

Foreword

More than a decade ago, a report from the National Research Council stated, “Raising student achievement is the most important challenge facing local school boards today.” That statement is as true now as it was then, only now there is a growing body of empirical evidence confirming the vital role of local school boards and the board actions and priorities that matter most for improving student learning. Since 1998, the Iowa School Boards Foundation has been conducting research that identifies roles and specific actions that, when boards engage in them appropriately, are associated with better district-level capacity for improving student learning and achievement.

The results of this survey provide clear evidence that boards are ready and willing to play a stronger leadership role in improving achievement. Board responses reflect a belief that more is possible in terms of student learning. More than two-thirds of board members agree that the current state of student achievement is unacceptable and that districts must make dramatic and rapid improvement in student learning. Board members and superintendents indicate that the extremely urgent issues in their districts right now are budget/funding (a given in the current economy), improving student learning, and closing the achievement gap.

Board members also show a belief that more is possible in terms of district capacity to improve student learning. Student achievement and financial management are the top two areas board members designate as extremely important when evaluating the superintendent. Board members and superintendents alike say they believe the board has the potential to positively impact district efforts to improve student achievement.

However, board and superintendent responses also indicate their practice does not consistently align with the actions that current studies show have the biggest impact on district efforts to improve. The survey responses show evidence of movement away from traditional ways of doing business toward these research-based practices, which define a new role for boards as they establish a culture of high expectations, set improvement goals and targets, regularly study data and monitor progress, connect with district leadership teams, and provide support for teacher collaboration and ongoing professional development focused on student learning needs. Significant numbers of boards, however, continue to operate in more conventional ways of working together that are not associated with the gains in student achievement we know are possible.

This is not surprising. Traditionally, school boards have been encouraged not to play an active role in various facets of student achievement. Generally, boards and superintendents have felt more comfortable leaving instructional matters solely in the hands of professional educators. Until recently, boards have been excluded from the school reform literature and from consideration as key levers in the school change process. However, the increasing public demand for accountability for student learning now places emphasis on the responsibility of the board, as a governing body, to ensure that student learning results are high and equitable. Boards are not professional educators, but the research is clear that they do have important and appropriate roles to play in clarifying expectations for improving student learning, holding the system accountable to meeting those expectations, ensuring that the superintendent has the support needed to meet the expectations, creating a sense of urgency and “will” to improve, and learning together as a board team to develop the capacity to provide systemic leadership for high and equitable student achievement.

Board member responses in this survey indicate a thirst for support and training in areas more directly focused on improving student learning. The number one choice of board members regarding their most important learning needs in order to be effective in their job as a board member was to increase their knowledge of factors that impact student achievement. When asked about the content of the training they have received, however, board members were almost twice as likely to indicate they had received training in basic boardmanship and

operations than in issues related to student achievement. Addressing the gap between what boards say they need to develop their leadership and what they are being provided has huge implications for state school board associations, the National School Boards Association, and superintendents, whom board members rely upon to provide the majority of their training and development. The stakes are high.

Throughout the country, at least one-third of the students in public schools will not learn to read well enough to handle the content in their intermediate- and secondary-level textbooks. If nothing changes, as many as one in four students will drop out of school before graduating. For children who live in poverty, who come from diverse backgrounds, or who struggle with disabilities, these numbers increase exponentially. This is the most important challenge facing public education today.

School boards matter. Solving the problems of public education will depend on the leadership of public schools. Issues affecting the conditions of schools that enable productive change are issues of policy. School boards are critical players in the school change process and must be active leaders on behalf of the students in their schools. Without effective school board leadership, systemic change becomes impossible, and improvement of student achievement will remain episodic, with only “pockets of excellence” sprinkled throughout public schools and school districts. How board-superintendent teams understand and carry out their roles can make the difference between dysfunctional leadership teams incapable of leading change and highly effective leadership teams that build districtwide capacity to ensure that every student succeeds.

Even though school boards are removed from the teaching and learning that goes on every day in classrooms, there are critical linkages between the policymakers who guide local school districts and the behaviors of those who interact regularly with students. Efforts to improve student learning must include efforts to support and develop the knowledge and skills of local school board members as vital parts of the leadership continuum providing guidance and direction around the urgent need to improve learning outcomes for students.

Iowa School Boards Foundation