# Professional development for school boards: why is it vital for student learning?

School boards have the critical mission of ensuring that each student in the district attains a comprehensive, well-rounded education in an environment of safety and support that prepares them for life beyond the K-12 school system. Boards meet this mission through vital processes such as: using an equity lens to adopt budgets and policies that support the district's goals and initiatives, monitoring progress on those goals and holding the system accountable, gaining and maintaining the support of the community, and selecting and collaborating with a superintendent who is a trusted and effective educational leader. In doing so, school boards position themselves to positively impact student achievement in their districts.

Studies into how boards impact student achievement has led researchers, practitioners, and board trainers to sets of best practices meant to help improve board functioning. But what distinguishes a low-performing district from a high-performing one, and how can a school board function in a way that increases student achievement?

**Background**

First, let's look at the behaviors of boards in districts with consistently low student achievement.

The research shows us that these districts' board meetings tend to be:

> "…less orderly; [have] less time spent on student achievement; lack respectful and attentive engagement across speakers; [have] board meeting members who seem to advance their own agenda; [have] less effective working relationships among the governance team; [have] fewer board members who [rely] on the superintendent for advice and input; [have] one member, other than the board president, stand out for taking excessive time during meetings; and [do] not focus on policy items." (Lee, 2014)

Additionally,

> "[w]ithout effective professional development, board members cannot understand their roles, making it difficult to forge sound decisions regarding the district….This lack of understanding of school board members about their roles aligns with the literature that states that lack of professional development leads to an ineffective board." (Korelich, 2015)

And finally, the research shows us that "…the vast majority of school boards in low-performing school systems spend little time on instructional issues or plans for relevant academic district improvement." (Lee, 2014)

So, how do boards in districts with consistently high student achievement behave? Since the groundbreaking Lighthouse Inquiry in 2000, we have known that boards in high-achieving districts believe that all students can succeed, they are knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and they link their board goals to school and district goals. (Rice, 2000) Research since then has emphasized that productive and positive school board behavior has a positively correlated impact on student achievement. (Lorentzen I. , 2013)

These effective boards more often:

- Express an "elevating" view of students
- Provide specific examples of how staff is approaching overall district goals through improvement initiatives
- Collaborate with the superintendent to seek improvement opportunities
- Collaborate with staff to connect board and district goals to student learning
- Monitor progress based on data (New Jersey School Boards Association, 2017)

Over time, research has indicated that the behaviors most greatly correlated with student achievement are: holding the system accountable for meeting expectations in student learning, communicating those high expectations and setting clear goals for meeting them with measurable outcomes, and providing responsible governance over the district. (Lorentzen I. , 2013)

**The Case for Board Development**

One way that boards demonstrate commitment to these behaviors is by engaging in their own professional development. When a board demonstrates commitment, it carves out space and time to learn together, it acknowledges the role of the board in improving student achievement, it evaluates its own performance on a regular basis and sets goals for improvement, and it models a willingness to learn and course-correct as necessary. Research shows that when boards and their superintendents share professional development times as a team, "[c]larity of roles and the reduction of conflict increase the time that can be spent on student achievement." (Shelton, 2015)  In fact, districts with high levels of conflict tend not only to have more turnover in superintendents, but also tend to have lower graduation rates. (Ford, 2013)

Case studies of high-achieving districts, meta-analyses of research on board practices, and studies on the performance of districts with similar demographics but substantially different student outcomes have led researchers and experts in board operations and performance to identify eight characteristics that effective school boards exhibit. These are:

1. A commitment to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction as well as clear goals toward that vision;
2. Strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels;
3. Behavior that is accountability-driven, with less time spent on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement;
4. A collaborative relationship with staff and the community, and an established strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals;

5. Data savviness: embracing and monitoring data, even when the information is negative, and using it to drive continuous improvement;
6. Alignment and sustainment of resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals;
7. Leadership as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust;
8. Participation in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendent, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts. (Dervarics, 2011)

Effective boards that lead high-performing districts do so through well-articulated high expectations for all students, a focus on student achievement, holding the system accountable while providing sufficient support for district goals and initiatives, hiring a superintendent with superb leadership skills, and by creating space for their own professional learning and development.

