993) asserted a while ago that “the dramatic changes needed to face today’s challenges lie in the way we run our schools: basic governance” (p.141). Shifting demographics, increased accountability under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and inadequate resources pose unprecedented challenges to current school board members as they attempt to generate the conditions that create and sustain high levels of student achievement (Peterson & Fusarelli, 2001).

Until recently, education reform movements paid little attention to school district governance. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, (2004) noted that much of the effective schools research ignored the role of district level leadership, including school board governance. Moreover, research regarding the link between school board governance and student achievement has been described as uncharted territory (Iowa Association of School Boards [IASB], 2000).

Emerging evidence demonstrates that school boards may have an influence on student achievement. Leithwood, et al. (2004) found evidence that effective district-wide leadership has the greatest impact on those school systems in which it is most needed. As former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige stated, school boards are close enough to communities and schools to see what needs to be done and powerful enough to do it (McAdams, 2006).

Yet, research substantiating the link between school board governance and students’ academic achievement is extremely limited (Land, 2002). Additionally, few studies regarding school board governance that include quantifiable and reliable measures of student achievement exist (Delagardelle, 2008).

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Review of the Literature

Understanding the context of school board governance in today's society requires knowledge of the historical role of school boards in the United States. In the 19th century, board members in the country were the most numerous class of public officials in the Western hemisphere (Blodgett, 1897). In fact, school board members actually functioned in a manner similar to current superintendent and central office administration (Kirst, 2008). They had extensive powers and responsibilities, including making curricular decisions, employing staff, selecting textbooks, and establishing administrative structures to operate the schools (Mountford, 2008).

The 20th century brought a call to take "the schools out of politics" (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002, p.10), as well as the adoption of the then popular "scientific approach" to management (Taylor, 1911). As a result, professional school administration increased and the number of decisions made by school boards decreased (Mountford, 2008). For most of the 20th century, school boards took a low-key, hands-off approach to student learning, reasoning that instructional decisions should be made by a professional (Lashway, 2002). With regard to student achievement, former Nevada Association of School Boards President, Anne Loring, believes that control was taken away from school boards because they were reluctant to compare districts results as they failed to accept responsibility for poor performance and focus on the clear mission: student achievement (as cited in Dexter & Ruff, 2007).

Amidst continuing societal changes in the latter half of the 20th century, school boards juggled diverse and changing conditions surrounding public school districts. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 commonly referred to as NCLB - enacted in 2001 - forced school boards to examine just how a school district can create and sustain high levels of achievement for all students. Indeed, under NCLB's accountability provisions, school boards found themselves in the position of approving outside agencies to provide supplemental services, replacing principals, reassigning an entire school faculty, and initiating other dramatic changes to address students' needs to achieve adequate yearly progress.

But, as previously suggested, demographics have dramatically changed throughout the second half of the 20th century. The Institute for Educational Leadership in 1992 recognized the increased non-instructional needs of a growing percentage of the school-age population (Danzberger, 1994). As asserted by Petersen and Fusarelli (2001), one in four children now live in poverty, and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Additionally, the U.S. Latino population has increased at a rate five times that of non-Latino whites (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001). Adopting appropriate curriculum, instituting bilingual instruction, and increasing non-instructional resources exemplify the decisions school boards face as they seek to address linguistic and cultural differences (Land 2002). School accountability has also increased. The public wants more voice (Resnick, 1999), as parents, community members, special interest groups, and advocacy organizations demand equal access to high quality instruction and rigorous curriculum for all students. These various constituent groups may cause fragmentation in school district decision-making and board agendas (Kirst, 2008). Special interest groups such as the Gates Foundation and the Council for Exceptional Children inform and engage the public, thus adding external influences exerted on school board deliberations (Kirst, 2008). Moreover, school boards find themselves squeezed between growing federal

mandates, congressional legislation, special interest groups, community and local collective bargaining contracts (Kirst, 2008). Currently, school board members may have less authority to make decisions yet held increasingly accountable for student performance (Mountford, 2008).

