

can and should “significantly impact teaching and learning,” or do they think it advisable to “leave teaching and learning to the professionals” [Table 27]? By a wide margin, boards are inclined to say they ought to “leave it to the professionals,” with just 16.6 percent of boards believing that their priorities and actions can significantly impact teaching and learning. Large district boards are the most skeptical about the impact of their priorities and actions on teaching and learning, with 61.6 percent saying it should be left to the professionals and just 9.6 percent suggesting that the board’s priorities and actions can significantly impact teaching and learning.

What emerges is a picture of boards that prefer to focus on studying achievement data and providing support to district personnel and do not believe the board is in a position to directly influence teaching and learning. That said, boards think it is appropriate to regularly shift the district’s direction in accord with the data to engage the community in discussions about priorities and direction.

Given these general views, we can better understand how board members approach the challenge of boosting achievement. When asked which kinds of interventions are most likely to improve student learning, board members are most inclined to cite capacity-building measures such as professional development [Table 28]. For example, 86.1 percent of members consider professional development extremely or very important, and three-fourths of all respondents feel similarly about boosting the quality of school leadership. About two-thirds say raising the quality of district leadership is extremely or very important, while just over half think the same about reducing class size.

Board members are much more skeptical that policy changes such as charter schooling or merit pay will help improve student learning. Forty percent say they attach little or no importance to recruiting nontraditional teachers, and more than 50 percent feel that way about increasing within-district school choice. More than 60 percent say the same about a year-round school calendar, and more than 80 percent put little stock in the creation of new charter schools. In an intriguing finding, given the support voiced by the Obama administration for charter schooling, just 7.2 percent of board members think the creation of new charter schools is an extremely or very important tool for improving student learning. This finding is especially noteworthy considering that local boards are far and away the primary authorizers of charter schools and are hence the main gatekeepers for the creation of new ones.

When evaluating the performance of their local superintendent, board members report that the three most important considerations are financial management, student achievement, and meeting goals [Table 29]. More than 90 percent say that each of these is very or extremely important in superintendent evaluations. More than half of board members also think it extremely important that the superintendent has an effective working relationship with others. Among those qualities that were deemed less important, 40 percent think community engagement extremely important, and 24 percent say the same of parental satisfaction. Considered extremely or very important by 61.2 percent of board members, parental satisfaction is the only criterion that fewer than 70 percent of members ranked as extremely or very important.

■■■ SECTION 3: HOW SCHOOL BOARDS GO ABOUT THEIR WORK

Even when reformers and scholars do turn an eye to school boards, the result tends toward exhortation about what boards *should* do rather than an attempt to understand what they currently do. To improve board practice or recommend changes in structure or routine, it is useful to better understand what boards actually do, how they go about their work, and what such examinations might teach us about how to help boards govern more effectively.

How much time do board members devote to their jobs? Nationally, 41.6 percent of board members report spending 25 hours or more a month on school board business, with one in five spending more than 40 hours a month [Table 30]. About one-third of board members report spending fewer than 15 hours per month on

board work, with about 7 percent spending fewer than seven hours a month. There are dramatic differences in time spent on board work between large and small districts. In the latter, more than half of board members work fewer than 15 hours per month, and just 8.3 percent work more than 40 hours. In large districts, however, fewer than one in 10 board members reports working less than 15 hours per month while nearly 40 percent report working more than 40 hours.

How do boards spend that time? Nationally, nearly three-fourths of board members report that the percentage of board time spent on improving student achievement has increased during their tenure on the board, while 20.4 percent say it has decreased [Table 31]. Board members in the largest districts are slightly more likely to report increased attention to achievement: more than 77 percent of members in the largest districts report an increased focus on achievement, compared to 70.1 percent in the small districts.

Most board members report participating in board development or training [Table 32]. Overall, the most common types of board development are state-level conferences, which 65.7 percent of members have attended during the past year; whole-board seminars or workshops (62.7 percent); and seminars or workshops geared to individual members (58.8 percent). Members from the largest districts are more likely to attend national conferences (52.5 percent have done so, compared to 7.8 percent in small districts) and twice as likely as members from small districts to engage in web seminars.

Members report that they have received professional development and training from a number of sources [Table 33]. The most frequently named source is their state school boards association (81.6 percent), followed by the member's own board or district (58.1 percent) and the National School Boards Association (32.4 percent). Large district board members are the most likely to report working with consultants or vendors, with 41.1 percent having done so, while boards in the smallest districts are the most likely to report working with regional service agencies.