**Impactful Action**

So, how do boards become more effective and impactful? First, board members must know and understand the role they play in district governance. New board members especially need to quickly gain a basic knowledge of the system in which they govern, and the laws and policies governing their behavior. Research shows that, '[i]n particular, for new board members, it is of utmost importance that they understand their roles and duties to avoid over-stepping boundaries, challenging team-building activities, and personal agendas." (Korelich, 2015)

A training on a board's basic roles and responsibilities should be the first step in a board's professional development plan. This training should encompass:
- The legal roles and responsibilities of a public-school board;
- How governance differs from management, and how the board's role differs from that of the superintendent;
- The board's role as defined by its own policies;
- A primer on communication between board members and communication with the superintendent;
- The board's primary expectations of the superintendent, and the superintendent's primary expectations of the board;
- Collaboration and communication agreements.

It is crucial that this training be done in partnership with the superintendent, as the board and superintendent together form a critical leadership team. In fact, when boards and superintendents undertake this training together, this can "…lead to lasting governance team success…and more effective governance that influences school districts and, ultimately, student achievement." (Lee, 2014)

Furthermore, as the Oregon Department of Education's Continuous Improvement Process and the recent passage of the Student Success Act both involve a higher level of board involvement than previous statewide initiatives, it is critical that school boards fully understand and grasp their role in setting the direction on vision of the district and monitoring the implementation of the strategic plan built on this vision.

But, beyond training in the board's basic roles and responsibilities, how do boards know what to undertake next? How do they determine the areas of professional development on which to focus their time and resources? Self-evaluation is the key. "A board's effectiveness…involves evaluating its own performance on a regular basis and then, quite importantly, committing to a vision about what the public school should be achieving in that district." (Gentzel, 2013)

A collaborative, authentic examination of board behaviors and practices is the next step in determining where to focus first in a board's professional development plan. "Knowing that student achievement increases when board members act collaboratively and that student achievement decreases when board members micromanage…should give board members pause." (Lorentzen I. , 2013) Therefore, the importance of the role of the board/superintendent team and reflecting on past and current practice with the goal of continuous improvement can lead to better student outcomes.

Research done in Montana using the Board Self-Assessment Survey (BSAS) developed by the Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA) showed that "[s]tatistically significant relationships were found between several aspects of student achievement and numerous elements of boardsmanship." (Lorentzen I. , 2013) Examples of these behaviors include: providing responsible school district governance, setting and communicating high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations, creating the conditions for student and staff success, holding the district accountable for meeting student learning expectations, and engaging the community. (Lorentzen I. , 2013)

Once a board has assessed its effectiveness in these areas, it can begin to develop a professional learning plan to address deficiencies in its performance. "School board members, especially those from low-performing school districts, need to be the participants of a highly refined and target-enhanced school board member training program." (Lee, 2014)

Even boards in high-performing districts benefit from regular professional development together with their superintendent. We encourage all boards to take the self-assessment, build the foundation of board governance with a course on basic roles and responsibilities, and then develop a training plan including one or more of the following topics:

- Monitoring the district's strategic priorities and their alignment with the district's strategic plan.
- Vision, mission, and goal setting
- Assessment literacy and data analysis through an equity lens
- Board culture (board operating agreements, communication protocols)
- Effective superintendent evaluation

This resource can also be used on an annual basis to gather data about board performance and growth over time. As we know, school boards are ever changing. We also know that "…effective school board training that mentors trainees to become leaders, shows exactly how to demand high quality from the staff and shows how to set benchmarks for excellence [will] enhance student achievement." (Lee, 2014)

Taken together, the Lighthouse research (the seminal research on the impact of school boards on student achievement), the Montana research (a later study that corroborated much of the Lighthouse research and prescribed specific actions a board can take to help improve student achievement), and the board self-assessment developed by WSSDA (the tool used in the Montana research) illuminate

common areas of board development that are critical to boards positively impacting student achievement.

We also know that adults learn best when they: know why they are learning something, learn through experience (as opposed to sit-and-get), take a problem-solving approach, and when they get immediate value from their learning. (Knowles, 1984) A well-designed professional development program for board members involves building on the foundation of what research has shown to be effective, reflecting on current board practices, and applying best practices to their work as a board-superintendent team.

In fact, research indicates receiving professional development in a sequence of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and then coaching increases participants' knowledge, skills, and the transfer of that training to practice more than any other combination or sequence of these components. (Joyce, 1995) In practice, what does this look like? Let's take a school board that wants to monitor progress on student learning outcomes but has never done so before. A facilitator might construct a professional development sequence in the following way:

- First, the facilitator would present the theory and research as to why boards learning about student achievement in their districts is important, and how the practice can impact student achievement. The facilitator might also debrief the board on the kinds of assessments used to measure student learning.
- Next, the facilitator would provide some sample questions the board might ask during staff data presentations, and demonstrate the kind of dialogue the board might have with staff that pushes beyond just data reporting, but allows the board to truly understand what assessments are measuring, what results are being realized, and the role of the board in supporting improvement.
- Now it would be time for the board to practice these conversations with the superintendent and staff.
- The facilitator would observe, providing feedback at the end of the conversation, and potentially throughout. This practice/feedback cycle may happen more than once.
- Now the board is ready to take on this practice itself. The facilitator is available for coaching and questions, as needed.

