

election ballot for board candidates [Table 56]. More than half of superintendents (53 percent) indicate that in their districts, school board elections are always held on the same day as national or state elections [Table 57]. Challengers face stiff odds when contesting elections against incumbent board members, with 46.8 percent of superintendents reporting that no incumbent board members have been defeated by challengers in the past five years [Table 58].

## III SECTION 6: SCHOOL BOARDS AND THEIR SUPERINTENDENTS

The most significant decision school boards make is the decision to hire a superintendent to lead their school district. While a variety of measures were collected on the 120 superintendents who participated in this study, the report is focused on school boards. Those seeking a more detailed look at superintendents would do well to check out *The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study*<sup>21</sup> or *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*.<sup>22</sup> Our focus here is on how superintendents and school boards view each other and how they interact.

Superintendents' views of their district's top priorities are quite similar to those of board members [Table 59]. When asked to rate the importance of the same goals posed to board members, approximately 20 percent of superintendents say preparing students for college is a first or second priority, and 15 percent say the same about preparing students for the workforce. These results mirror the views expressed by board members, who ranked preparation for college or the workforce at only slightly higher levels (nearly 25 percent and 20 percent, respectively) when identifying the district's most important objectives. Both board members and superintendents think the two most important objectives are to "help students fulfill their potential" and to "prepare students for a satisfying and productive life," with 71.7 percent of superintendents deeming the former of first or second importance and 70.8 percent saying the same for the latter.

Superintendents also closely mirror board members when it comes to identifying the most urgent issues that boards confront [Table 60]. Just as nearly 90 percent of board members think budget and funding issues are extremely or very urgent, so too do 91.6 percent of superintendents. The next three most urgent priorities for superintendents are improving student learning across the board (76.5 percent think it extremely or very urgent), closing the achievement gaps among subgroups (69 percent), and improving the quality of teaching (67.5 percent). In these, as in the areas they consider less important, superintendents' views mirror those of board members.

Compared with school boards, superintendents are less likely to cite district policies and collective bargaining provisions as barriers to such efforts as hiring nontraditional teachers, and they are more likely to point the finger at federal or state laws overall [Table 61]. For instance, when looking at the biggest hurdle to removing ineffective principals, over 30 percent of superintendents cite federal or state law as a hindrance to such efforts, while only 13.3 percent indicate that district policies are a barrier. This rate is half that of school boards, 26.1 percent of which find district regulations to be an obstacle in firing ineffective principals. When asked to identify barriers to removing ineffective teachers, superintendents again veer from school boards. Over 60 percent of superintendents cite federal or state law as an obstacle, compared with the 47 percent reported by boards.

While superintendents are less reticent than school boards to cite federal or state laws as barriers to improvement, boards and superintendents concur on the most significant barriers to raising student achievement. Over 70 percent of both boards (74.5 percent) and superintendents (79.2 percent) point to finances and funding as strong or total barriers to boosting achievement, while over 45 percent of both superintendents and boards see district customs and bureaucracy as at most a minimal barrier [Table 62]. Overall, superintendents are less inclined than boards to fault federal, state, or district policies as barriers to improving student achievement.

Superintendents appear more concerned about the state of student achievement than are board members. Superintendents are slightly less likely than boards to agree that defining success in terms of student achievement is “short-sighted,” with 86.8 percent of boards affirming the statement, compared with 82.5 percent of superintendents [Table 63]. More than two-thirds of superintendents strongly agree or are inclined to agree that “dramatic and rapid improvements” are needed to fix “unacceptable” student achievement. Superintendents are much more likely than board members to agree when asked whether schools should have greater flexibility in staffing to restructure faculty. One-third of superintendents strongly agree, compared to just 22 percent among boards. Although superintendents are more likely than board members to strongly agree with drastic measures like staffing changes to raise poor performance, four out of five superintendents strongly agree or are inclined to agree that the pressures of accountability require that they provide teachers and administrators with “moral support.”

When it comes to school board behaviors, superintendents sometimes tell the same story as boards themselves—and other times tell a slightly different story. Whereas boards report that they are far more likely to receive annual progress reports on achievement rather than more frequent monitoring (by a margin of 38.6 percent to 21.1 percent), superintendents indicate that their experience is slightly different. Superintendents in just 33.4 percent of districts say their boards receive annual reports, while more frequent monitoring is reported in 29.2 percent [Table 64]. Because the superintendents surveyed are not a matching set for the boards surveyed, it is possible that both findings are true. However, it seems more likely to be the case that boards and superintendents view their interactions somewhat differently.