In recent years, school boards grappled with balancing budgets in the midst of the worst economic recession since the Great Depression (Brookings Institution, 2009). Superintendents presented dire financial information accompanied by unprecedented reductions in an effort to balance district budgets. On top of these challenges, ongoing threats to funding also come in the form of charter schools, vouchers, tuition tax credits, contracting out to educational management organizations, and a reinvigorated home school movement (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001).

Moody's Investors Service (2013) reported that the rise in charter school enrollments over the past decade is likely to create negative credit pressure on school districts in economically weak urban areas. School board members may continue to find themselves slashing budgets, which often results in demoralized employees, skeletal instructional programs, and community dissatisfaction.

Clearly, school boards and superintendents lead in intensely changing contexts (Bjork, 2008; Kirst, 2008). To remain a viable governing authority, school boards may need to both, reexamine their role within the current educational context, and refashion themselves accordingly (Kirst, 1994). But how should all of this happen?

With school board literature dominated by personal narratives, opinion-based articles, and guidebooks (Land, 2002; Conley, 2003), and few studies empirically examining the subject (Delagardelle, 2008) research regarding district-level leadership may serve as a guidepost to school boards.

In the past, research on district-level leadership has been sparse (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988), and few school effectiveness researchers devoted themselves to uncovering district practices and characteristics associated with student achievement (Cuban, 1984; Rowan, 1983, Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001). However, more current research acknowledged the role of the school district in providing leadership and directing large-scale change and reform (Leitherwood, et al., 2004). With a clear division of roles and responsibilities school boards can provide accountability and monitor performance (Hess, 2008), thus creating the conditions for improving student achievement. A large-scale quantitative study found that higher outcomes in middle grades schools were associated with support from district-level leadership (Kirst, Haertel, Levin, Padia, & Balfanz, 2010). Kirst et al. (2010) found that superintendents associated an effective school board with higher outcomes of student learning. Togneri's and Anderson's (2003) examination of five California school districts, found that "it was the courage of the school board that jump-started the reform efforts" (p.7). These studies offer knowledge worthy of school board members' attention as they work toward the goal of effective governance. Two seminal studies on governance and student achievement, one conducted by Goodman, Fulbright and Zimmerman (1997) and another commonly referred to as *The Lighthouse Inquiry*, conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards (Delagardelle, 2008; IASB, 2000), emerged with comprehensive documentation.

Goodman, et al. (1997) conducted one of the first in-depth examinations of school board governance and student achievement. The researchers uncovered that districts with high quality governance tended to have greater student achievement as measured by dropout,

college going, and aptitude test rates. While this study provided a foundation for understanding effective governance and student achievement, additional research remains to be done.

In a mixed-methods study conducted in three phases over ten years, the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB, 2000; Rice, Delagardelle, Buckton, Johns, Lueders, & Vens, 2001) implemented perhaps the most comprehensive examination of district governance roles and responsibilities necessary to positively impact student learning. Based on school renewal research (Rosenholtz, 1989), and reflecting the work of Goodman, et al. (1997) and the National School Board Association's (NSBA) *Key Works* (Gemberling, Smith & Villani, 2000), the Lighthouse Inquiry identified seven *Key Areas of Board Performance*. The seven Key Areas provide a framework for examining the effectiveness of school boards and contribute to the discussion of school board governance and student achievement. These areas were used in the study here reported and discussed later.

Conceptual Framework

The Lighthouse Inquiry offered emerging evidence that school board members' behaviors and beliefs have a positive impact on a school district's efforts to improve student achievement (Delagardelle, 2008). Thus, the seven Key Areas of Board Performance, a product of the Lighthouse Inquiry, provide a conceptual framework for examining if differences exist in school board members' perceptions of their behaviors and beliefs related to student achievement in California's high-performing poverty districts compared to low-performing poverty districts.