**Toward more collaborative leadership**

OSBA believes that boards are well-positioned to make the biggest impact on student learning and increase equitable access to successful student outcomes when they involve multiple stakeholders, share leadership and accountability, and engage in collective decision-making processes. This process – called Collaborative Governance – utilizes effective partnerships to learn and lead together in an environment of trust and respect, with a shared focus on student learning through collective responsibility, accountability, and support.

To define our work in helping boards adopt this model of governing, OSBA has outlined the components of collaborative governance in Figure 1, and we believe that boards that receive training and develop tools in these areas are equipped to help student achievement increase in their districts. Moreover, "[e]mpirical evidence indicates that a more collaborative board governs a smoother functioning district, which is associated with higher student achievement." (Lorentzen I. a., 2015)

**Figure 1:** Elements of Collaborative Governance

Additionally, Table 1 outlines these principles and illustrates that their associated activities align well with the eight board characteristics shown to increase student achievement. The table also contains

recommended training and tools to assist local school boards in the adoption and implementation of collaborative governance.

**Table 1:** Characteristics and Tools of High Performing Boards Aligned with Elements of Collaborative Governance

| | Unified Leadership | Effective Partnerships | Systems Thinking | Shared Focus on Student Learning | Culture of Trust and Respect for Collective Responsibility | Learning Together | Collective Accountability and Support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **What it looks like** | Vision and goals are clearly communicated. The board and superintendent work together to lead the district toward achieving the vision. | Stakeholders are invited into the conversation. Multiple perspectives are considered and honored. | Big picture is considered. Decisions supported by policy and best practice. | Intentional focus on success for all students. | Role clarity for all parties. Mutual respect. Communication that builds trust. | Deep reliance on data to inform decisions. Learning and developing as a team. | Decision-making is shared and accountability is reciprocal. The conditions necessary for improvement are monitored. |
| **Alignment to eight characteristics of high-performing boards** | 1. A commitment to a vision of high expectations for all students as well as clear goals toward the vision. | 2. A collaborative relationship with staff and the community, and a strong communications structure | 3. Alignment of resources to district goals. | 4. Strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for all students and their ability to learn. | 5. Leadership as a united team with the superintendent with strong collaboration and mutual trust | 6. Data savviness and the use of data to drive continuous improvement.  7. Participation in professional development. | 8. Behavior that is accountability-driven, with more time focused on policies to improve student achievement. |
| **Training and tools** | Basic Roles and Responsibilities, Intermediate Roles and Responsibilities, forming a District Leadership Team (DLT), strategic visioning. | 360 superintendent evaluation; Basic Roles and Responsibilities; Intermediate Roles and Responsibilities; forming a DLT. | Strategic visioning and planning, DLT, updated policies | Strategic visioning and planning, monitoring plans, looking at data through an equity lens | Basic Roles and Responsibilities, Intermediate Roles and Responsibilities, communication protocols, board/sup working agreements | Data and assessment literacy, examining data through an equity lens, DLT | DLT, strategic visioning, monitoring plans, superintendent evaluation, board self-evaluation, use of an equity lens in decision-making |

**Conclusion**

Research has conclusively shown that board behavior and actions have the power to influence student achievement. Boards that share collective accountability with their superintendents and other stakeholders, that maintain a laser focus on equitable student achievement, that help create a culture of trust and respect, and that invest and engage in their own development for continuous improvement are much more likely to see gains in student learning in their districts.

High-quality training and facilitation can greatly influence not only how the board interacts with itself, but how it models behavior that impacts the rest of the district – all the way into every classroom! Every board member in every district has the power to help move the dial for students in a positive direction. What will you do with your power? We hope that you choose a priority that involves a relentless focus on student improvement, with an equally relentless focus on board, district, leadership, staff, and student leading and learning: because… "if we, as leaders, deny ourselves the opportunity to 'grow on the job,' how likely is it that those around us, those who work for us, [and with us] are going to feel genuinely entitled to this same right themselves?" (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, Rasmussen; 2006, p. 223).

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