Leadership for Student Learning

The School Board's Role in Creating School Districts Where All Students Succeed

IASB
Iowa Association of School Boards

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CONTENTS

Foreword

When asked, "Why did you become a school board member?" most Iowa board members give simple but powerful answers:

- "To make a difference for children."
- "To help my school system become a better place for kids to learn."
- "Because it was a way to give back to my school system, to my community."
- "To make a change. To get things moving in the right direction around here."

However, many times board members find actual membership on a school board leaves them with one major question: "What can I really do?"

Passion for children, for the school district and for the learning of the community brings people to the board table. Often that passion is frustrated by a seeming inability to have any meaningful impact on the system.

- "All we do is meet and vote and go home."
- "We never talk about anything that really matters for kids."
- "All we have done since I came on board is add a few more pages to a policy manual that is already a foot thick."
- "Nothing ever changes. From the board table, we can't do anything to cause change."

This book is about what can be done. This book is about what must be done.

Change must happen. In Iowa, about one-fourth of students struggle to learn the basic skills that will allow them to succeed at the next grade level. Our state as a whole struggles to keep pace with the growing demands society places for graduates to leave school prepared with 21st century skills.

The Iowa Lighthouse research in this book shows clearly that learning boards can make a difference in the future of children. Our children deserve no less from every board member and every school board in Iowa. This book is written to give your board tools it needs to create that best possible school district. An effective board can ensure a bright future for Iowa's children. Your board can be that board.

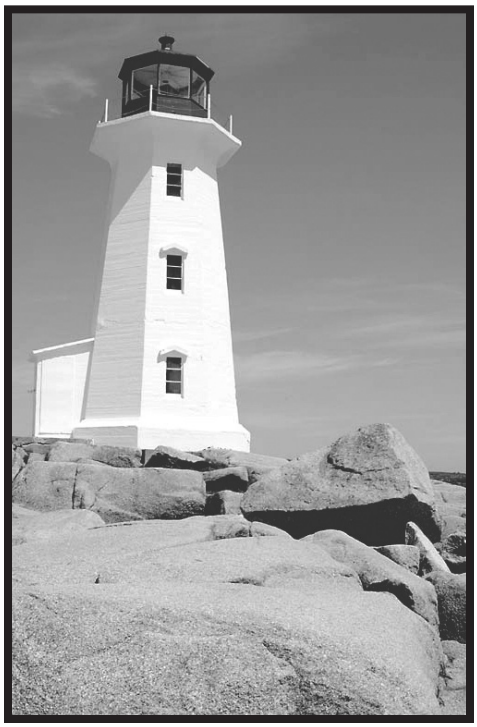
Learning from the Lighthouse:
The School Board's Role in Student Achievement

In 2000, IASB set out on a journey to define the school board's role in student achievement. That journey was sparked both by the requests from Iowa school board members who cared about improving results for students, and by the critics of school boards who questioned whether a board could make a difference—and in some cases, whether school boards were detrimental to education today.

In the midst of those questions, the association needed a beacon to guide its programming—a beacon driven by research. The association wanted a "lighthouse" to guide school boards in their efforts to improve student achievement and IASB in efforts to help them do so.

Lighthouse Study #1, 1998-2000—High-Achieving vs. Low-Achieving: An IASB research team studied school board/superintendent teams in Georgia, where an extensive achievement database allowed them to compare board/superintendent teams in districts where schools had generated unusually high achievement over a period of several years with those that had consistently generated unusually low levels of achievement. Their focus: Are school boards in high-achieving districts different than those in low-achieving districts? How?

The answer: School boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in knowledge, beliefs and actions than school boards in low-achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers throughout the districts. This study became one of the first and only studies that made a credible, research-based connection between the work of the school board and levels of student achievement.



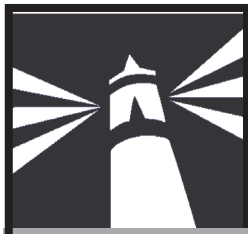
Lighthouse Study #2, 2002-2007—Action Research with 5 School Boards "On the Journey": In 2002, IASB's newly created research affiliate, the Iowa School Boards Foundation, took the second step in that research quest by beginning to work with five pilot Iowa school boards over a five-year period on their role in student achievement. Their focus: What specific knowledge and skills do school board members need to lead their districts to high achievement? What can the school boards association do to help the board build that knowledge and skill? The research team created board workshops, consulted with superintendents, and helped the board/superintendent teams come together in their journey to improve student learning.

To monitor the impact, the research team studied changes in school conditions that support improvement, changes in beliefs and changes in student achievement. Among the findings:

- All five sites in the project showed significant improvement in one or more indicators of specific conditions needed for improving student achievement.
- Student achievement in four of the five sites showed significant gains in student reading and/or math for at least two grade levels over the course of five years. One district made gains in reading comprehension at every grade level.

The results of those two Lighthouse efforts have helped to frame the recommended actions for school boards in this book.

Today, IASB continues the quest to help Iowa school boards have a positive impact on student achievement by sharing the knowledge gained in the Lighthouse efforts with boards across the state through publications such as this book, and an ongoing board development program of workshops and supports. The Iowa Association of School Boards is bringing together school boards associations from other states across the country to continue to study how association programming best supports the school board's impact on student achievement.



ROLES OF THE BOARD FOR IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING

Based on the Iowa Lighthouse Research
Iowa Association of School Boards/Iowa Association of School Boards

The Lighthouse Research studies frame five main leadership roles of the board in improving student learning, along with key actions of the board within those roles.

1. Set clear expectations	• Believe more is possible and communicate high expectations • Get clear about the greatest student learning needs – the most important content area to improve first • Establish a clear and narrow focus for improvement – clarify improvement goals and specific targets • Focus on student learning and teaching – improving teaching as the key strategy for improving learning
2. Create conditions for success	• Demonstrate commitment to the improvement focus through board actions and decisions • Support quality professional development • Support and connect with districtwide leadership • Develop and nurture board/superintendent team leadership • Align all parts of the system around the learning needs of students (curriculum, instruction, assessment; goals, actions, resource allocation; etc.) • Stay the course
3. Hold the system accountable to the expectations	• Use data extensively • Determine what you will accept as evidence of progress/success • Monitor progress regularly • Apply pressure for accountability
4. Build collective will	• Create awareness of the need • Create urgency around the moral purpose of improvement • Instill hope that it's possible to change • Connect with the community
5. Learn together as a board team	• Establish board learning time • Learn together • Talk to each other – extensive board conversations • Develop a willingness and readiness to lead and allow others to lead • Build commitment to the focus through shared information and discussion • Engage in deliberative policy development – lead through your policies

Chapter Overview

Studies of high-performing school districts provide some common themes: high expectations, a focus on instruction, clear goals, professional development, use of data, leadership and collaboration and more. We've framed the chapters in this handbook around those themes. Each chapter includes:

Lessons from Great Gains Districts

Across the country, some school districts are getting significant results in improving student achievement, especially in closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students. What do they do? We looked at several well-documented research studies for the practices they've been putting in place to get results.

- *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools,* Learning First Alliance, 2003.
- *Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts*, Charles A. Dana Center, September 2000.
- *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement,* MDRC for the Council of Great City Schools, September 2002.
- *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems,* Educational Research Service, 2001.
- *Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds…and Others Don't,* Morrison Institute for Public Policy and Center for the Future of Arizona, March 2006.
- *Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools,* Charles A. Dana Center, 2001.
- *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students,* The Education Trust, November 2005.

Why It Works, Why It's Hard, Why It Matters

Insights from national experts will help you understand more about these practices and the challenges school districts face when putting them in place.

The School Board's Role

Using the lessons from great gains districts as a backdrop, this section provides advice for your school board/superintendent team in putting these practices in place in a way that positions your district for success. These sections begin with insights from the Iowa Lighthouse Research Studies on the school board's role in improving student achievement.

1 Committing to High Expectations for All

"The American education system has been in the thrall of a myth for more than 30 years. The myth says that student achievement has much more to do with a child's background than with the quality of instruction he or she receives. It says that urban and rural schools face insurmountable obstacles caused by poverty and racism. It says that 'disadvantaged' children might learn some basic skills, but that their home lives are just too deprived to allow them to attain the same levels of learning as their affluent suburban peers. The myth is powerful. It is pervasive. And it is wrong."

—The Education Trust

Overview

Commitment to high expectations is a foundation for improving student achievement. Studies of districts that have made significant gains in student achievement are consistent in identifying that district leaders made a firm commitment to overcome the status quo, to seek equity and excellence, and worked actively to build commitment to that vision, even in the face of barriers.

The board/superintendent team sets the tone in committing to high expectations for all students.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Committing to high expectations for all students is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Leadership arose within the school districts as an ethical or moral pursuit of high and equitable achievement for all groups of students.** The districts each faced a defining moment or series of events that marked a change from the status quo toward a new focus on higher levels of achievement. These "catalytic events" included dissatisfaction with current performance levels or pressure from community activists. Faced with tough or turbulent times, district leaders responded proactively by committing to develop a district in which literally all student groups achieve at high levels. District leaders took a stance against the common thinking that some groups of children cannot or do not learn well. District leaders worked to develop shared equity beliefs around the common commitment to the achievement success of all children. They developed a remarkable consistency in the messages transmitted to educators, parents, students and community members. District employees did not have to guess much about what was important to district leaders—it was improved academic achievement for all groups of students. These shared beliefs became the foundation for shared action to improve. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

- **Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.** Some combination of leaders—school board members, superintendents and community members—acknowledged poor performance without placing blame, accepted ownership of difficult challenges and began seeking solutions. The courage to accept negative information was critical in building the will to change. The districts instilled visions that focused on student learning. What distinguished the districts was not the existence of a vision, but the way it was actively used. Visions were clearly outlined in strategic plans, board meeting agendas, school improvement plans and newsletters. Superintendents made it clear that the vision was to drive program and financial decisions at every level of the system. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **The high-performance districts all had a superintendent and other leaders who developed and nurtured widely shared beliefs about learning,** including high expectations, and who provided a strong focus on results. *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Schools emphasized the achievement of every student in every classroom and took responsibility for that performance.** Values and culture stood out as a key contrast; beat-the-odds schools took responsibility, had the strength to look at problems honestly, and accepted that if students aren't learning, the school needs to change. *(Source: Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds)*

- **Staff at the high-performing schools wanted their students not only to graduate from high school but also to leave high school fully prepared to be successful in college.** Administrators and teachers shared the conviction that all students could be successful, provided they have adequate support and high-quality instruction. Through words and actions, the teachers, administrators, counselors and support staff continually demonstrated their belief that their students could learn—and their faculty could teach—challenging curriculum. *(Source: Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools)*

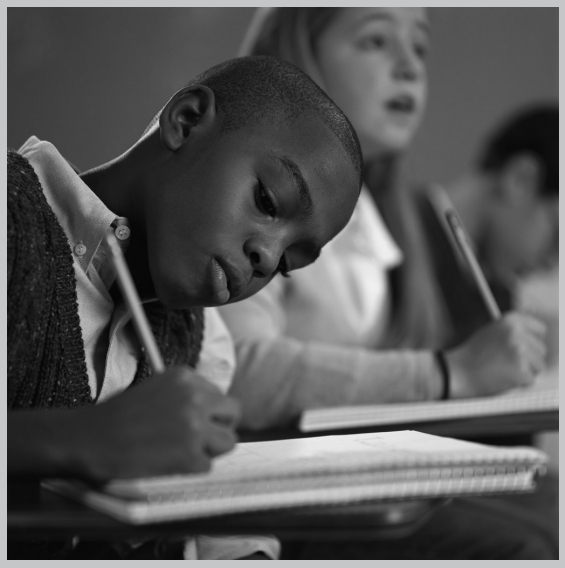
- **High-impact schools had consistently higher expectations for all students, regardless of students' prior academic performance;** and principals, teachers, and counselors took responsibility for helping students succeed. High-impact high schools were clearly focused on preparing students for life beyond high school—specifically, college and careers. The staff members viewed it as their responsibility to help students succeed academically. That philosophy played out in many hands-on ways, from course selection, to counseling, to daily instruction, to ensuring struggling students get the additional help they need. By contrast, average-impact schools were more focused on preparing students for graduation and tended to assume that it is the students' responsibility to take advantage of opportunities offered to them. *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*

More than 30 years ago, Harvard educator and researcher Ron Edmonds asked, "How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of all children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that basic pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background."

Today, Edmonds would likely be pleased to learn that there are thousands of schools across the nation overcoming limited expectations for poor and minority children.

The Achievement Alliance, an organization that highlights schools that beat the odds, tells these stories, among others:

- University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, serves students in grades 7-12, with a student population that is 62 percent minority and 73 percent low-income. One hundred percent of the 10th graders passed the Massachusetts high school exit exam on the first try. University Park is the fifth most successful school in the state, surpassing many schools serving wealthy students.
- At Frankford Elementary in Frankford, Delaware, 64 percent of students are minority and 79 percent meet the standard for free- and reduced-price meals with the rest having family incomes barely exceeding the standard. Main parental employment is found at a chicken processing plant or in the service industry at a nearby affluent beach community. In 2006, 96 percent of 5th graders met Delaware's state reading standards and 91 percent met the state math standards. At each grade level, Frankford exceeds the state average, despite being a high-poverty school. Principal Sharon Brittingham says this about all students achieving. "It is a hard process, but it's achievable. But first you have to believe it's achievable."



"How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of all children?"