Two of the Key Areas of Board Performance assess the school board's interaction with the public, specifically in creating awareness and connecting with the community to build the public will toward improved student achievement. In addition to the board's effectiveness in increasing public awareness and will to improve, another one scrutinizes board member commitment to improved student achievement. Several Key Areas encompass the school board's relationship with staff as the school board supports and connects with district-wide leadership, provides ongoing staff development, and applies pressure for accountability. A final Key Area examines school deliberative policy development related to the improvement of teaching and learning. Each of these seven Key Areas of Board Performance were used in the quantitative phase of the study here reported and formed the foundation for the qualitative phase.

For the purpose of this study, *poverty districts* were defined as those districts with twenty five percent or more students who qualify for a free or reduced meal as defined by the National School Lunch Program criteria. The term *high-performing poverty school district* was defined as a school district meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) overall and for the significant subgroups of African-American, Latino, English Learners, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. The term *low-performing poverty school district* was defined as a school district designated as Program Improvement by the federal government and assigned a District Assistance Intervention Team by the California Department of Education.

Research Methodology

Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods procedure to collect, analyze, and link both quantitative and qualitative data in two phases (Creswell, 2009). Exporting a data file from the California Department of Education (2011) to statistical software generated a report identifying school districts meeting this study's criteria for high-performing and low-performing poverty districts. Twenty-two school districts met the study's definition of a low-performing school district with a total of one hundred five school board members contacted to participate in the study. Seventeen school districts met the study's definition of a high-performing school district with a total of eighty-two school board members contacted to participate in the study.

Quantitative Phase

This phase compared school board members' perceptions of their behaviors and beliefs related to the Key Areas of Board Performance through a closed, four-point scale survey designed to collect descriptive, self-reporting data. School board members from the identified districts were asked to respond electronically. The survey also contained three open questions. The survey research method resulted in a numeric description of school board members' behaviors and beliefs. Descriptive statistics were used to quantitatively analyze survey results. Some qualitative data were collected through the open questions as well.

The researcher sent the survey through three separate e-mails via the California School Boards Association (CSBA). Moreover, due to the researcher's position as a superintendent, the researcher personally contacted each of the superintendents and requested that they encourage their respective school board members to respond to the survey.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of this study added an in-depth look into the beliefs of school board members. Interview questions were developed based on research findings addressed in the literature review, the quantitative phase of the study, and a panel of scholars, including board members and superintendents. Using a convenient sampling technique, one board member from a high-performing school district and one board member from a low-performing school district were selected for one-on-one telephone interviews.

Research Question

What differences in school board members' perceptions exist of their behaviors and beliefs related to student achievement in California's high-performing poverty districts compared to student achievement in low-performing poverty districts?

Study Limitations

Obtaining an adequate survey response from school board members in identified districts presented a limitation for this study, particularly among the identified low-achieving poverty

districts. Moreover, the fact that the research was also a school superintendent, may have played a role in both obtaining a larger response and bias control in the content of such responses.

Data Analysis

Survey participants self-reported their responses on a four point scale with 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree. Responses to each question from participants were calculated to yield a total score for the seven Key Areas of Board Performance. The mean and the standard deviation were used to measure central tendencies of the seven Key Areas of Board Performance. The researcher used descriptive statistics to depict numerical and graphical summaries designed to provide a picture of the data collected for specific survey questions and each Key Area of Board Performance. No statistical tests of significance were used for this study.

The qualitative phase of the research examined the thoughts and beliefs of one school board member selected from the high-performing school districts identified for this study and one school board member selected from the low-performing school districts identified for this study. The researcher categorized the tape-recorded interview responses according to each of the Key Areas of Performance, analyzing the data for evidence that corroborated or refuted findings from the quantitative phase of the study. Additionally, the researcher looked for emerging topics or themes beyond the parameters of the survey.

Figure 1 displays the aggregated mean average responses of school board members regarding their behaviors and beliefs related to each Key Area.