When asked whether boards set specific goals for student achievement or whether they set broad expectations and leave it to the professionals to determine specific goals, the superintendent responses closely mirror those of boards—both groups indicate that districts tend to be relatively split on this score, with superintendents’ responses ranging from 28.6 percent for broad expectations to 34.5 percent for specific goals [Table 65]. Superintendents also agree with boards that boards should forgo the stern taskmaster routine, taking care to celebrate hard work and initiative even when results fall short: by a margin of 49.1 percent to 17 percent, superintendents say that boards need to take care to recognize success [Table 66]. Those figures are remarkably similar to those of boards themselves. Superintendents also agree with boards when it comes to data consumption, with superintendents reporting that boards tend to actively study achievement data rather than rely on the district staff to produce charts and summary analysis [Table 67]. Superintendents indicate that boards prefer more fine-grained data by 44.5 percent to 26 percent, numbers broadly similar to the 45.5 percent to 14.7 percent split that boards report.

Superintendents are even more likely than boards to report that boards are inclined to alter priorities each year based on new data and determinations of need. By a margin of 56.7 percent to 11.9 percent, superintendents indicate that boards are more likely to make annual adjustments than to maintain the same focus until they accomplish the desired goals [Table 68]. That is similar to, though even more stark than, the 48 to 17.2 percent response proffered by boards. Superintendents also offer a response broadly similar to that of boards when asked whether boards and district staff actively engage the community in shaping district policy or whether they focus on communicating their decisions out to the community. With a 49.2 percent response compared to boards’ 25.8 percent, superintendents indicate that they see district leaders actively engaging the community [Table 69]. And, finally, superintendents are somewhat more likely than boards to report that boards believe they have the ability to influence teaching and learning [Table 70]. Just over one-quarter of superintendents say their boards think they can impact classroom practice, while 41.5 percent say their board believes issues related to teaching and learning should be left to the professionals. Boards themselves say they are less confident that they can affect classrooms.

Overall, boards and superintendents tend to hold very similar views of how boards approach data and community input, how supportive boards are to district staff, and how boards go about shaping district priorities. The two areas where some disagreement arises relate to how often boards get briefed on district achievement and how much boards think they can impact teaching and learning. In each case, superintendents

describe boards as moderately more engaged than the boards themselves say of themselves. Whether these disagreements reflect different perspectives on the same behavior, responses from different districts, or something else is not clear.

Like their boards, superintendents cite professional development as the most important approach to improving student learning, with more than 95 percent deeming it extremely or very important [Table 71]. Superintendents also mirror their boards in emphasizing “capacity building” as a means for learning improvements. Improving leadership at the school and district level follows close behind professional development in relative importance, and increased teacher pay comes next, with just under 50 percent of superintendents citing it as very or extremely important in achieving learning gains.

Superintendents regard the frequent use of assessment data as an important strategy, with more than 95 percent also flagging data as extremely or very important. This makes superintendents notably more enthusiastic about the significance of data than are board members, of whom a more modest three-fourths consider it very or extremely important. Superintendents are also more likely to be skeptical of many popular reform initiatives than their boards. New charter schools (92.4 percent), greater school choice within the district (64.7 percent), merit pay (33.6 percent), and nontraditional teachers (58.4 percent) are all cited as somewhat or not at all important by superintendents more frequently than by boards, but boards themselves are also generally lukewarm toward these measures.

When faced with limited resources, superintendents report that their districts are more likely to target resources to low-performing students rather than allot resources equally to all students (60.5 percent versus 39.5 percent). The largest districts are much more likely to take this approach, while superintendents in districts with 1,000-2,499 students are almost evenly split, with 53.5 percent giving priority to allocating resources to low-performing students [Table 72].

Asked how confident they are that their boards will support them when making tough decisions on resources and personnel, 87.4 percent of superintendents overall report being confident or very confident. Superintendents in small and medium-small districts are slightly more confident than their counterparts in larger districts, who also report more frequent instances of their boards overturning their personnel termination decisions [Table 73]. Nearly one-fourth of superintendents in the largest districts have experienced such a reversal [Table 74].

When it comes to evaluation by their boards, 95 percent of superintendents report that their financial management is a very or extremely important factor, followed by meeting goals (90.6 percent) and having effective working relationships (89 percent) [Table 75]. Superintendents are far less likely than board members to think that boards evaluate superintendent performance on the basis of student achievement outcomes. While two-thirds of board members think that student achievement is an extremely important indicator in how they judge a superintendent’s performance, only 40.3 percent of superintendents believe that to be the case. Parental satisfaction is the least likely factor to affect superintendent evaluation, with 63 percent reporting this as extremely or very important.