There are many more schools proving it can be done. Whether the impetus comes from leadership inside or outside the district, research on high-performing schools demonstrates that schools in the most troubled neighborhoods can become places where children make progress and perform well academically. Schools that cultivate a culture of high expectations, for students and teachers alike, that emphasize student learning, and engage in continual assessment and efforts to improve, are on the road toward becoming places where all students succeed.

Why High Expectations Work: What the Experts Say

There is growing evidence to show that schools can have a tremendous impact on student achievement if they follow the direction provided by research on effective schools and districts. And the difference in belief and expectation between "Schools can't do much for those children" and "Our school is determined to ensure success for all children" is fundamental to that difference.

According to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), research on effective schools shows that:

- Schools that establish high expectations for all students—and provide the support necessary to achieve these expectations—have high rates of academic success.
- Successful programs for at-risk youth have clearly demonstrated that high expectations—with support—is a critical factor in decreasing the number of students who drop out of school and in increasing the number of youth who go on to college.
- Teachers convey their expectations through their relationships with students—"This work is important, I know you can do it" and by providing firm guidance, challenge, and support.
- Schools communicate expectations in the way they structure and organize learning, the use of challenging curriculum and assessments, and how they assign children in classrooms or courses.

(Source: Pathways, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory)

Watching Hope Grow

"We just banded together and decided that we needed to have higher expectations for the kids. And we looked at test scores, we were looking at standardized test scores, and the scores were low. A lot of people had the idea that our kids don't have the…background, they don't have the abilities to do this. We just got together and said, 'These are the expectations and our students can do it.' As soon as you realize that they can do it, and you started accepting that this is what's going to happen, the scores started going up… I think that probably all the teachers in here felt that years ago even before the district embraced it. But I think that the district embracing it at a higher level, at a higher administration level—then it came down. From the principals, from the leadership of our school district, from the superintendent on down, said, 'This is what's expected, and our students can do this.' And so the people who had always felt that felt very encouraged. And the people that didn't feel that way were kind of on the outs because this is the philosophy we're having and those really strong teachers who always expected that of their kids really overpowered the people that weren't interested. So it became the accepted thing to do was have the high expectations. And the unaccepted thing to do would be the slacker teacher."

A high school teacher, quoted in *Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts*

Reality Check: Why Creating High Expectations is Hard

"[I]t's our job to help all kids learn. Most operate under the premise that it is our job to see that all kids are taught. … That is not semantic. It is a seismic shift."

Rick DuFour, School Improvement Expert

Many schools make statements of high expectations on paper, but don't put them into action, according to Rick DuFour, a school improvement expert who, as a school leader in Illinois, was part of a significant successful improvement effort. Speaking to Iowa school board members in 2005, DuFour said, "What would we do and stop doing if we really embraced that message—that our job is to see to it that every child learned? One thing we'd do is to align all of our practices, everything we do, every policy that we have, with that mission of learning for all children. One thing we'd stop doing is confusing 'writing a mission statement' with 'living a mission statement'… we would start doing things differently and stop doing many of the things we do now, such as allowing teachers to work in isolation."

DuFour calls the commitment to live the mission of all kids learning a tremendous shift. "Most schools do not operate under that premise… that it's our job to help all kids learn. Most operate under the premise that it is our job to see that all kids are taught. … That is not semantic. It is a seismic shift. Schools that operate from the premise that we haven't completed our fundamental purpose until every child has learned, operate very differently."

When having high expectations seems like common sense, why the problem? Many leaders point to the influence of James S. Coleman's 1966 Equality of Educational Opportunity report. Commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education, the report (now known as the Coleman report) examined the importance of a student's background on their achievement. Coleman's study was largely interpreted as a single proposition: "family matters more than schooling." Says sociologist Karl Alexander, who teaches a course centered on Coleman's work at Johns Hopkins University: "The Coleman Report was a singular event in the history of school policy research. In its day and for many years after, its finding framed policy discussions; even today, almost 40 years later, its influence is still felt." Even though later studies—including one done by Coleman—provided different findings, several generations of teachers and administrators learned about the Coleman findings as evidence that schools could do little to overcome factors in a student's home life.

That impact comes through as school improvement consultant Mike Schmoker discusses the research on teacher efficacy.

"(Many teachers) feel that student learning has little to do with them and had everything to do with things over which they have no control. Teachers' doubts about their efficacy have hobbled them. This fatalism has kept schools from accelerating the rate of improvement, or realizing the power of getting teachers together on a regular basis to decide what's the most important student learning to concentrate on right now, to determine what they can do differently to get

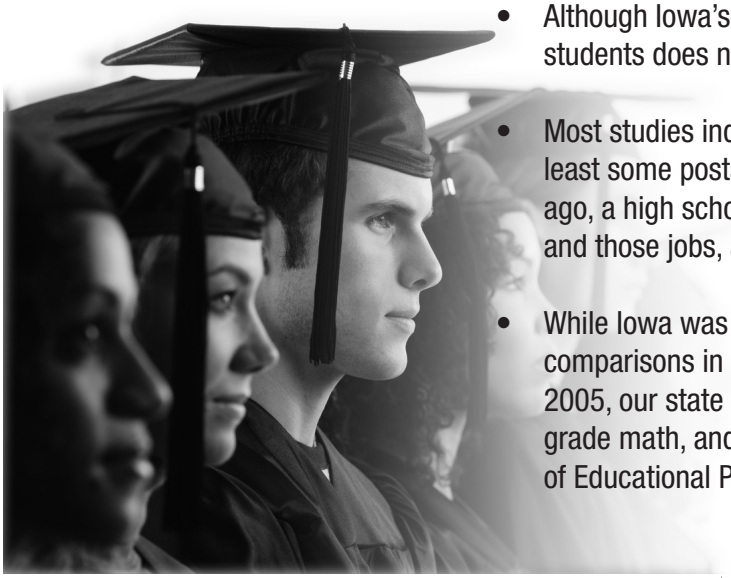
more students to learn those things, and to gather simple data that tell them whether they are getting closer to their goal." *(Sparks, Dennis. "Results are the Reason: Interview with Mike Schmoker." Journal of Staff Development, Winter 2000. Vol. 21, No. 1.)*

Low expectations based on an assumption that some students cannot learn is certainly an issue for many school districts. But complacency can be just as troubling. Many school board members lament that their communities and school staff are satisfied with the status quo. One board member described it this way: "We raised the issue of improvement and were met with resounding apathy. A lot of people just didn't think it was an issue to be concerned about."

Why High Expectations Matter

High expectations are pivotal if Iowa school districts are to ensure that students have the skills they need to succeed in work and life, and that our state is to be a national leader in education. Consider:

- State testing data show that about 1 in 4 Iowa students have such low-level skills in reading that their success in all academic areas is at risk.
- Low-income and minority students are far more likely to be in the low-performing group. Iowa's achievement gap is 20-30 points on average, as measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills/Iowa Tests of Educational Development.
- Although Iowa's graduation rate is among the nation's highest, 1 in 10 Iowa students does not graduate from high school.
- Most studies indicate that fast-growing and high-paying jobs require at least some postsecondary education. As one study put it, "Even 15 years ago, a high school diploma was a ticket to the middle class. Those days, and those jobs, are gone."
- While Iowa was among the top five states in national achievement comparisons in the early 1990s, that status has slipped substantially. By 2005, our state rank had dropped to 25th in 4th grade reading, 22nd in 4th grade math, and 15th in 8th grade math, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.



Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and High Expectations

Lighthouse Study #1

Comparing Boards in High and Low Achieving Districts

School board members in the **high-achieving school districts** had high expectations for all students and expressed their focus on finding ways to reach all children. Poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors were described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members seemed to feel an internal desire to improve. They talked about the importance of improving education for the sake of students. "This is a place for all kids to excel. No one feels left out," said one board member. Another board member said, "Sometimes people say the poor students have limits. I say all kids have limits. I believe we have not reached the limits of any of the kids in our system."

In contrast, school board members in **low-achieving school districts** often made excuses about why students weren't successful. They tended to view students as limited by characteristics such as their income or home situation. Board members indicated student needs were too varied to meet them all. "You can't reach all kids," said one. Another said, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink. This applies to both students and staff."

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

Lighthouse Study #2
Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

"The way we try to raise the bar and get people to understand that all kids can learn is first of all through research, data-based research, that shows all kids can learn. Just saying it over and over again that we believe this. This is what we're striving for."

—Board Member,
Iowa Lighthouse Study #2

Boards in the Iowa Lighthouse districts engaged in several activities when developing their expectations for student achievement. They studied current data from several sources about student achievement in the district, looking at trends over time, data for cohorts of students who were consistent across years, and data disaggregated by subgroups such as ethnicity, gender and other characteristics. Their study of data during board work sessions helped build clarity, so that they could speak with a common voice about the 70-85 percent of students at each grade level who were proficient in reading and math (and the 15-30 percent who were not). Board members identified talking points to use to describe the health of student achievement during informal conversations with the staff and community. For example, board members practiced responding to this kind of question: "If you bumped into someone at the local convenience store tomorrow and you had 30 seconds, what would you tell them about the reading achievement of students in your district?"

They also studied information on high-achieving districts across the country and what is possible to expect based on those examples. Board/superintendent teams in Lighthouse districts said studying these materials helped trigger some tough, face-to-face discussions at the board table about what they could and wanted to expect for the children in their district. This was true even in the districts with high levels of students scoring as proficient or above on their assessment at the beginning of their work in the Lighthouse project.

A board president in one of the Lighthouse districts stated, "The concept that all children can learn at high levels has been a huge realization for us. Before that we were all very content with the norm of 65 or 75 percent of our kids doing well and not ignoring [the data] but assuming that that's good enough.… If we can only expect 75-85 percent of the kids to learn at high levels, do you want to choose the ones that don't do as well? If you're sitting on a board, if you're sitting in a classroom, do you want to line the students up and say OK out of these five, this one and this one, we're not going to teach as well. I don't want to be the one that says OK, disregard that group of kids because we don't think they can learn at high levels."

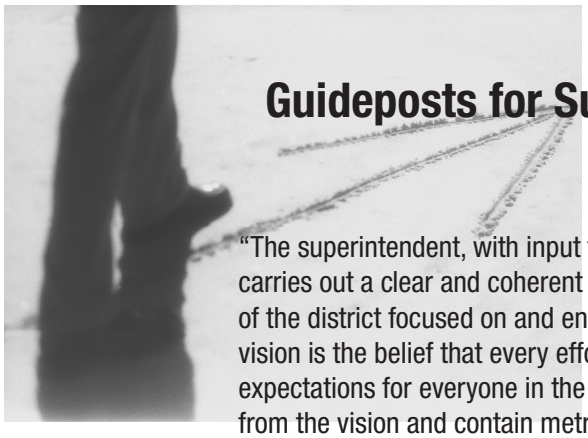
Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

The school board plays a key role in developing commitment to high expectations and improvement for all students throughout the district. It begins with confronting your own low expectations or complacency, acknowledging that higher levels of achievement are possible, and committing to lead. Consider the following guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around high expectations.

Roles of the Board	*Guideposts*
Learning Together as a Board Team	**Learn about what is possible to expect.** Study the research on high-performing schools and districts to learn more about what is possible, and how these districts are succeeding in reaching higher levels of student learning. Tap into achievement data from other school districts in Iowa and the nation to benchmark your district's performance against that of other districts. Many of the districts in the great gains studies used "existence proofs"—evidence that other districts are getting better results—as a way to create hope and inspire confidence that more was possible in their own districts. **Talk about why high achievement for all students is important to your board. What's at stake for your students?** Take time at the board table to talk about what's at stake for students who aren't successful and why strong skills for all students are important to children, to your community and to the success of Iowa's economy. A frank discussion about what's at stake for students can help cement the board/superintendent team's commitment to lead for change and improvement.
Setting Clear Expectations	**Study the data: Take a hard look at how students are really doing.** Set aside time at your board table to really study, with your administrators, the status of student achievement in your district. Take this study of data beyond a mere report of Iowa Test scores to a deep review of achievement on several measures and from several angles. Be willing to confront and discuss the "hard truths" of achievement in your district. It's a first step in clarifying expectations for how to improve. **Unite around a common vision and beliefs; use them to drive your own work.** High expectations are often articulated in school districts through vision, mission and belief statements, with the board/superintendent team playing a leadership role in developing these driving statements. The process of developing these statements can build ownership in the need to improve, as it moves people from thinking in terms of "what I want" to "what we all want." Making them visible throughout the district is a way to communicate their importance, but they'll only have meaning if the statements are used to guide decision making at the board table and throughout the district. Build those statements together, then commit to "living the mission" through your words, decisions, actions and policies. If the board is not clearly focused on the moral imperative of every student reaching their potential, it will be difficult for staff and community to commit to, and sacrifice for, high expectations.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Creating Conditions for Success	**Understand that opening this discussion can be threatening. Adopt a no-blame approach.** No matter how strong your relationship with administrators and staff, when the board starts discussing the need for improved results, it can be intimidating to the people who work in the district. It's a natural human reaction. Make a conscious effort to approach this work without blame, to communicate your appreciation for the hard work of staff in the past, and to acknowledge that past results are not an indication of personal failure, but instead that the school system must change to keep pace with growing expectations of society. Never assume that teachers or administrators don't care or aren't trying. Instead, emphasize that everyone is responsible for raising achievement, together you can do it, and that your board is committed to fulfilling your responsibility of ensuring staff have the supports to accomplish improved results.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Monitor progress toward higher expectations.** With input from staff leadership, discuss and determine what indicators the board finds understandable and will accept as evidence of progress toward increased expectations in the district. Set aside time at board meetings to study data, hear from experts in the field or staff about the progress your district is making toward defining and meeting higher expectations for student learning. The board's ongoing monitoring of data and progress reinforces that improvement is important and expected.
Building Collective Will	**Communicate the urgency to achieve high expectations with clarity and consistency.** School boards in the great gains and Iowa Lighthouse districts were driven by the goal to improve student achievement. They worked actively to dispel apathy and stereotypes and to build urgency and dedication to improve. Make a commitment as a board/superintendent team to talk with school and community leaders about the need to improve for the sake of children. Let key leaders know, through clear and consistent communication, that your board has a strong commitment to improve, and that you want and value their involvement in that quest.