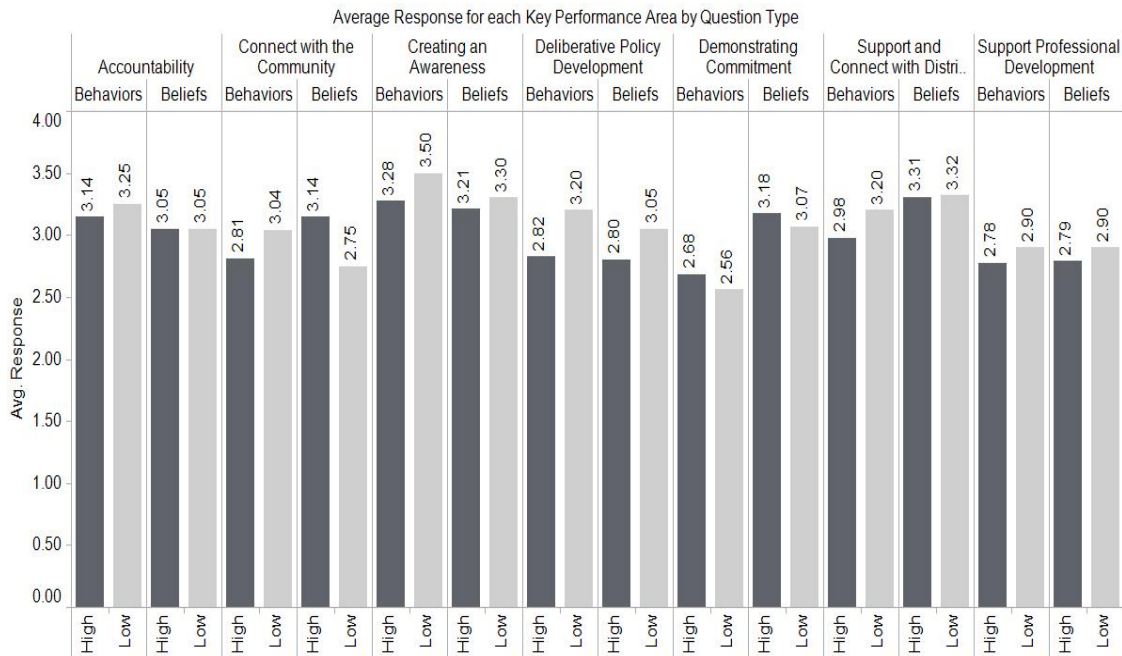


Figure 1. Seven Key Areas of Board Performance

As depicted in Figure 1, aggregated results for each Key Area demonstrated more similarities than differences. The greatest differences occurred in the Deliberative Policy Development and Connecting with the Community areas.

The researcher also calculated the numeric results and created a graphic representation for each question, similar to the aggregated results for each Key Area depicted in Figure 1. Examining the results for *each* survey question within the seven Key Areas of Board Performance yielded additional data that demonstrated differences between the two groups of board members. Findings from the examination of each survey question within the seven Key Areas of Board Performance are summarized below.

Creating Awareness

Similar responses among school board members for this Key Area were found. Board members from low- performing school districts indicated a slightly higher level of response to the belief that school board members must possess a fundamental commitment to close the achievement gap. Board members in low-performing districts ranked possession of a vision of what they want to accomplish based on their values and beliefs higher than board members in high-achieving districts. The qualitative phase of this study corroborated this finding. Confirming this finding, a board member from the latter group, noted that when the district was designated a low-performing district, prior to exiting Program Improvement status, the board had to “set things in motion” and “figure out where we needed to go, set the tone, and develop the vision.”

Applying Pressure for Accountability

Both high-and low-performing districts had the most agreement that board members are responsible for ensuring that all students learn to high levels. On spending time related to accountability, both high- and low-performing districts reported spending the least amount observing instruction in the classroom. However, those from low achieving districts appear to spend more time monitoring student learning progress, and adopting long-range and annual goals, but slightly less time creating plans for student learning. The board member from the low-performing district corroborated this finding, saying that keeping teachers on target with pacing guidelines and ensuring the coverage of essential curriculum was a focus for the school board.

