

# Foreword

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While public education has been part of the American culture for more than 200 years, it's only in recent history that we've examined school board governance and begun linking the work of board members across the country to the achievement of their students.

Just over 10 years ago, with the help of state school boards associations, the National School Boards Association published the first version of the *Key Work of School Boards*, which created a systemic process to guide school board members through the many facets of their work. We began our work on that project by asking the question, "Are school boards still relevant?" And the answer was, unequivocally, yes.

Since then, public education has shifted toward a system of accountability that holds students and the adults who teach them responsible for their academic progress at nearly every turn. But even in this new landscape, we know that school boards are every bit as relevant today—perhaps even more so.

Districts now are dealing with the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act and increased accountability requirements on students, teachers, and administrators. On an equally daunting front, most of our nation's 13,809 districts are in the midst of a severe economic recession—two-thirds of board members deemed the financial situation "extremely urgent"—that is predicted to strongly impact state and local budgets for years to come, threatening to curtail the progress made in our schools.

Nevertheless, our commitment to student achievement remains unwavering. As our economy demands a better-educated workforce, school boards know how important it is to maintain high standards for learning and to equip all of our children with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The top priorities for educators, as board members and superintendents told us in this survey, are helping students fulfill their potential and preparing them for satisfying and productive lives. However, the data also show that school boards are highly attuned to student achievement and closing the persistent gaps between whites and minorities and between students from impoverished families and their well-off peers.

School board members also share our collective restlessness about the achievement of U.S. students. Among individual board members surveyed, three out of four considered improving student learning "extremely urgent" or "very urgent," while almost 70 percent said the same about closing achievement gaps. Two-thirds agree that we must make dramatic and rapid improvements in student learning, and the same number believe it is a bad idea to lower our expectations.

To accomplish these improvements, school boards are changing and reinventing their practices to move beyond an oversight role to one of shared leadership with the superintendent. As the body of research surrounding school leadership grows, it's evident that board member best practices entail a system of active engagement with the superintendent, school leaders, and the community at large.

School boards realize that test scores aren't all that matter. Nearly 87 percent of boards think it is shortsighted to define success on the basis of student achievement alone. Success goes beyond preparing students for college and the workforce; there is a much larger purpose to educating our next generation to make a living, a life, and a difference.

The questions in this survey, compared to the one conducted in 2001, reflect the changing nature of the school board member's job. What is perhaps most telling, however, is that two areas—student achievement and school funding—were the top concerns in both reports.

As their roles evolve, school board members remain the critical connection between the school administration and the community at large. Their willingness to look at the broader picture and advocate for the whole child is an example of what communities want. School boards are also one of the most representative forms of

governance—these data show that boards are more diverse than other elected bodies and are nearly evenly split between men and women.

It's clear, based on this survey and other research, that a school board's effectiveness is tied to its leadership development. Ongoing training and learning is a must for both new and veteran board members. NSBA and its state associations are the number one source of support for board development, and our organizations have pledged to make it happen.

That said, boards need latitude to perform their roles. Even as there is no checklist for good governance, this survey shows that more and more boards are engaging in efforts to improve their schools through activities such as goal-setting, monitoring, and ensuring alignment of professional development. Board members do not turn a blind eye to this work; indeed, they are eager and anxious to turn their community's vision for successful life-long learners into reality.

Given the role of states and the increased involvement of federal lawmakers, local control doesn't look like it once did, but local leadership remains every bit as relevant today. No matter what happens with education policy at the state or federal level, we will always need locally elected or appointed boards to govern and lead our schools in some capacity.

NSBA fervently believes that local school boards that have a vision, a commitment to strong governance, and the resources to support data-based decisions can make a difference in the lives of children. Research, in the form of this report and others, shows this to be true. And while we may not see eye to eye on all of the details, NSBA and the other sponsors of this report agree that making a difference is what counts—for our future, and for future generations to come.

National School Boards Association