Guideposts for Superintendents

"The superintendent, with input from staff and the community, creates and carries out a clear and coherent vision for the district, with all members of the district focused on and engaged in this vision. At the core of the vision is the belief that every effort is for the good of the students. High expectations for everyone in the system - staff and students - emanate from the vision and contain metrics to determine how well goals are being met… Superintendents model the vision through their belief and behavior in instruction, collaboration and high expectations."

—From the Education Leadership Policy Toolkit, an online resource of the Education Commission of the States, www.ecs.org

It's really common sense:

You get what you expect.

Act on the belief that all children can learn.

THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION

Your messages as leaders have a powerful affect on the culture and focus of the district. Think about what these messages have to say:

- **To parents…about whose kids matter.**
- **To students…about how much you think they can learn.**
- **To teachers and administrators…about whether they even have to try.**

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

"My general feeling from a gut level is you have a bottom percent that no matter what you do, you won't help them achieve. There is a middle range where the talent isn't there to be high achievers. Thirty percent have the capacity if they work. Some kids just want to be average, with average jobs."

—An Iowa school board member

"Other schools don't have the challenges we face. If we had the kids from the desirable families, we wouldn't have to worry about 'getting on the list.'"

—An Iowa principal

"For some families in this school district, we know from the first day their kids walk through the door for kindergarten, there's not much we can do for them. Their fate is pretty much sealed, and it won't be a very pretty picture."

—An Iowa superintendent

"Our town is a blue-collar town and education is not really emphasized in the families. Success depends on the kids applying themselves."

—An Iowa school board member

"We have a very good school here and I'm tired of people saying we're not. I got a good education here, just like my parents before me. Lots of our kids go on to college and those that don't do pretty much okay. Why can't the complainers just be satisfied?"

—An Iowa school board member

"Our school board believes that all students can learn…that we can't leave any child behind. We've moved beyond making excuses for why some kids can't learn. We can't let anything stand in the way."

—An Iowa school board member

"Yes, parents may have the greatest impact on how their children come to us. But we have the greatest impact on how they leave us."

—An Iowa superintendent

"We fully intend to beat the odds. We don't make any excuses and we don't take any excuses. Every one of our students has the potential to be anything they want to be, but they have to know how to read. We can teach them."

—An Iowa principal

"What do I do when teachers come to me and say, 'I wasn't hired to teach those kids?' I have to respond, all of 'those' kids are 'our' kids and we're all going to see to it that every one of them succeeds. But you won't have to do that alone. It's our entire school system that has to commit to the challenge."

—An Iowa school board member

"The world changed around us. What was good enough for my generation isn't good enough for our students today. There is no status quo: Today, if we're not improving, we're losing ground."

—An Iowa school board member

Use your words, your consistent communication both formally and informally—to send the message of the values and focus you are shaping in the district. Then, back them with action, showing your commitment to making good on high expectations.

Aiming for the Core: Improving Instruction for Each Student

2

"Right now we have this little anecdote that goes out that says all children can learn. And everybody really ascribes belief in that. But the problem with that is that that's only half of the equation. The other half of the equation is all children can learn if adults provide high-quality instruction."

— Anthony Alvarado, former superintendent, District 2, New York City

Overview

Districts that make significant gains in achievement understand that teaching has the greatest impact on student learning. They focus their efforts on improving instruction in every classroom in a way that benefits all students.

The school board plays an important role in ensuring that goals and improvement initiatives "aim for the core" of improved instruction.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement show a conscious effort to focus on the core of district business: instruction.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **In all districts, leaders came to the same conclusion: To improve student achievement, they needed to emphasize a key factor within their control—improving instruction.** District leaders realized they would need to fundamentally change both instructional support and instructional practice. Teachers would need to be more effective in helping every child succeed, and principals, central office staff and board members would need to support classroom efforts more effectively. Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction—one that articulated curricular content, coherent across grade levels, to provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach. They sought to develop a philosophy of instructional practice that expected and supported teachers in actively engaging students in rigorous content, developing expertise in a range of proven instructional approaches, assessing the impact of instructional methods, reflecting on practice, working with colleagues to research and share effective practices, and using data to make appropriate adjustments to help students learn effectively. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **Districts developed key understandings that to be successful they had to change teaching and learning practices in the classroom.** While specific approaches varied, each district engaged in intensive efforts to align their curriculum and developed focused and coherent practices for the delivery of instruction within that curriculum. The districtwide focus on instruction engaged all staff with the idea that each and every one of them was responsible. By making classroom teaching and learning the primary focus, the classroom moved from an almost invisible one behind shut doors to the center of all district and campus action. As a result, all teachers had to assume the responsibility for achieving equitable and excellent learning in their classrooms. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

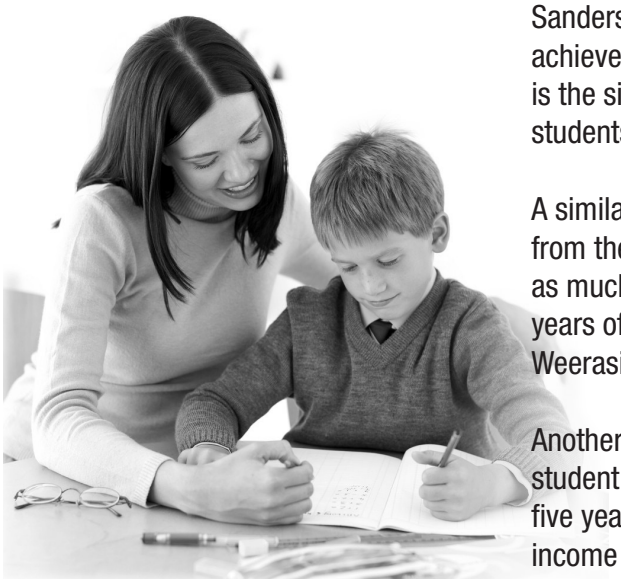
- **Districts made a concerted effort to review curricula and instruction.** These reviews found substantial problems with curriculum alignment, discovering multiple, unaligned curricula and a general lack of clarity in instructional objectives. There was no systematic approach to teaching and no consensus about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. District leaders concluded that it was nearly impossible for their districts to hit academic targets when each school was aiming in a different

direction. The districts adopted or developed districtwide curricula and instructional approaches rather than allowing each school to devise their own strategies. Each district took an active role in defining good instruction and made an effort to create consistency in instruction by centralizing certain decisions about curriculum and how to implement it. They supported these districtwide strategies at the central office through professional development and support for consistent implementation throughout the district. One superintendent referred to this process as taking responsibility for the "core business" of education. *(Source: Foundations for Success/ Great City Schools)*

- **Districts focused on clear standards and developed procedures to assess progress toward these standards.** The districts worked extensively on curriculum alignment, ensuring that the local curriculum matched the state framework and doing item-by-item and student-by-student analysis of student responses to test items. *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Beat-the-odds schools are figuring out ways to customize instruction and intervention so it exactly suits each student's needs.** They are creating formal yet flexible structures that ensure all students receive the personal attention and support they need to succeed academically. *(Source: Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds)*

Why Improving Instruction Works: What the Experts Say



Study after study shows that what happens in classroom instruction matters, both in terms of the skill of the teacher and in the expectations demanded of students.

William Sanders, a former statistician at the University of Tennessee, has spent most of his 25-year career analyzing the impact of classroom instruction. Sanders comments, "Our research work, based upon millions of student achievement records, clearly indicates that difference in teacher effectiveness is the single largest factor affecting academic growth of populations of students."

A similar study found that students who have three years in a row of instruction from the most effective teachers can have standardized test percentile ranks as much as 50 points higher than students who have three consecutive years of less effective instruction. (Heather Jordan, Robert Mendor and Dash Weerasinghe, "Teacher Effects on Longitudinal Student Achievement," 1997.)

Another study, done by policy researchers John Kain and Eric Hanushek, of student achievement in Texas found that having an above-average teacher for five years running can completely close the achievement gap between low-income students and others.

"We believe that creating a system focused on the ongoing improvement of instruction must be the central aim of any education improvement effort."

Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools

Catherine Snow of Harvard University conducted a research study of students with both low and high home support and those who received effective and less effective instruction. Snow found that students with low home support can consistently achieve academic success in reading comprehension with two or more years of highly effective classroom instruction. However, even students with highly supportive home environments are less successful academically when they receive two or more years of consistently low-quality instruction.

These studies and others led Richard Allington to summarize: "Neither parents nor socioeconomic status of the family were as powerful as good instruction in shaping the academic futures of students."

"We believe that creating a system focused on the ongoing improvement of instruction must be the central aim of any education improvement effort," say Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan in their book, *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools.* "In a way, it seems to be a statement of the obvious: our core business is teaching, and our product is student learning. The only way we can improve our product is to get better at our core business."

Reality Check: Why Improving Instruction is Hard

Richard Elmore, a Harvard University professor and policy analyst, notes that the "core" of education is curriculum and instruction, or what is taught and how it's taught. Yet those who make up the system—school administrators, school board members, teachers, and others—have spent decades protecting this "core" from outside scrutiny.

"You don't change performance without changing the instructional core," said Elmore to a group of Iowa educators in 2007. "The relationship of the teacher and the student in the presence of content must be at the center of efforts to improve performance."

He advises focusing on those things that make the instructional core work, which include increasing the knowledge and skill of teachers, strengthening the content (or what is taught), and enhancing the role of the student as learner.

"You can't alter the skill and knowledge of the teacher when you stay in a low-level curriculum. If you alter the content without changing the skill and knowledge of teachers, you are asking teachers to teach to a level that they don't have the skill and knowledge to teach to. If you do either one of those things without changing the role of the student in the instructional process to one of engagement, the likelihood that students will ever take control of their

own learning is slim," he said.

Elmore contends that schools have spent decades avoiding this most important factor in school improvement. Most change that occurs in schools has nothing to do with instruction, he notes. Instead, schools exert tremendous energy around changes on the periphery of instruction, such as bell times and facilities.

Why Improving Instruction Matters

Unless schools can get at the core of improving instruction, they are likely to expend tremendous amounts of energy in the effort to improve, then lose hope because they see little or no results. As school improvement consultant Mike Schmoker noted in an article in *American School Board Journal,* "The great irony of our time is that the brutal reality of poor instruction is seldom addressed or even mentioned at school board meetings. It isn't written about in the education section of newspapers or honestly discussed at faculty or central office meetings. Amidst the din of our perennial plans and programs, this fact works silently to cripple every well-meant improvement initiative, feed cynicism, starving hope, and denying our children the education they need and deserve."

Schmoker, a school board member himself, challenges: "School boards must be the driving force for this momentous shift from business as usual. …If we don't, let's at least stop pretending that we are serious about better schools and closing the achievement gap. But if we do, we immediately will begin to improve the life chances of tens of millions of children whose success is the reason most of us became school board members."

"If we truly believed that every child could learn under the proper circumstances, we would be relentless in the search of those circumstances. We would use well-validated instructional methods and materials known to be capable of ensuring the success of nearly all children if used with intelligence, flexibility and fidelity. We would involve teachers in constant, collaborative professional development activities to continually improve their abilities to reach every child. We would frequently assess children's performance to be sure that all students are on a path that leads to success, and to be able to respond immediately if children are not making adequate progress. If children were falling behind despite excellent instruction, we would try different instructional approaches, and if necessary, we would provide them with tutors or other intensive assistance. We would involve parents in support of their children's school success;…If we truly believed that all schools could ensure the success of all children, then the failure of even a single child would be cause for great alarm and immediate, forceful intervention."

--Robert Slavin, Nancy Madden, Lawrence Dolan, and Barbara Wasik,
Every Child, Every School, Success for All, 1996

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

Lighthouse Study #1
Comparing Boards in High- and-Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving districts*, school board members were knowledgeable about what was going on in the district in relation to curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. Board members could describe why this work was important and the impact they expected the work to have on student learning.

In *low-achieving districts,* board members said it wasn't their job to know about instruction or they expressed opinions about what was happening in classrooms based on their own child's experience, their spouse's experience, or some other personal contact.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

Lighthouse Study #2
Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

In order to lead the district toward meeting the higher expectations for student learning, Iowa Lighthouse boards aimed their attention on the core district activities: teaching and learning in the classroom. Board/superintendent teams studied articles and case studies that underscored the critical role of quality teaching in improving student learning. Superintendents and central administrators led principals and district leadership groups in studying the same materials. Discussions about the studies caused board/superintendent teams and other leadership groups to confront past perceptions about outside factors that can tend to be excuses for poor student achievement.

For some districts, this was an uncomfortable step as it involved the board in work that had traditionally been separated from their work at the board table. The key was in maintaining strong collaboration with the superintendent and respecting the roles of all leaders in the system while building the trust among the board and district leaders to openly share data and information and to ask tough questions when needed.