When board presidents or chairs are asked to address the frequency of *whole-board* development—with the entire board participating in training together—nearly one-fourth (23.3 percent) report that they never engage in such development, and 38.7 percent do so only once a year [Table 34]. The smaller the district, the less likely boards are to have whole-board development, with nearly 40 percent of the smallest districts never engaging in this kind of training. Of the boards that do not engage in whole-board development, the reason most frequently cited is scheduling difficulties (45.3 percent) [Table 35]. Cost is the next most common explanation, with 18.9 percent of presidents overall reporting it as a barrier. Open-meeting laws frequently prevent whole-board development for the smallest districts, with one in five board presidents citing such regulation as an obstacle. Though board members participate with some regularity in development and training opportunities, it is relatively rare that they do so together as a whole board.

In terms of substantive areas in which they have received training, 92.6 percent of board members have received or have received and would like more training on board roles, responsibilities, and operations [Table 36]. More than 80 percent have received training in legal and policy issues (82.7 percent) and funding and budget (82.9 percent). Roughly three-fourths have received training in leadership skills (75.2 percent) and student achievement issues (73.9 percent), while nearly two out of three have been trained in community engagement (65.1 percent). Board members report that while they have had training, they would benefit from additional guidance in several areas. More than 40 percent of board members desire additional training in funding and budget (44.2 percent), student achievement (49.2 percent), and legal and policy issues (41.6 percent). Just one in six members want additional training in board roles and responsibilities (18.5 percent). Among areas in which board members have not received training but would like to, the most popular areas are community engagement and student achievement.

Board members report that superintendents play a crucial role in determining what information board members have when making decisions [Table 37]. More than 56 percent of board members report that they “almost always” turn to their superintendent to get the information they need to make board decisions, and 88.7 percent

say they do so often or almost always. No other source of information comes close. Just 5.4 percent of board members say they “almost always” consult research journals; other sources of information consulted “almost always” are education publications (cited by 3 percent of board members), the state school boards association or other state organizations (7.9 percent), the daily newspaper or television news (11.1 percent), and search engines like Google or Yahoo (9 percent). In short, board members appear to turn to their superintendents for information more frequently than they turn to all other sources of information combined. This gives the superintendent a crucial role, not only as the key executive of the district but also as the gatekeeper who may determine what information board members have access to.

When asked to explain the knowledge that makes for an effective board member, members indicate that the most important thing for members to know is what factors impact student achievement [Table 38]. More than 63 percent of board members deem such expertise extremely important. Board members think the next most significant kinds of knowledge entail how to communicate with the public (47.5 percent), evaluate superintendents and principals (46.6 percent), and interpret student achievement data (43.8 percent). When asked which expertise area was only somewhat or not at all important, 21.1 percent of respondents point to curricular expertise, with budgetary expertise coming in a distant second to last, at 5.8 percent, and characteristics of effective districts last, at 2.6 percent.

III SECTION 4: HOW SCHOOL BOARDS ARE CONFIGURED

Like any other governing body, school boards are shaped by the rules and policies that regulate their membership, compensation, the nature of meetings, and so forth. Three-fourths of superintendents report that their boards have a total of either five or seven seats [Table 39]. Over 60 percent of boards have four-year terms for members, while only 3.4 percent have terms of less than three years [Table 40].

Nationally, 62.3 percent of board members report that they receive no salary, while 14.3 percent receive an annual salary of \$5,000 or more and 2 percent earn a salary of more than \$15,000 per year [Table 41]. The differences between small and large districts are dramatic. In small districts, three-fourths of board members earn no salary, and the other quarter earns less than \$5,000 per year. In large districts, the majority of board members receive a salary, with 22.1 percent earning \$10,000 or more and 7.8 percent earning more than \$15,000 per year. About one in four board members reported receiving a per-meeting stipend, most commonly less than \$100 [Table 42].

When board chairs are asked about the operational resources available to them, 90.8 percent respond that their board has access to administrative support, and 90.2 percent have access to legal counsel. Boards in the largest districts are most likely to have access to research and communications staff, as well as data analysis assistance: 80.6 percent report having data and research staff and 71 percent have access to communications staff. Smaller districts are far less likely to have such support [Table 43]. Nationally, more than 87.8 percent of board members report using the Internet on a daily basis, and just 5.2 percent report using it less than once a week [Table 44].

Board chairs also provided information on the prosaic details of how boards operate and interact with the public [Table 45]. Almost half of all board chairs who responded (47.7 percent of 153 boards) deliver meeting materials to board members electronically, and more than 75 percent of all districts, except the smallest, make all district policies available electronically. Two-thirds of boards (66.7 percent) feature e-mail contact information for all board members on the district website, and 56.2 percent post board minutes and supporting documents online. The largest districts are most likely to employ these tools, while the smallest districts lag by a fair margin. For example, while 84 percent of large district boards feature electronically accessible district policies, only 54 percent of the smallest districts do.

When it comes to board proceedings, over half of the board presidents responding (53.6 percent) indicate that