Demonstrating Commitment

Members from high-performing school districts agreed most strongly with the statement that effective board members are a resource to the organization and agreed the least with the statement that a board member’s commitment is more important than board training. However, board members from low-performing districts agreed that commitment is more important than training, while they agreed least with the statement that school boards function efficiently if members are dedicated to practices of equality and democracy.

Both high-and low-performing districts report spending the least amount of time attending conferences and implementing special board study sessions, though it appears that

members from high performing school districts spend more time in these activities than those from low performing districts.

Supporting Professional Development

Members from the high-performing districts appear to have much less agreement with the statement about reducing or eliminating professional development than those from low-performing school districts. For the questions about how they spend their time, board members from low- performing school districts appear to spend much more time establishing criteria to guide the staff in choosing initiatives for professional development that improves student achievement, than the board members from high- performing districts.

Supporting and Connecting with District-wide Leadership

Board members in both types of districts stated that they spend time developing a relationship with the superintendent, and statements on the survey's open-ended section supported the closed section responses about this point. In fact, this topic generated the most comments in the survey's open-ended section and extensive commentary through the interviews. Study participants repeatedly stressed the importance of the board-superintendent relationship.

Deliberative Policy Development

Both groups agreed most with the statement “a clear division should exist between the board and the superintendent”, and least with the statement “board policy regarding the employment and termination of personnel has the highest impact on student achievement.” However, there seems to be a large discrepancy in whether they see educational reform as a district's main mission. Members from high-performing districts demonstrated much lower agreement with this statement than those from low-performing school districts. In terms of how they spend their time on activities related to policy development, board members from low-performing districts appear to spend more time reviewing and updating policy related to student achievement and fiscal policy related to resources for student achievement.

Connecting with the Community

High-performing school districts' board members reported higher levels of agreement with all of the belief statements related to connecting with the community. They had the highest level of agreement for the statements that the board should connect with and represent underserved populations and the board's linkage with other agencies enhanced their ability to raise student achievement. However, those from the low-performing school districts appear to spend much more time directly informing the community regarding student achievement.

Discussion

The overall response to the seven Key Areas demonstrated more similarities than differences in the two groups of board members. However, school board members demonstrated notable

differences in their responses to three key areas: Demonstrating Commitment, Deliberative Policy Development and Connecting with the Community.

In the Key Area of Demonstrating Commitment, board members in low-performing school districts indicated that commitment is more important than training, while more board members in high-performing districts registered greater disagreement with this statement. However, board members from both types of districts stated that they spent minimal time at state or national conferences. Lack of training and conference attendance, as Danzberger & Usdan, 1992 and Maeroff, 2010 have shown, may hamper a school board's ability to work as an effective governance team focused on student achievement, particularly in a low-performing school district where school board governance must contribute to effective leadership efforts toward raising student academic performance.

Furthermore, board members in high-performing districts indicated their belief that school boards function efficiently if dedicated to equality and democracy in their practices, while low-performing districts disagreed with this statement. These data contribute to the discussion surrounding the type of training that is most valuable to school board members. Critics of formal training or development programs state that they are too concerned with dispensing information rather than building skills, and too focused on individuals rather than the board and superintendent as a team. Such issues resonate with findings from researchers such as Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud & Usdan (1986); Goodman & Zimmerman (2000) and Schmidt (1992). In other words, practices of equality and democracy --- which include the ability to work together --- contribute to effective governance.

While the key area "Demonstrating Commitment" revealed that working as a team may be attributed to effective school board governance, the area "Deliberative Policy Development" yielded another difference between the two groups of school board members participating in the study. Responses to the belief that educational reform is a school district's main mission produced the second greatest difference on the entire survey. School board members in low-performing districts agreed, in the 1 to 4 scale, with an average score of 3.20, while school board members in high-performing districts disagreed with an average score of 2.32. The low-performing districts identified for this study exist under the pervasive rule of state and federal accountability and may be more keenly aware and focused on the impetus for reform under NCLB of 2001.