As a board member in one of the Lighthouse districts said, "Our board is focused. It's not about what lawnmower we're going to buy. It's about our reading and math scores and what we're going to do to change and improve student achievement."

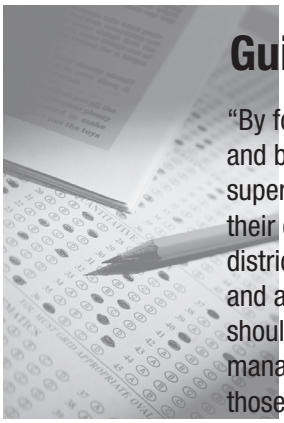
Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Research is clear that improving districts pay close attention to classroom practice and provide guidance and oversight for improving teaching and learning. Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around improved instruction.

Roles of the Board	*Guideposts*
Setting Clear Expectations	**Be clear that enhancing teacher skill is job #1.** Efforts to improve instruction must do just that: improve the skills of teachers. The board/superintendent team must be clear from the start that improving teacher skill—through research-based professional development—is the primary strategy for improving instruction. Creating academic standards, improving curriculum and assessment, and structural changes such as reducing class size if warranted, are useful—sometimes even necessary. By themselves they do not lead to substantial improvements in teaching and learning. As Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan state in *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools,* " Unless and until there is a focus on how to develop the teaching skills required to help all students meet more rigorous standards and master the curriculum, student achievement is unlikely to improve more than marginally." The board/superintendent team must constantly weigh the need for staff to focus on those supports for instruction, without allowing the efforts to become an end in themselves. Make the importance of improving instruction evident in guiding documents of the board, such as belief statements or school improvement plans and ensure that those statements drive the work of the district. **Say it in policy.** Review board policy to ensure it provides guidance for development of a rigorous curriculum based on high expectations; the improvement of instruction to deliver the curriculum; aligned assessments that measure student performance to curriculum expectations; and the use of research and best practice in selecting instructional improvement initiatives.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Provide supports for staff to work on the core.** Ensure that your staff has the direction and supports needed to identify clear, consistent standards for what is to be taught (content), to build their understanding of powerful instructional practices, and to select quality assessments to measure the impact of instruction. Teachers need time and access to the best academic content standards to define agreed-upon curriculum around which to teach. Staff leaders need quality assessments to measure whether students are learning. Provide supports for that work through time and access to expert help when needed. **Allocate resources for oversight of teaching and learning.** Administrators must have time and supports to monitor instruction, curriculum and changes in instructional practice. Principals often need enhanced training to understand and fulfill their own role as an instructional leader. As one administrator puts it, "We can't lead what we don't know."

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Creating Conditions, continued	As principals focus more on instructional improvement issues, they may need administrative help in ensuring that school management issues—such as buildings and buses—are addressed.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Keep the main thing the main thing.** As you drive to change the core of instruction as a district, you do so in the "real world." Buildings need repair. Buses need to be purchased. Controversies break out over specific issues. The board/superintendent team and district leaders are wise to assess the issues that may distract from the district's ability to focus on instructional improvement. Take stock of these non-instructional issues and address them as needed, but ensure that the primary focus and accountability is on instructional improvement.
Building Collective Will	**Develop widespread commitment to improving instruction as the center of your efforts to improve achievement.** As you build commitment within the board that improving classroom instruction is the primary focus of your district's efforts to change achievement, you'll need to build commitment throughout the community. Support that understanding throughout the district through consistent communication and reinforcement. **Reinforce teachers, who may feel threatened.** Teachers often are wary of efforts to improve classroom instruction because they interpret them as attacks on teacher competence and professionalism: "Don't you think I know how to do my job?" The board must be able to clearly articulate that instructional improvement is a system issue, not a personnel issue. Every teacher is working hard to apply their best professional skill. Focusing on aligning instruction, providing professional development, collaboration and other issues of instructional improvement will help all teachers enhance their existing practices as the system moves forward to accomplish even greater results.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**Learn more about "the core."** As a board team, learn more about instructional improvement issues in your district and how other districts have successfully improved instructional processes. As board members, you certainly don't need to become "the experts" or earn a degree in education. You do need to be clear about what it will take to ensure that school improvement initiatives are successful so you can make informed decisions about allocating resources and other supports. **Learn to be good consumers of research.** "Research-based improvement" should be more than a buzzword for your board. As professional educators, the staff's role is to research and select instructional improvement initiatives. Your board must, however, have a practical understanding of what research says about the initiatives your staff selects. What's the evidence this effort worked in other settings, with students with needs similar to our students? What will it take to implement the initiative well? If we implement the initiative well, what gains can we expect? Your understanding of the research will help you make informed decisions.



Guideposts for Superintendents

"By focusing professional development on instructional issues and basing principal evaluation on instructional improvement, superintendents can create powerful learning communities within their districts. Without attempting to micromanage classrooms, district leaders can be firm in asserting the instructional agenda and aligning the organization to support it…. Superintendents should put instruction at the top of the district's agenda. While the managerial and political dimensions of the job will not go away, those roles should be aligned with the overriding goal of continuous instructional improvement."

— *Larry Lashway, "The Superintendent in an Age of Accountability," ERIC Digest, September 2002*

It's really common sense:

If you want to improve, focus on what matters most.

Teaching causes learning, so aim for instruction.

Setting Clear and Focused Goals

3

"Less is more. Districts usually have more initiatives than can be implemented effectively, leaving staff with a sense of initiative fatigue. Being strategic requires unpacking the layers of initiatives to concentrate on those most likely to raise achievement. Unless a strategy is coherent, disconnected initiatives vie for attention."

— Mary Jo Kramer, consultant, Center for System Leadership, American Association of School Administrators, "Systemic Improvement to Raise Achievement," *The School Administrator,* August 2006

Overview

Districts that make great gains in achievement acknowledge they can't do everything at once. They set clear goals to focus improvement on the academic content area where students have the greatest needs. By concentrating their efforts on clear, measurable, high yet reachable goals, they are able to build momentum for success in other areas.

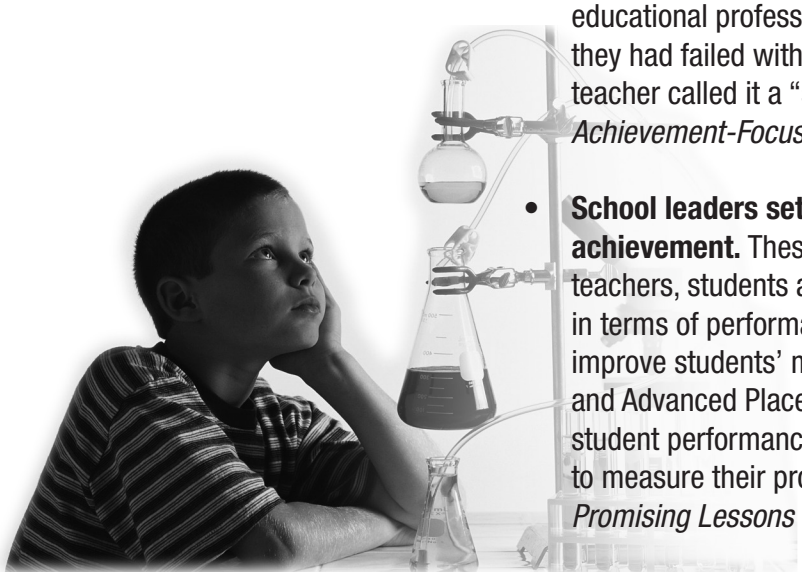
The school board plays a key role ensuring that goals are clear, focused and manageable.

The use of clear, focused goals is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Rather than simply trying to "improve student achievement," great gains districts developed high, specific, measurable goals associated with specific deadlines.** District leaders tried to set ambitious goals and to hold people in the district, including themselves, responsible for achieving the goals within a specified timeframe. The goal-setting process was used to communicate expectations about performance and genuine progress in the district. Superintendents often asked specifically to be held publicly accountable for achieving the goals. Accountability that started with leaders at the top filtered through the central office and radiated out to the schools, especially to building principals. The specificity of the goals, combined with the reality of timeframes, was enough to get schools and districts motivated to meet performance targets. *(Source: Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **School boards played an important role by establishing goals that articulated strong beliefs about the importance of getting all students to achieve challenging academic standards.** There was a clear sense of direction and focus. Not only had boards established goals, but also superintendents and other district leaders articulated those goals with such regularity and such conviction that board goals actually found life in schools. Early on, the districts were typically focused on narrower and reachable targets. As they had success at each step of the way, they would re-set their goals at higher levels. But they did not know when they started that these higher levels were even possible. As teachers and other educational professionals began to learn they could succeed with children they had failed with in the past, they began to raise their goals. One teacher called it a "snowball of rising expectations." *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*



- **School leaders set clear and measurable goals for student achievement.** These goals were publicly expressed and shared with teachers, students and parents. One way they defined their goals was in terms of performance on standardized tests; but they also worked to improve students' mastery of curriculum as measured by end-of-course and Advanced Placement exams. Administrators and teachers used student performance data to set their goals for student achievement and to measure their progress toward these goals. *(Source: Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools)*

- **In high-impact high schools, teachers and administrators express consistent views about achievement-related school goals.** The evidence suggests more agreement—among administrators, among teachers and between teachers and administrators—on important academic issues. In average-impact schools, there are staff members with very high expectations, but much less consistency in the school as a whole. *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*

Why Setting Clear and Focused Goals Works: What the Experts Say

Goal setting is the central focus of the leadership responsibilities and practices of superintendents and other district leaders, according to *School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement, published in 2006 by the MidContinent Research for Education Learning (McREL).* The study found a statistically significant positive relationship between district leadership and student achievement. Researchers identified five district-level leadership responsibilities that have a statistically significant correlation with above-average student academic achievement. All five of these responsibilities relate to goals:

1. Collaborative goal-setting—Include relevant stakeholders, such as central office staff, building-level administrators and board members, in establishing goals for the districts.

2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction—Ensure that the collaborative process results in goals that all staff members must act upon. Effective leaders set specific achievement targets for schools and students and then ensure the consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in all classrooms to reach those targets.

3. Board alignment and support of district goals—The board ensures the goals remain the primary focus of the district's efforts and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing the goals.

4. Monitoring goals—Continuous monitoring ensures the goals remain the driving force behind a district's actions. "If not monitored continually, district goals can become little more than pithy refrains that are spoken at district and school events and highlighted in written reports," noted the research team.

5. Use of resources in support of goals—Ensuring that necessary resources, including, time, money, personnel and materials are allocated to accomplish the goals. This can mean cutting back or dropping initiatives that are not aligned with district goals for achievement and instruction.

Reality Check: Why Setting Clear and Focused Goals is Hard

Many experts agree that schools today struggle in using goals well. Researcher and school improvement expert Emily Calhoun framed it this way in an article in the *Journal of Staff Development:* "Selecting schoolwide goals focused sharply on student learning is difficult. Staff members often say, 'Student learning is what we are all about,' but coming together to select a student learning goal in an academic area is often very hard work. There are a number of reasons something that sounds so easy is so complex. Part of the problem is that a faculty wants everyone to be satisfied, so the school ends up with five or six goals. I've seen as many as 11 goals in a school improvement plan. As a result, it's impossible for the school to achieve any of them. One powerful student learning goal is sufficient if the staff is working diligently on it and looking carefully at student performance." *("The Singular Power of One Goal," Journal of Staff Development,* Winter 1999)

In his article, "Setting Goals in Turbulent Times," Mike Schmoker says:

> "Moving from vague, general goals to measurable student learning goals is a transition of the greatest magnitude—a sea change from conventional school improvement planning. It is delicate work that requires clear, systematic effort and, in the early going, strong district-level interest and commitment...
>
> "The scheme for continuous improvement is essentially a simple one: select a meaningful goal; gather meaningful assessment data regularly relative to the goal; then use the data to monitor progress and to identify the areas of performance that represent your best chance for promoting additional improvement. Nonetheless, we must make a very deliberate effort to keep it simple, to keep the effort from being derailed by the potential complications in the areas of assessment and analysis. …It is no easy task to select clear targets when we are being pulled in seemingly different directions—for example, disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary ones—and when we are also subject to the vicissitudes of what appear to be different state, district and school preferences and expectations. It is extremely important to remember that we cannot do everything at once…"
>
> i*n Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind*

Even if well-intentioned, attempting to do everything at once drains resources and energy from educators and gets little results, says Douglas Reeves, president of the Center for Performance Assessment. "Educators are drowning under the weight of initiative fatigue--attempting to use the same amount of time, money and emotional energy to accomplish more and more objectives. That strategy, fueled by various mixtures of adrenaline, enthusiasm and intimidation, might work in the short term. But eventually, each initiative

added to the pile creates a dramatic decline in organizational effectiveness.... Research and common sense make it clear that initiative fatigue is rife in schools." *(Educational Leadership, September 2006)*

A final, and important, reason schools can't manage too many goals at once relates to the significant amount of time and training teachers need to improve their instructional skills in any given content area. Read more about this in Chapter 4 on professional development.

Why Setting Clear and Focused Goals Matters

In contrast, the power unleashed by using goals well brings results, not just in the area addressed by the goal, but in the school district's overall ability to improve. According to Susan Rosenholtz of Stanford University, "The success of any organization is contingent on clear, commonly defined goals. A well-articulated focus unleashes individual and collective energy. And a common focus clarifies understanding, accelerates communication, and promotes persistence and collective purpose."

