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The Governance-Achievement Link

The school board plays a pivotal role in improving student achievement

“LEARNING IS NOT ATTAINED BY chance. It must be sought with ardor and attended to with diligence.”—Abigail Adams

Barely a week goes by without the reporting of our ongoing and seemingly endless national debate about public education and the quality of our nations’ schools. This debate typically invokes such topics as testing, curriculum, funding, standards, parental involvement, teacher quality, and a myriad of school-related topics.

Only rarely does this national conversation turn to school boards and their role—positive or negative—in improving student achievement. School boards are a unique American institution, statutorily empowered with the responsibility of governing our public schools. Yet they are often an

afterthought when it comes to discussions about the quality of the education provided to our children.

Is the ignored role of school boards in improving student achievement an earned one? Can school boards play a meaningful and valuable role in the improvement of student achievement?

The short answer to the question is, yes, school boards can and do make a difference. Current research contains a number of studies that conclude that school boards do have an impact on student achievement. This research also identifies common characteristics of the high-performing boards and points to best practices that facilitate high student achievement.

Below are some of the characteristics of school boards that support high student achievement.

A BELIEF AND COMMITMENT TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Studies have consistently shown that one of the most profound differences between successful and less successful school boards and school districts is a belief and commitment to the central importance of student learning and achievement.

A 2014 study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that students in school districts where a larger fraction of responding board members believed that improving student learning is important outperformed students from similar school districts.

This finding echoes a core finding from the original Lighthouse study that found that board/superintendent teams from high-achieving districts professed a belief in the ability of students to learn, as compared to board members in low-achieving districts who accepted limitations in students and their school districts.

These findings are not surprising. Belief informs goals and commitment dictates action. School boards that have committed to student achievement will focus their work on improving student achievement spurred by a belief that this work is both necessary and possible.

Successful boards establish “nonnegotiable” goals for student achievement and instruction, monitoring progress in these areas. Board work is aligned with the requirements of improving student achievement and resource decisions are made to support achievement and instructional goals.

The benefits of a focus and commitment on improving student achievement are seen, not only in resource and program decisions, but also in the creation and reinforcement of a school district culture that focuses on students and their instruction. Leadership that

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nurtures a student-centered culture, regardless of circumstance and challenges, allows the important and difficult work of learning to take place.

GENUINE ACCOUNTABILITY

The most effective school boards are accountability driven, developing rigorous and sustainable systems of accountability for all stakeholders. With this emphasis on accountability comes a focusing of the school board's work, with board members devoting time to an understanding and analysis of student achievement.

It is important to distinguish between "genuine" accountability and "feel good" accountability. The characteristics of "feel good" measures are an accountability process that is inconsistent, not aligned to important goals and objectives, and lacking in rigor. At best such an approach yields little in the way of understanding and, at worse, leads to misguided or harmful decisions.

Genuine accountability systems are characterized by a consistent application of accountability rules, a clearly understood process, agreed-upon metrics, a linking of the accountability process to district objectives and goals, and the regular review of progress and results. It informs everyone as to what is important, and ensures that the essential work of the district is being performed.

A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

While school boards frequently have

goals and objectives for student learning, it is much less common for boards to apply these same goals to their own learning. A board's commitment to its own education and learning is an essential element of building a district characterized by student and staff learning.

Mike Pedler, an author who writes about the development of learning organizations, writes that "a learning organization is an organization that facilitates the learning of all of its members and continually transforms itself." This is a description that is particularly well-suited to school districts charged with preparing students for the future.

Given the nature of school boards, most board members begin their service with little formal understanding of the requirements of school board service, and frequently possess preconceptions at odds with successful board service. In order to effectively lead their districts, boards are well-advised to put in place formal, rigorous, and ongoing learning and development opportunities for both individual board members and the board itself.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

It is not unusual to witness school boards, comprised of well-intentioned individuals who are serving for the right reasons, fail because of problems of board governance. School boards that do not take the time to develop an understanding of effective governance and lack a shared understanding of their values find that they lack the means of putting their values into action.

Service on a school board is not just about conducting business in a professional manner: It is about leading an institution that makes a meaningful difference in the lives of children.

The developing and formalizing of an agreement about core values is evidence of a board's acceptance of this responsibility.

Effective school boards choose what is vital over what is immediate, see the future and not just the present, and advocate for the greater good over individual interests. They are designed with governance practices and procedures that allow them to approach their work with an enhanced focus and collective resolve.

School boards can play a vital role in student achievement. Research has repeatedly found a set of common characteristics shared by school boards that make a difference. At the root of these essential characteristics is an understanding of the value of the practices of good governance.

Good governance is not just professional, it is meaningful. It is a conscious choice, repeatedly made by a school board, to pursue professionalism in service of an articulated, shared belief to improve the education of children.

Board members should be inspired by the success of so many exceptional school boards around the country, and seek to emulate the essential characteristics of their success.



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