Similarly, low-performing districts indicated that they spent some time reviewing and updating policies related to student achievement, while high-performing districts spent only minimal time in that effort. Again, the self-reported behaviors of school board members in low-performing school districts may demonstrate the mandates of being a Program Improvement district.

Mandated accountability for "Program Improvement" may have influenced board member responses from low performing districts in an additional Key Area, Connecting with the Community, particularly when providing information about student achievement to the community. The behavior of *directly informing the community regarding student achievement* indicated that school board members in high-performing districts spend "minimal time" on this behavior, while board members in low-performing districts spend appreciably more time informing the public. As previously stated, low-performing districts designated as program improvement function under the mandates of NCLB, including distinct requirements for disseminating student achievement results.

Data from the key Area “Connecting with the Community” demonstrated several other differences between school board members in high- and low-performing school districts. School board members in high-performing districts posted an average response of 3.47 with the belief that the board should connect with and represent underserved populations, while board members in low-performing districts responded at 2.80. The population in our public schools has changed, and effective school boards, school boards that foster increased student achievement, understand that they need an awareness of the changing demographics in today’s schools.

Another difference emerged in the key Area “Connecting with the Community” as school board members in high-performing districts agreed at an average rate of 3.37 with the belief that the board’s linkage with other government agencies or community groups enhances the school district’s ability to raise student achievement, while board members in low-performing districts responded at an average of 2.80. The behaviors reported by school board members in high-performing districts mirrored their beliefs in the Key Area of Connecting with the Community. They ranked allocating resources for the purpose of connecting with parents and the community as spending “some time,” while low-performing groups spent “minimal time” on this. Collaboration yields resources to assist students and support staff in the quest for higher student achievement. Resnick (1999) noted that school boards and superintendents are ideally situated to coordinate policies and activities with other public agencies and private institutions responsible for services related to children.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

A strong need for more research about school board preparation and training emerged from this study, particularly on the type most beneficial for school boards and their work to raise student achievement. This study indicates that governance training, as opposed to sessions dedicated to specific information or topics might have the greatest impact.

Additionally, participants indicated that their school board discusses a variety of topics related to student achievement. But to gain thicker data regarding what school boards discuss and how much time they spend discussing student achievement, a quantitative analysis of school board documents may help illuminate the issue. Additionally, detailed observation of school board behaviors, rather than reliance on self-reporting, may also offer robust data regarding effective governance as it relates to student achievement.

Finally, school board members from high-performing districts in this study indicated a greater amount of time spent with government and community agencies for the purpose of enhancing the district’s ability to raise student achievement. Qualitative research regarding how school boards accomplish this task could prove useful to schools and district staff as they identify and analyze potential support for initiatives that raise student achievement. Additionally, further study may discern which type of agencies, groups, or businesses provide the most monetary and other types of support for public schools.

Summary

This study found that, indeed, there is a difference between school board members’ perceptions of their behaviors and beliefs related to student achievement. Such fact affirms an old truism: school district governance is not easy. In fact, it’s often controversial, confusing,

and confounding, as school board members attempt to represent the community in a quest for high student achievement that will prepare our nation's children in the 21st century. At their best, school board members embody the thoughtful, purposeful focus of elected officials who esteem the value of public education in a democracy, and honor the trust of placing our children's education in their hands.

While some would eschew the work of school boards, calling them an archaic system that no longer serves a purpose in our educational institutions, others call upon the potential for school boards to lead the nation toward improved schools, higher achievement, and a better citizenry. As education reform movements seek the elements that produce great schools and high-achieving students, let us hope that school boards begin to attract the attention and support necessary to propel their work for the good of public education. Training school boards to function as a team focused on student achievement with an ability to leverage community resources for the benefit of all students will support and sustain effective school board governance.

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