Success with a narrowly defined goal can accelerate hope and progress. As teachers see they can make a difference for students through their instruction, they realize more is possible. That "snowball of rising expectations" described by a teacher in a "great gains" district comes into play: It is only after seeing some initial results that they are able to suspend their previous beliefs, roll up their sleeves and dig in, reaching more students than they ever imagined possible, just because they saw what they did mattered. Put simply, success breeds success.

Why Specific Goals Matter

School improvement researcher Susan Rosenholtz frames the value of specific goals:

- Specific goals convey a message directly to teachers that they are capable of improvement.
- Specific goals provide a basis for rational decision making, for ways to organize and execute instruction.
- Specific goals enable teachers to gauge their success.
- Specific goals promote professional dialogue.

"Workplace Conditions that Affect Teacher Quality and Commitment: Implications for Teacher Induction Programs," *Elementary School Journal,* March 1989.

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and Clear, Focused Goals

Lighthouse Study #1

Comparing Boards in High and Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving districts*, the superintendent and board established district goals based on student needs. School goals were expected to be linked to district goals. School board members could describe specific initiatives that were underway and the focus of those initiatives. Board members could describe the learning needs of students, what the district was doing to address the needs, why it was reasonable to expect change, supports needed so the initiative could be implemented well, and how they were monitoring results. Board members described a clear direction and focus on specific goals related to improving reading. Board members could describe the work of staff around the goals in clear, specific terms.

Although some board members in *low-achieving districts* said goals and improvement plans existed as written documents, they couldn't describe how they were being implemented. Some board members mentioned that their districts had goals, but seldom knew what they were. In some cases, board members acknowledged that a specific area—such as reading—was an important area for the district's efforts, but were vague about what was being done and why.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

"You can't have 7 goals or 15 goals regardless of the size of your board. No matter how good they all sound, you have to take one area and you all have to be working toward that one goal at that point in time."

—Board Member,
Iowa Lighthouse District

Lighthouse Study #2

Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

At the beginning of the Lighthouse Project, district efforts aimed at improving instruction tended to fall into two categories. Some of the districts had very little going on and others had too many initiatives, resulting in the districts not being able to adequately support them. In both cases, the impact on staff was lack of clarity about the "main student need" and what was being done to address that need. Narrowing the focus and building commitment toward it was difficult under both sets of circumstances, but it was especially hard in the districts that were trying to implement many improvement initiatives at once.

Early in the project, one of the school boards requested information from district staff about what was being done to address needed improvements in reading and academic achievement. The district's leadership team compiled a list of 103 district initiatives in place to improve reading achievement and academic achievement in general. This finding about district initiatives confirmed for the board and the district leadership team that improvement efforts in the district were fragmented and usually lacked support necessary to be successful.

Through requesting this kind of information from inside the system, the board discovered an area of confusion where board leadership could help to bring clarity. They set about working with the superintendent and district leadership team to define clear and focused goals that would reduce the confusion and focus improvement efforts across the district more effectively. Although there initially was some doubt expressed by people at all levels of the system about the ability of the districts to stick with a focus over time, both board/superintendent teams and district leadership teams have protected the emphasis on their focus area and dedicated the bulk of staff professional development time and activities to this area for the past three years.

This consistency on the part of the board, superintendent and district leadership has increased the teachers' commitment and given them the time to see positive impact from implementing changes around the focus area. In a recent accountability report to one of the boards, a teacher representative from the district leadership team said it well: "The board has stuck with the reading comprehension focus as you promised, the staff now knows you meant what you said, and we are confident we have the support we need to improve student reading."

Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around using clear and focused goals.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Setting Clear Expectations	**Let the data be your guide in identifying a narrow focus for improvement.** Based on your study of student achievement data, get clear about the academic content area of greatest student need—the most important content area to improve first. While your district likely has a way to go in several areas, your achievement data will surface an overall area (such as reading or mathematics) where achievement is lower. Select this area to get the lion's share of attention, even as you balance the need to continue to attend to other areas. Some experts advise that it will take 70-75 percent of your staff implementing a powerful instructional strategy well in the focus area to see significant gains in student achievement.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Consider starting with reading—often a gateway to other learning.** Unless your district's achievement data points strongly another way, consider the merits of starting with a districtwide goal in the area of reading. The research on school improvement is clear that many districts that make gains across academic content areas, started first with literacy, knowing that students' ability to read is a foundation for learning content in social studies, science, the arts or other areas. **Fine-tune the focus.** Allow buildings the flexibility and autonomy to fine-tune goals based on their unique needs. While your districtwide goal might be in reading comprehension, each building should have the latitude to narrow that focus even further based on the specific student learning needs shown in their assessment data. **Show your board's commitment in word and deed.** Although you will inevitably have other work that must be done within the district and at the board table, the board must ensure that the goal remains the top priority of the district and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing that goal. Consistently supporting the goal, both publicly and at the board table, are key. Your board's commitment to the goal must be unwavering as shown through board actions, decisions and conversation.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Clarify the goal with specific, measurable targets that "stretch" the system.** "Improving reading" is still too vague to really focus improvement efforts in a way likely to impact instruction. Your goal-setting process will need to clarify a broad area and a measurable target. These targets will vary based on your data—set them too low and there's no urgency; too high and people see them as unattainable. Setting clear, measurable targets will be a key in energizing the system—and in monitoring progress toward the goal.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Holding the System Accountable, continued	**Commit to delivering supports and monitoring progress around the goal.** The process doesn't end with setting a goal. The board's role continues in providing supports for professional development, regularly monitoring results, and engaging leadership. See other chapters of this book for more details.
Building Collective Will	**Build ownership and commitment up front.** Engage leaders throughout the district in the goal-setting process. While it might seem quickest for the board to mandate a single, focused goal, most experienced board leaders know that school boards must balance their authority to do so with a process that engages others and creates ownership. As a board/superintendent team, identify how you will engage key leadership groups throughout your district in the goal-setting process. These leadership groups might include administrative teams, building leadership teams, or your school improvement advisory committee. Again, achievement data should be the guide as these groups provide input to the board on the academic area of focus. **Make the case for the goal.** Even though you involve others in the goal-setting process, you'll have to continue to "sell it" to build commitment and ownership in the goal area. Make sure the goal is visible throughout the district. As one board member said, "Our goal is visible everywhere—in our buildings, on our buses and especially at the board table." Take the time at the board table to build common messages within the board/superintendent team and your ability to articulate the "why" of your goal. Then, actively communicate the case for the goal, especially among district and community leaders.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**Know your goal.** If your goal area is in reading comprehension, for example, the board team must know enough about the area to make sound decisions and to clearly communicate with citizens, teachers and others. You don't need to have an advanced degree in education or know everything your expert staff do. Success in leading change means a deeper understanding of the goal area than your board might have had in the past. Learning together at the board table allows you to ask questions of your staff, build a common understanding—and thereby, a commitment on the whole board.

CREATING FOCUS AMONG GOALS

WHAT HAPPENS	BACKGROUND	EXAMPLE
Working within a broader context...	School districts are required by law to have school improvement goals in several areas. Certainly, students have learning needs in all of these areas.	Reading Mathematics Science Writing Social Studies Technology
...District leaders use achievement data to select a focus area...	Based on student learning data which indicates a significant need, the district picks a narrower area of academic content on which to focus. While other areas are attended to, this focus area will receive the lion's share of districtwide attention and resources, in order to increase the implementation of new instructional strategies.	Reading Comprehension (other examples: narrative writing, expository writing, math problem solving)
…And set specific, measurable stretch targets for improvement…	Specific, measurable targets help to create a laser-like focus for improvement that challenges the system and supports monitoring progress toward accomplishing the goal. The "stretch" target should challenge the system but not be unfeasible. These targets help people throughout the system get a clear picture of what results might actually look like and a shared language that people can understand and commit to.	90% of students will be proficient in comprehending non-fiction text (other examples: Increase percentage of students who demonstrate mathematics problem solving by 15%; 85% of students will demonstrate necessary skills in writing persuasive text)
…While providing individual buildings flexibility…	Within the district focus area, building leadership teams can refine the focus based on a more specific look at the needs of students in their building.	Elementary: fluency Middle School: vocabulary High School: reading comprehension in content areas
…And designing districtwide professional development to improve instruction in the focus area.	Staff research and select instructional strategies that are known to be effective in improving student learning in the academic content area of focus. Districtwide professional development is provided to help teachers learn and apply these strategies, and gauge their impact on student learning.	"Read Alouds" "Think Alouds" "Cooperative Learning"

Guideposts for Superintendents

"The superintendent who implements inclusive goal-setting processes that result in board-adopted non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, who assures that schools align their use of district resources for professional development with district goals, and who monitors and evaluates progress toward goal achievement is fulfilling multiple responsibilities correlated with high levels of achievement."

— J. Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano,
"The Primacy of Superintendent Leadership,"
The School Administrator, March 2007

It's really common sense:

You can't do everything at once.

Jumpstart success with a clear, measurable, focused goal.




4 Making Professional Development Relevant and Useful

"The purpose of staff development is not just to implement isolated instructional innovations; its central purpose is to build strong collaborative work cultures that will develop the long-term capacity for change."

— Michael Fullan

Overview

To hone in on improving academic instruction, districts that make great gains in achievement revamp professional development so it is meaningful, relevant and based on research.

The school board is critical in accomplishing this, as the board sets the expectations for professional development, provides supports and resources, and monitors implementation of instructional strategies gained through the professional development.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Professional development is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Districts adopted new approaches to professional development.** To varying degrees, they all rejected the traditional, one-time workshop approach to developing teacher skill. Instead, they implemented coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction, using research-based principles of professional development. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs; based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data; and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning, including a network of instructional experts. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **Districts provided professional development and support for consistent implementation of key strategies throughout the district.** The districts used focused, intensive professional development programs to show teachers how to use curricula effectively. The professional development included teacher coaches who could model lessons and critique instructional practice; several days of training for all teachers; common planning time and grade-level meetings; and more extensive training for lead teachers. *(Source: Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **Extensive staff development opportunities by both districts and schools ensured that the knowledge base on improving teaching got into the hands of teachers.** Staff development typically focused on district initiatives, such as early reading instruction or classroom instruction. Several of the districts were incorporating research about the teaching of reading in the development of their own programs and in the staff development they provided to teachers. Teachers were also being supported in their efforts to increase their repertoire of instructional strategies. Some of this assistance was provided through time spent in team or grade-level meetings discussing instruction, time allocated to focusing on district priorities and goal-setting, some by training and workshops, and some by providing master teachers to model lessons. *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Leaders in the successful school districts devoted substantial amounts of time and resources to helping teachers develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary in order to improve instruction for all groups of students.** They also devoted substantial time and resources to helping administrators learn to support teachers. Dozens of examples were evident of ways these districts built the capacity of people to contribute to and lead the transformation underway in the districts. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

  Teachers in high-impact high schools are more likely to have a say in the content of professional development than their peers at average-impact schools. They reported taking part in teacher committees that make such decisions. *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*

Why Professional Development Works: What the Experts Say

Many carefully designed research studies over the past 25 years have shown that teacher learning through quality professional development can lead to enhanced teaching and learning. But to be effective in improving achievement, the studies show that professional development must have several key components, described below.

Grounded in student need in an academic content area, such as reading, math or science: This content area is selected based on data that shows a real student learning need. The entire staff engages in an initiative to improve instruction around that area of need, usually by studying and receiving training in a specific teaching strategy or model.

Research-based: The most effective efforts focus on teaching strategies backed by research that shows those strategies have proven effective in producing higher student achievement in other school districts over time and with students with similar needs.

Collaborative and ongoing: This type of professional development requires an ongoing study of teaching and learning throughout the school year, not just one-shot sessions or separate, unconnected projects or workshops. Teachers meet as whole faculties and in smaller teams on a regular basis to learn, study data, plan lessons and solve problems. Their goal is to improve their daily work to advance the achievement of students around the district goals for student learning.

Collective: To see widespread improvement in teaching and learning, all teachers must participate, not just a small group or subset. The teaching practice or instructional strategy must become part of the toolbox of teachers throughout the system.

Embedded in the system: There must be a structure, embedded in the everyday life of the school, that ensures that teachers can acquire the skill and knowledge they need, practice what they learn and then reflect on the results.

Includes effective training processes: For a teacher to learn a new behavior and effectively apply it in the classroom, several steps are involved:

Theory: Understanding the principles behind new skills and strategies.
Demonstration: Observing an expert in action, modeling the new skill.
Practice: Practicing the new behavior in a safe context, such as a classroom or in front of a coaching partner.
Collaboration/Coaching: Trying out the skill with peer coaching and support in the classroom.

It's important that formal training be provided by an expert trainer—someone for whom this teaching strategy is a well-developed skill, not someone who has just read about it or been to a workshop. Unless all of the training components are in place, it's highly unlikely teachers will actually be able to effectively transfer what they learn into actual classroom practice.

Led broadly: This kind of professional development requires such complex, persistent efforts that it's unlikely to succeed without sustained leadership at all levels of the district—the board/superintendent team, teacher leaders, principals and other administrators.

Connected: The program doesn't stand alone. It must be aligned with other foundations of school improvement such as goals, standards, curriculum and assessments.

Evaluated: The results are monitored by changes in teacher knowledge and skills and improvements in student learning. The guiding questions are: Are teachers effectively implementing their new skills in the classroom? Are students learning more as a result?

