Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards

What makes an effective school board – one that positively impacts student achievement? From a research perspective, it’s a complex question. It involves evaluating virtually all functions of a board, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators, and the public.

But the research that exists is clear: boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts. So what do these boards do? Here are eight characteristics:

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective school boards are data savvy: they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Though the research on school board effectiveness is in the beginning stages, the studies included in the report make it clear that school boards in high-achieving districts have attitudes, knowledge and approaches that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts. In this era of fiscal constraints and a national environment focused on accountability, boards in high-performing districts can provide an important blueprint for success. In the process, they can offer a road map for school districts nationwide.
Related Finding: Stability of Leadership

One study noted that fast-moving districts had political and organizational stability, as evidenced by low rates of school board and superintendent turnover. Another echoed those points, concluding two characteristics of high achieving districts were long tenures by superintendents. A third study noted the long tenure of board members and superintendents in high-achieving districts. “They set their courses and stayed with them for years,” the study said. Among the five successful districts profiled, superintendents in three districts had been at their jobs for at least eight years. In most of those profiled, the majority of board members had been serving in that capacity for 10 or more years allowing superintendents and boards to grow together in their approaches to change and to better understand each other’s work.

A Dozen Danger Signs

While this report did not specifically focus on characteristics of ineffective school boards, it may be helpful to review some of the descriptions of ineffective boards mentioned in the research:

1. Only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning.
2. Focused on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation.
3. Offer negative comments about students and teachers.
4. Micromanage day-to-day operations.
5. Disregard the agenda process and the chain of command.
6. Left out the information flow; little communication between board and superintendent.
7. Quick to describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach.
8. Looked at data from a “blaming” perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance.
9. Little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers.
10. Slow to define a vision.
11. Did not hire a superintendent who agreed with their vision.
12. Little professional development together as a board.

The Center for Public Education is an initiative of the National School Boards Association

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