WHAT IT TAKES TO IMPACT CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Training Components and Attainment of Outcomes
(Percent of Participants)

	Outcomes		
Components	Knowledge	Skill (Strong)	Transfer (Strong Classroom Implementation)
Study of Theory	10	5	0
Demonstrations	30	20	0
Practice	60	60	5
Peer Coaching	95	95	95

Staff development that includes only study of theory, demonstrations or practice outside the classroom rarely transfers to implementation of a new instructional skill for teachers in the classroom. "Peer coaching" brings a 95 percent classroom implementation of the new teaching skill. It's important to note that "peer coaching" is defined as practice in the classroom, along with lesson planning and collaboration with peers as teachers improve their practice and gauge the effect on students.

Joyce, Bruce and Showers, Beverly. *Student Achievement Through Staff Development.* 3rd Edition. ASCD. 2002.

Reality Check: Why Professional Development is Hard

Professional development systems that change achievement are still relatively rare. Authors Tom Corcoran, Susan Furhman and Carol Belcher describe most of today's systems as "an unfocused menu of workshops, courses and awareness sessions" with little or no follow-up support and little if any attempts to monitor implementation.

During staff development, teachers are learning and applying significant, new instructional skills—and monitoring their impact on student learning. Unless all of the components above (study, demonstration, practice, coaching, supported by leadership, evaluation, data-oriented academic goals, etc.) are successfully implemented, the chance of impacting classroom instruction—and thereby student achievement—are small. And implementing them well takes a significant commitment of staff time. Staff development researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers comment in their book, S*tudent Achievement through Staff Development*, "In many of the jurisdictions where we work, at least in the beginning, the time for staff development was only three or four days a year; the districts were comfortable until they found that 10 or 12 days a year is a minimum if practice is to change enough to generate student effects."

That intensity and time commitment are among the reasons districts must often narrow the focus of staff development to a goal in a specific academic content area—successful implementation in a way that impacts achievement—means you cannot tackle everything at once. (See Chapter 3 on goal-setting for more details.)

Why Professional Development Matters

Quality professional development unlocks the doors of the classroom instruction—it drives the district to focus on the heart of improved instruction. But it does so in a way that honors teachers as professionals: working together, studying data, coaching each other, problem solving together—all around student needs and district goals.

How has professional development changed me as a teacher?

We asked a teacher who has experienced professional development that results in increased student learning to share her reflections.

"I had always prided myself in the fact that I am the kind of teacher that challenges her students while at the same time allowing them the time to learn and grow. However, I see now that even so, I was limiting my students. I know now that there is no cap to what individuals can learn whether they be children or adults. I am enjoying learning and growing with my students. The scientific research-based strategies that we are learning in professional development are evident every day in my classroom.

I am more responsible as a teacher. I understand learning and teaching more clearly and I look at student learning differently. Our building is focused on one area of learning—reading comprehension. That focus has allowed optimal learning to occur and the transfer from workshop to workplace is more evident. As a classroom teacher and as a staff, we look at student data, analyze it, and use it to guide our instruction and our professional development. We study the theory behind our learning, watch demonstrations, and plan and practice lessons with our colleagues. We, in turn, apply our new learning daily in our classrooms. We have technical assistance from our AEA and the reading team from the Department of Education. We align instruction and curriculum to student achievement.

I have control of my own learning. I get to help plan and deliver good professional development. That's exciting to me as a teacher.

My experiences in this form of professional development have helped me to believe that all kids can learn. Every day we are learning more—all to help students learn skills and strategies to help them become lifelong learners."

—Darlys, an Iowa elementary school teacher

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and Professional Development

Lighthouse Study #1

Comparing Boards in High- and-Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving districts,* school board members described staff development activities in the district and could describe the link between teacher training and board or district goals for students. Board members emphasized the focus of staff development as a collective effort to meet student learning needs. They expressed a belief that staff development could make a difference and that their staff was capable of learning new skills.

In *low-achieving districts,* board members described staff development as chosen by individual teachers or as required for teacher certification. Board members knew there was a budget for staff development, but were unsure whether there was a plan for staff development. Board members made frequent disparaging remarks about staff development, both as an expense of time and as an ineffective strategy for changing or improving teacher practice. The board members questioned whether staff could learn new techniques or would even try.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

Lighthouse Study #2

Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

In all Iowa Lighthouse districts, one of the most critical components of the board's leadership for higher student achievement involved requiring and supporting effective professional development. After studying research-based characteristics of effective professional development, each board worked with their superintendent and district leadership team to support districtwide professional development aligned with the focus area.

Through studying research and case studies of effective professional development, the boards learned what is needed to support it and took several actions to ensure that those supports were in place. For example, during the budget process, four boards approved a calendar that created additional time for training and for teachers to meet two or four times a month in study teams to plan, practice and debrief lessons, to read and reflect on research and best practices, to gather, organize and analyze data related to students and instruction, and other issues—all related to the key initiative(s) the districts were implementing in the primary area of focus. The boards received information about the work of study teams several times during the year in work sessions with their district leadership teams.

"It's been very rewarding to us as a board to see how the teachers have come on and understood and realized that all of our professional development is focused on reading comprehension. They don't come to professional development days and wonder what we're going to do this year, or what's the latest flash in the pan now. They know that when they come to professional development it's going to be all about reading comprehension, strategies, what can we do to improve that in our school."

—Board Member,
Lighthouse Study #2

In three of the Lighthouse sites, the board developed a policy to embody these characteristics, identifying five outcomes that the board will expect from professional development activities in the future:

1. Achievement improving for all students and the learning gaps among subgroups of students narrowing with a minimum standard of performance at or above grade level.
2. Students integrating strategies into their own learning (learners that know how to learn.)
3. All educators having improved instructional skills/strategies in the focus area identified for improving student learning.
4. All educators having a clear understanding of what the expected performance of instructional strategy/skill looks like and frequently monitoring their practice to determine implementation progress.
5. Administrators actively leading teachers' instructional improvement.

The expectations were shared in many settings with administrators and staff and provided a structure for district's improvement work. Progress reports from district leadership teams or principals to the board/superintendent team are framed around the outcomes defined in board policy.

Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around professional development.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Setting Clear Expectations	**Through policy, send a clear message that the priority for your district's professional development is to improve teaching and learning.** Use board policy to send the message that the priority for district-sponsored professional development is to align with academic improvement goals, be selected based on evidence that it has worked elsewhere, and will result in measurable improvements in student learning. At the same time, check related policies or documents, such as master contracts, to remove conflicts and ensure alignment. Build the board team's knowledge about this important issue by learning more about the research on effective professional development as you develop a policy for your district.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Provide the time and resources to get the job done.** The board makes key decisions that affect the capacity of the district to deliver professional development. The annual school calendar—generally approved by boards in early spring for the next school year—should provide a clear indication of whether your staff will have the time as part of their regular work day or week to engage in study, training, practice and coaching around the new skill. In addition, your budget decisions will affect whether the district has funds to pay substitute teachers to release leadership team members for their work, or funds to hire an expert trainer if one is not available locally through your area education agency. **Be willing to bring in the help your staff needs.** Delivering professional development around a powerful instructional strategy is technical work which very few school districts can accomplish without help. If your staff already knew what to do, they would be doing it! Be willing to bring in needed skills and the objective voice of an external partner, such as a consultant or your area education agency. They have the ability to "push," and a connection with the expert trainers or technical expertise.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Review and discuss progress regularly with staff leaders.** Make progress on the district's professional development plan a part of your board agenda at regular intervals. Use that time to stay abreast of training sessions, to review examples and summaries of data your staff will be collecting as teachers practice and apply the strategies in their classrooms, discuss challenges with administrators and teacher leaders, discuss achievement data, and commend staff members for tackling the work.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Holding the System Accountable, continued	**Keep the focus on the bottom line: student learning.** Evaluate the effectiveness of professional development not only based on implementation, but by changes in student learning. Is the program producing the expected results in student learning?
Building Collective Will	**Take a stand with parents and the community.** Changing dismissal times and school calendars as you build in time for professional development can cause disruptions for parents who have established after-school care arrangements for their children. It can also cause community members to ask questions if they don't understand the changes. Your board must be visible and vocal in helping parents and community members understand the role staff development plays in improving results for students.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**Build your understanding about the instructional improvement strategy your staff selects.** In alignment with your district's primary academic improvement goal, your staff members will select one, or perhaps a few, powerful teaching strategies to learn about and apply through professional development. Talk with staff leaders at the board table about the strategies, how they work to help students learn, and what evidence shows they will work for your staff. Your board's understanding of these strategies—and what it takes for teachers to be successful in applying them—is critical in guiding the decisions and work outlined below.

Guideposts for Superintendents

"Successful superintendents must ensure that every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so that every student achieves. They recognize that investing in the continuous improvement of their staff is among their most important decisions because that is the best tool they have for ensuring that every student experiences great teaching every day. Excellent superintendents also recognize that they must model the value of continuous improvement by being continuous learners themselves."

— *Stephanie Hirsh, executive director, National Staff Development Council*

It's really common sense:

It takes time and effort to become an expert at anything.

Add to teachers' toolbox through professional development.

Much of this book focuses on the board/superintendent team's role in leading change within the district. But no school district operates as an island. What happens at the capitol has a huge impact on your district's capacity for success in improving student achievement. State and federal policy can make the road easier—or harder.

Your connection with your legislators is key for several reasons:

- **Public policy can help focus attention on school improvement.** While some education leaders have concerns about the federal (ESSA) Every Student Succeeds, this legislation has focused public attention on the achievement gaps and the importance of education to our nation. Business people, the media, civic groups and others are talking about improving education. It reinforces that improving results for students is a broad public issue that deserves attention. And, while few education leaders relish the idea of sanctions or "the list," some have found the public pressure an aid in overcoming complacency within the school or community.
- **Legislative decisions impact funding and capacity for your school district, from general funding through allowable growth, to specific funds for aspects of school improvement such as professional development.** Legislative decisions also impact the technical capacity available to school districts through area education agencies or the Iowa Department of Education. Money isn't the only answer to improving education, but it can sure be an asset.
- **You know best the practical issues of school improvement in your district.** Legislators cannot make sound public policy decisions without understanding the challenges, barriers and opportunities to maximize progress for students. They get plenty of information from other stakeholders that may have a limited or self-interested view - whether that's limiting resources or restricting management's authority. They need your insights to inform their decisions. They need board advocacy to represent the needs of students.

Legislative advocacy must be a "habit" of your board's leadership work—a key part of the board's role in building public will for improved academic achievement.

As you discuss issues such as standards, professional development or assessment at the board table, include a discussion of the connecting legislative issues—and make a plan for connecting with your legislators on a regular basis. Engage other leaders in your district—administrators, teachers or community members—in building those legislative relationships.

As your state association, IASB offers a wealth of resources to help you connect with legislators and make the case for your needs, along with providing a grassroots advocacy platform as a collective voice for Iowa public schools.

5 Effective Use of Data for Accountability and Improvement

"Educational trends may come and go, but student performance tends to be the best measure of effective instruction."

— Mike Winstead, director of accountability and curriculum, Knox County Schools, Tennessee

Overview

School districts that make great gains in achievement use data relentlessly as an accountability and decision making tool. School boards are pivotal in identifying and monitoring meaningful measures of accountability and in ensuring that the district staff has the supports to use data well.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Using data as a tool for accountability and improvement is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **The great gains districts sought to dramatically increase their use of data to drive decision making and improve instruction.** Districts developed multi-measure accountability systems to gauge student and school progress, identified and acquired multiple measures of student performance instead of relying only on end-of-year standardized tests; and made conscious efforts to make data more usable for staff by providing easy-to-understand data analysis tools and training. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

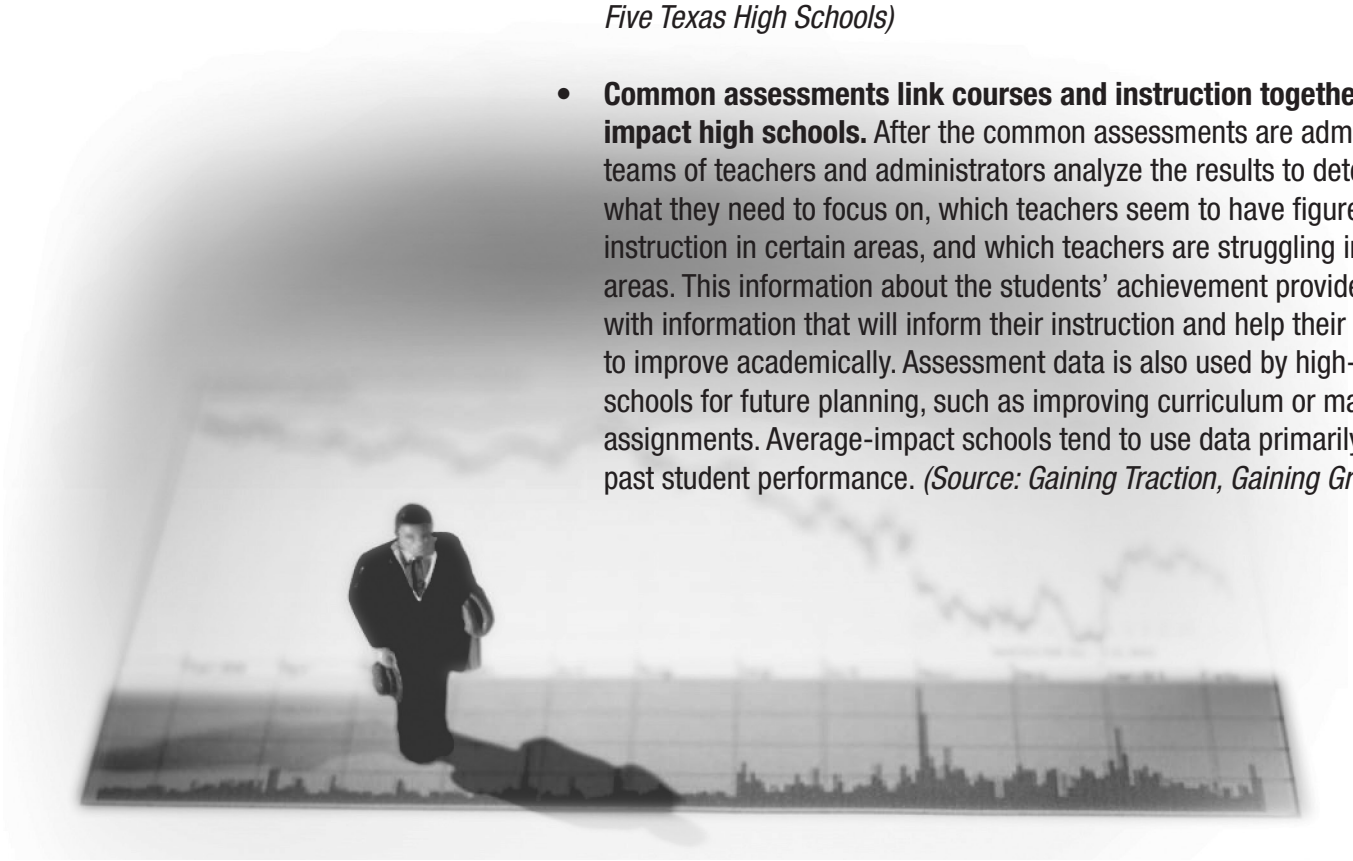
- **School boards made clear to superintendents that change in student performance was necessary, possible and expected.** Each of the districts used data and other processes to hold staff accountable for results. Once goals were established, the board monitored progress toward the achievement of goals. The terms data and monitoring became a regular part of vocabulary. Superintendents and boards discussed student achievement data regularly in board meetings. Principals discussed with teachers data for the school and for each teacher, and the teachers discussed it with each other. Central office staff helped building leaders and teachers use data to focus, plan and monitor the implementation of their plans. In addition to using data to drive improvement efforts, each school district developed specific, local accountability practices that ensured that everyone involved in the instructional program was held accountable for educational equity and student achievement. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

- **Districts committed themselves to data-driven decision making and instruction.** They gave early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals as well as trained and supported them as the data were used to diagnose teacher and student weaknesses and make improvements. The districts became far more sophisticated in using data to better understand the challenges they faced, to monitor progress toward their goals, and to refine their approaches to reaching them. They made a concerted effort to improve their systems for collecting, analyzing and reporting data on student achievement and other performance measures—and in training teachers and administrators in the interpretation and use of assessment data. The districts also created concrete accountability systems that went well beyond what their states had established in order to hold district leadership and building-level staff personally responsible for producing results. *(Source: Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **High-performance districts restructured their systems in order to decentralize management and budgeting to the building level.** This change increased accountability by linking people to results, with school staff working in teams using feedback data about performance to plan for improvement. The districts have restructured the system to place accountability in the hands of the people closest to the products (the schools, the principals and the teachers), and they typically have adopted a "no excuses" mentality. In each of the districts, the concept "all children can learn" has moved beyond rhetoric. Staff members are expected to do whatever it takes to make sure that each student is achieving. *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Administrators and teachers used student performance data to set their goals and to measure progress toward these goals; to pinpoint instructional strengths and weaknesses; to identify students who needed additional support on specific objectives; and to enhance collaboration around the academic goals of the school.** Assessment data collected by the district was critical to this work. School- and district-level administrators facilitated the use of data in the classroom by providing teacher training and support in the use of data to make instructional decisions, and ensuring the timely collection, analysis and dissemination of student assessment data. *(Source: Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools)*

- **Common assessments link courses and instruction together in high-impact high schools.** After the common assessments are administered, teams of teachers and administrators analyze the results to determine what they need to focus on, which teachers seem to have figured out instruction in certain areas, and which teachers are struggling in certain areas. This information about the students' achievement provides them with information that will inform their instruction and help their students to improve academically. Assessment data is also used by high-impact schools for future planning, such as improving curriculum or making teacher assignments. Average-impact schools tend to use data primarily to measure past student performance. *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*



- **Beat-the-odds schools have a clear bottom line: the academic achievement of every student in every classroom.** Teachers and principals alike assess student and teacher achievement early and often—and use the information to drive improvement rather than to assign blame. They disaggregate data so they can look individually at each classroom, each teacher and most importantly, each student. It's not just relentless assessment that makes the beat-the-odds schools stand out. These schools are hardheaded about using this knowledge to change so as to improve student outcomes. They move past big-picture metrics and focus on achievement per classroom, achievement per teacher and achievement per student. This approach unmasks poor performance and forces everyone at the school to take responsibility for student performance. *(Source: Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds)*

Why Using Data Works: What the Experts Say

According to *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research*, improved districts use data as evidence to monitor results, for making instructional and resource allocation decisions, and for accountability. District staff provides time and training in the use of data and helps schools in gathering and interpreting data. The data is used to monitor equity, make decisions about alignment, and target professional development efforts.

"Educational leaders are the wise physicians who must consider how to improve education, not merely how to analyze the demise of the system."

Douglas Reeves,
Daily Disciplines of Leadership

"The momentum behind building high-quality data systems to harvest better information about student, school and district performance has never been stronger. Although collecting better data is essential, knowing how to analyze and apply this information is just as important for meeting the end goal of improving student achievement," according to Elizabeth Laird of the National Center for Educational Accountability and Data Quality.

Douglas Reeves, in the *Daily Disciplines of Leadership*, cautions that using data for accountability and improving instruction must be like a physical, not an autopsy. "The purpose of our efforts is not the educational version of an autopsy, in which we announce that the patient has expired and suggest some insight into the cause of death. Rather we are concerned with the health of the patients… Educational leaders are the wise physicians who must consider how to improve education, not merely how to analyze the demise of the system," says Reeves.

Using data well means not only looking at measures of student performance such as assessments, but looking at measures of the adult responsibilities for improving instruction. "Next to a chart of student performance in writing, there is a chart that displays the frequency with which teachers require writing in classroom assessments… The data friendly school uses numbers not as a weapon but as a guide. The data friendly leader uses measurement not only to suggest how children can improve their performance but more important how adults in the system can improve their leadership, teaching and curriculum strategies," says Reeves.

Rick DuFour, in Professional Learning Communities at Work, says, "In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done. When a school devotes considerable time and effort to the continual assessment of a particular condition or outcomes, it notifies all members that the condition or outcome is considered important. Conversely, inattention to monitoring a particular factor in a school indicates that it is less than essential, regardless of how often its importance is verbalized."

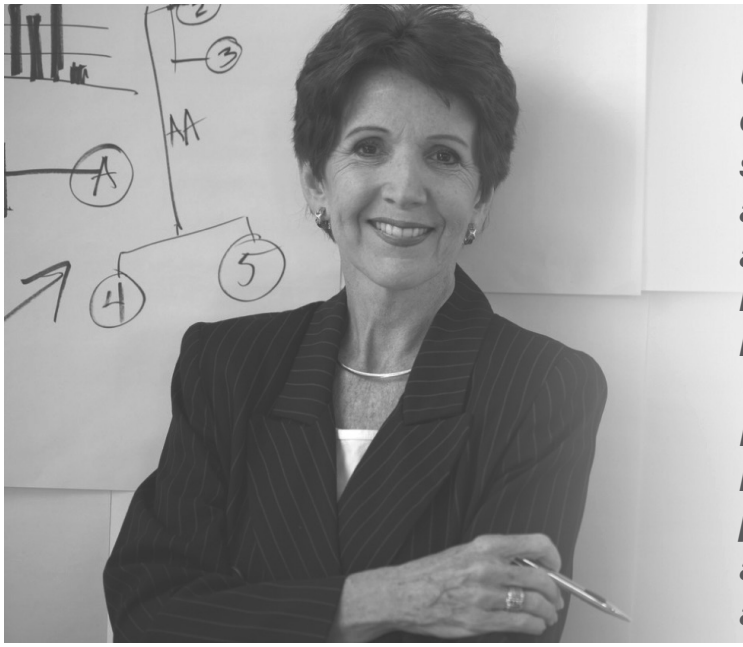
Reality Check: Why Using Data is Hard

Using data for accountability and improvement is a stretch for many districts. In *Change Leadership*, Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan say, "Many schools and districts typically have a 'hide and seek' or a 'fire hydrant' approach to data. There may be too little data about how students are doing, or the data are not widely known or understood by teachers, parents and the community. Alternatively, when too much data is released, people are overwhelmed and confused about what it means and what's most important."

Another issue: confronting performance data makes people uncomfortable. Mike Schmoker frames it this way in his book, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement:* "Why do we avoid data? The reason is fear—of data's capacity to reveal strength and weaknesses, failure and success. Education seems to maintain a tacit bargain among constituents at every level not to gather or use information that will reveal where we need to do better, where we need to make changes. Data almost always point to action—they are the enemy of comfortable routines. By ignoring data, we promote inaction and inefficiency."

Why Using Data Matters

Schmoker also reminds us why using data for accountability is critical: "Data can become a force for improvement by energizing those closest to their work. Most of all, data promote the flow of pertinent information and emerging expertise that is the lifeblood of optimism and improvement… If leadership provided the encouragement and opportunity for practitioners to begin gathering and examining collective student results, we would make real strides toward understanding our strengths and weaknesses."



Using data well means not only looking at measures of student performance such as assessments, but looking at measures of the adult responsibilities for improving instruction.

For example, your board might review data on student performance in writing, along with data collected by administrators gauging the frequency with which teachers require writing in classroom assessments.

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and using data

Lighthouse Study #1
Comparing Boards in High- and-Low Achieving Districts

Board members in *high-achieving districts* often referred to student needs—as shown through data about students and groups of students—as the focus for decision making. Board members could talk about data on the dropout rate, test scores and student needs. They talked about receiving information on a routine basis, such as monthly reports.

Board members in *low-achieving districts* referred to data used in decisions based on anecdotes and personal experiences. Data on student achievement was received as a report to the board, but rarely linked to a decision. The board members talked very generally about test scores and relied on the interpretation made by the superintendent.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

Lighthouse Study #2
Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

Across Iowa Lighthouse districts, the concept of accountability changed as boards put data and research at the center of their conversations with each other, with the superintendent and with staff leaders from inside the district. Boards moved away from the traditional form of accountability, in which boards receive periodic subjective reports from staff or simply focus on meeting state and federal requirements. Instead, accountability came to be a shared responsibility across the district for making improvements in student learning in the focus area. So while the professionals inside the district were still accountable for providing information to the board about student performance, the meetings became more of a conversation in which the board and staff looked at many sources of data to understand what was happening in the district, what was going well, what needed improvement, and what the staff and board would need to do differently to move toward their shared goals.

For example, in addition to ongoing study of data depicting student performance on formative and summative assessments in the focus area, many of the Lighthouse districts began collecting and studying information about how an improvement initiative was being implemented. In Lighthouse districts, board members asked, "How are we going to know how an initiative is going and its impact on students?" In response to this question, staff reports to the board stress the degree to which staff has accomplished usage targets set by the administration and/or district leadership team, including quantity and quality

of staff practice of the instructional strategies. During these board reports, district leadership team members repeatedly emphasize the importance of the board holding the district leadership team accountable to study/report staff implementation of the strategies/initiative to the board. A recent comment by one of the district leadership team reps during a presentation to the board captures this perspective. The teacher said, "Accountability for using the teaching strategies we learn through professional development is not a bad thing. It keeps us (staff) focused on the key things we're supposed to be doing. We need the board to keep expecting these reports from the staff."

Traditionally, boards have received "reports," usually annually. This work differs from that traditional format by involving more frequent data study, on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The board and staff then have time to take corrective action (two to four times per year). This combination of studying student achievement data more frequently and having implementation data about improvement initiatives gave the Lighthouse boards a much clearer picture of where the district is headed, what kinds of corrective actions might be needed and what kinds of supports are required to accelerate improvement.

Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

"First determine where you're at and go with that data. Bring your staff into it. You don't want to catch them off guard. They need to see the research. They need to see the data that you're looking at. Get a leadership team together with members of your staff who are excited about change. Keep the community informed from the very start."

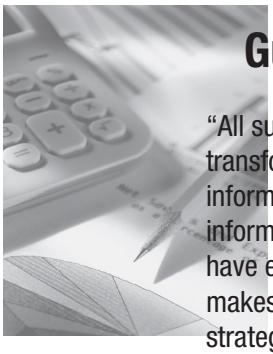
Board Member, Iowa Lighthouse Study #2

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around using data for accountability and improvement.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Setting Clear Expectations	**Expect that data drive decisions.** Set the expectation that data will drive decision making in your school system at all levels, from the board room to the classroom. Model this at the board table by making data the basis of your own decisions. **Define clear, meaningful measures of improvement.** State and federal improvement laws require your district to collect and report many pieces of data—and you should certainly do so. Certainly, no one measure tells you everything and it's important to have a multi-faceted look. But it's easy to get lost in the expanse of data. Work with staff to identify fair, reasonable indicators of progress around your districtwide achievement goal and annual targets. Then, track and publicize those key data points so that everyone understands the results you are trying to produce.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Provide supports for staff in understanding and using data.** Although collecting good data is essential, knowing how to analyze and apply this information is just as important for meeting the end goal of improving student achievement. Provide supports and training for your staff in learning to analyze and understand their data, along with time to study it and identify the implications for their classroom or building. For greatest effect, provide this training in data use within the context of your goals and professional development effort, not as a stand-alone effort, so that teachers and administrators can apply what they learn immediately.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Keep the data in front of the board and the staff.** As a board/superintendent team, regularly monitor progress toward your improvement goals and specific targets, both in terms of student performance and data your administrators are collecting about implementation issues. Regular looks at data on your indicators are important to helping you—and district staff—make informed decisions. Keeping the data front-and-center also helps to apply pressure on the system to improve--in a fair and meaningful way. **Take advantage of an objective look.** Consider tapping external resources— your AEA or private consultants—to provide an external audit of implementation, processes and results. Avoid at all costs a "gotcha" mentality, as if this external look is designed to uncover incompetence. Instead, it provides your staff and board with an objective look at where you are and constructive advice on steps to improve.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Building Collective Will	**Connect the head and the heart.** Data provides a fair and rational, intellectual approach to improvement. But being driven by data doesn't mean that you, as a board, forget that there are real people behind each number. An Iowa school board member put it this way: "When I look at the data that says 1 in 4 of our students isn't learning to read at grade level, I picture my daughter's 4th grade class and ask myself, which of her friends is that? While it's not my place to know which students specifically, the mental picture keeps me grounded." In any discussion about data, the board/superintendent team must keep the focus on the moral imperative behind the work of the district. The hopes and dreams of children in your community can inspire an ownership that numbers alone rarely do.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**"Test" your knowledge.** Testing and assessment involves technical terms and processes. Build your knowledge as a board team so you can understand the language and purposes of testing and assessment, along with how your district uses tests and assessments to monitor progress in student learning. Although you don't have to be a statistician, a basic knowledge of data terms and assessment issues is a foundation for board work today. **Make data part of your board's way of doing business at the board table.** Put bluntly, a once-a-year report to the board on test results in the spring won't cut it if you're truly committed to leading through data—you'll be in the "autopsy mode" that Douglas Reeves warns of. Boards that use data as a leadership and learning tool move far beyond "receiving the annual progress report" from staff. Work with the superintendent to establish an annual calendar that builds in regular discussions around the data you are tracking on your improvement goal or goals. Set aside work session time to study performance and implementation data deeply, ask questions, and consider where the data leads you. What actions need to be taken, based on data, to continue progress?



Guideposts for Superintendents

"All superintendents, new and veteran, have been besieged with the notion of transforming their districts into organizations that collect and use data to make informed decisions. Data-driven decision making involves getting the right information to the right person at the right time in the right format. All organizations have easy access to data, but refining the data into useful information is what makes the data relevant and able to be translated into intelligent action that is strategic, timely and relevant. Superintendents ensure the proper management of this data-gathering and assessment process. While various tools exist to help collect and disseminate data, the key for any superintendent is to make sure that the data is being used in ways that facilitate student achievement."

— Doug Otto,
"Systemic Change for Continuous Improvement,"
AASA New Superintendents E-Journal,
American Association of School Administrators

"Effective superintendents continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure that these goals remain the driving force behind a district's actions."

—Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano,
School District Leadership that Works:
The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement,
McREL, 2006.

It's really common sense:

What gets measured gets done.

Use data to drive improvement.

THE POWER OF BALANCE

School board/superintendent teams that commit to improving achievement create pressure on the school system and staff. There's moral pressure--that improvement is the right thing to do for students. And, there's technical pressure in the form of increased measurement, increased scrutiny, and increased accountability. That pressure is a positive, as it's necessary to cause change.

But school boards must always carefully balance that pressure with the support to get the work done. Harvard professor and noted education expert Richard Elmore calls it "reciprocity."

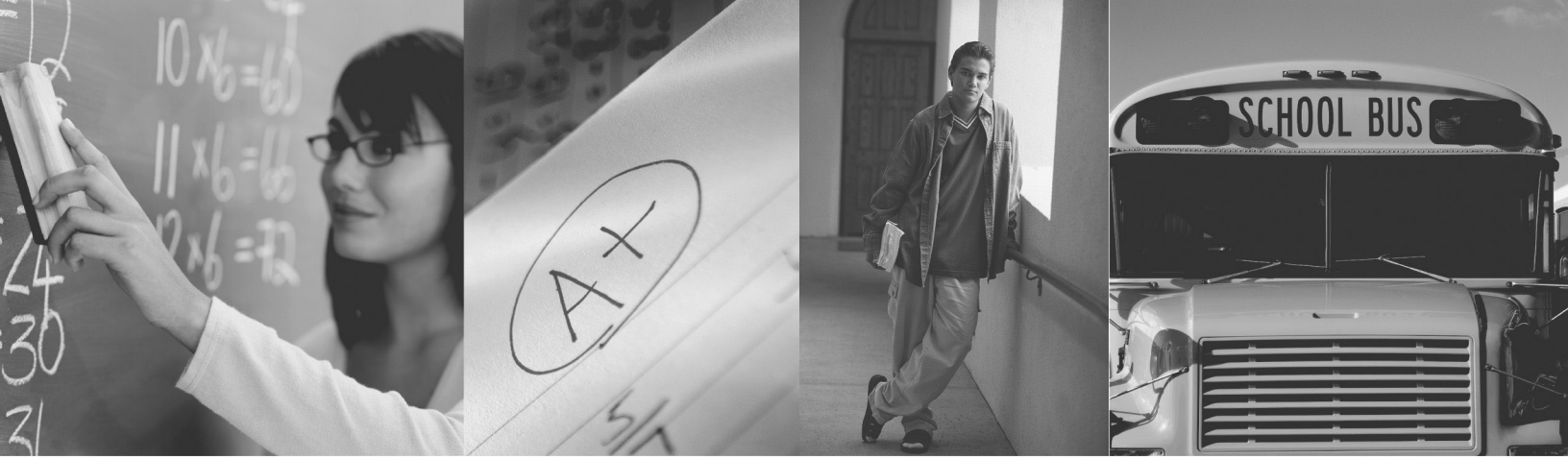
In *Building a New Structure of School Leadership*, Elmore describes that reciprocity this way: "If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do."

That balance was directly noted in one of the great gains studies, *Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts*. Each district that made great gains in achievement committed to substantially higher expectations for students and put in place a series of accountability measures to ensure progress. But teachers in these districts were not left to flounder under increased expectations; pressure to perform according to the new accountability expectations was always accompanied by support. The districts developed practices that increased the likelihood that each and every teacher would be able to get their students to achieve expected results. Those supports included building the capacity of teachers and administrators to contribute to and lead the changes underway in the districts; and devoting substantial time and resources to helping teachers develop the knowledge and skills needed to improve instruction.

As leaders of change, the board/superintendent team must constantly be gauging the interplay, balancing pressure and support, to ensure that momentum continues.

Too much pressure can be demoralizing.

All support and no pressure is rarely enough to generate real change.



6 Developing Leadership and Collaboration Around Shared Purpose

"Individuals alone, no matter how competent or charismatic, never have all the assets needed to overcome tradition and inertia except in very small organizations… Without a powerful guiding coalition, change stalls and carnage grows."

— John Kotter, in ***Leading Change***, Harvard Business School Press

Overview

Districts that make great gains in achievement pay careful attention to creating broad-based leadership and a culture of collaboration around the shared purpose of improving student achievement. The school board ensures that leadership and collaboration are anchored in the school culture and serves as a model for that work.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement show a considerable focus on developing widespread leadership and collaboration.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Districts redefined leadership roles.** District leaders determined that no single group would be able to tackle instructional improvement alone. Instead, they redistributed leadership roles. Leadership was not simply shared; most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform they were best positioned to lead or were uniquely situated to fill. *(Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **A new way of doing things emerged in the districts.** Focusing on achievement and equity required roles of district personnel to shift substantially. Persons in leadership, from the superintendent through the district staff to the principals, were expected to create an environment of caring support, encouragement and assistance to ensure that the teachers could be equally successful with all children. This orientation became part of the culture of these districts. Principals assumed roles that went beyond building management to include instructional leadership—helping teachers be academically successful with all students. Central office staff—once focused on procedures, monitoring and enforcement—became focused on providing support to principals and teachers in student learning. *(Equity-Driven, Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

- **Administrators recognized the central role that teachers play in the success of the school and worked to build an environment where teachers felt appreciated and supported as professionals.** School administrators worked in partnership with teachers to identify and solve problems related to student achievement; provided teachers with time and resources needed for instruction and planning; and responded to teachers' suggestions for school improvement. Administrators used structures like site-based teams, departmental teams and cross-departmental teams to support collaboration around curriculum and instruction and include a broad range of individuals in meeting the academic goals of the building. The decision-making process empowered everyone involved to take ownership of the education provided by the school. *(Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools)*

- **At beat-the-odds schools, responsibility for school improvement is shared among the teachers and staff, not concentrated in a**

few people at the top. Strong and steady leadership from principals is important. The principals reach an agreement on goals and then distribute responsibility for improvement among all the teachers. They involve teachers in analyzing data, identifying possible solutions to problems, selecting good, evidence-based practices, and designing training and schedules to support change. *(Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds...and Others Don't)*

- **Districts drove reforms into the classroom by defining a role for the central office that entailed guiding, supporting and improving instruction at the building level.** Accountability started with leaders at the top and filtered through the central office, then radiated out to the schools, largely focused on principals. The focus on accountability for all students, starting at the central office, helped bring key constituencies on board the reform effort. *(Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **Although collaboration was part of the school culture in high-impact high schools, it was not happenstance.** Teachers had regular, set-aside time during which they worked together on curriculum and instruction. Instructional practice was not private; rather, it was a shared enterprise with a specific goal: to improve student learning. *(Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*

Why Developing Leadership and Collaboration Works: What the Experts Say

Successful school districts devote significant time to developing instructional leadership capacity. By distributing responsibilities for getting the work done among teachers and staff members other than the principal or superintendent, they tacitly but clearly acknowledge that every member of the school community can work as a leader, according to Deborah King, writing in a May 2002 article in *Educational Leadership.*

The research synthesis *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research,* describes leaders in improved school districts as dynamic, united in purpose, involved, visible in schools, and interested in instruction. Leaders provide encouragement, recognition and support for improving student learning. Instructional leadership is expanded to encompass the superintendent, principals, teacher leaders and other administrators at the district and school levels. The ethical and moral nature of effective leadership is demonstrated when leaders move beyond talking about the belief that students can learn to taking concrete action to change instruction so students do learn.

In his book, *Renewing American Schools,* Carl Glickman cites many studies that show that successful schools are places where teachers are always questioning their practices; faculty members guide one another, plan together, coordinate their practices, and participate in the most important decisions; and

larger questions about educational practice are at the forefront of meetings and conversations. These elements—faculty members working together, discussing important issues relevant to their role as professionals and taking a significant role in the school's decision-making process—provide the foundation for developing a collaborative culture.

The Center for Collaborative Education in their *Turning Points* school reform initiatives describe shared leadership and decision making as a primary component of a school district's collaborative culture and one that places teachers and principals as key players.

> "Shared leadership requires an operational structure that allows more people to lead the thinking of the school… With shared leadership, teachers become members of teams and play a substantial role in the change a school undertakes. As teachers participate on the school's leadership team, study groups, and academic and discipline-based teams, they are able to influence their school's direction and make decisions about the school's curriculum, teaching priorities, hiring and budget and expenditures. When teachers have a genuine part in making decisions and implementing changes, they become more committed to reform efforts. In a collaborative culture, reform is not imposed upon teachers but created by them."

Clearly, structures such as building, grade-level or subject-matter teams are important. But the focus of those teams is the real key. Those collaborative teams must be focused on creating "a better learning environment for themselves and students by studying education and how to improve it," according to Bruce Joyce, James Wolf and Emily Calhoun, writing in *The Self-Renewing School.* These teams must be disciplined in staying focused on their purpose. This ongoing study of content, instruction and its effects on students requires time in the regular work day and extensive use of data to monitor progress.

Sharing or distributing leadership does not mean letting everyone do what they want. Timothy Waters and Robert Marzono's research on effective leadership and student achievement frames it as "defined autonomy:" principals and leadership groups have autonomy to lead within the boundaries defined by the district goals. This balance between districtwide direction and goals, and building-level autonomy and leadership, is clearly important:

> "When [the] superintendent also encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility: to establish a relationship with schools. This relationship is characterized by defined autonomy, which is the expectation and support to lead within the boundaries defined by the district goals."

J. Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano,
"The Primacy of Superintendent Leadership,"
The School Administrator, March 2007

Balancing district focus with building-level autonomy is possible—with data as the guide. It provides the objective look that allows leadership teams to operate based on student need, not staff opinion. And, it supports teachers and administrators in being responsive to student needs that might otherwise be obscured with a districtwide direction and focus.

Reality Check: Why Developing Leadership and Collaboration is Hard

Many school improvement experts lament the professional isolation built into schools today. Rick DuFour in *Professional Learning Communities at Work* says that despite waves of reforms in public schools, "the task of teaching continues to fall to a single individual who stands alone before a group of students and works in isolation…. In fact, schools have been characterized by some critics of public education as little more than independent kingdoms (classrooms) ruled by autonomous feudal lords (teachers) who are united only by a parking lot."

DuFour also cautions that providing teachers with time and a team structure for collaboration doesn't ensure that they will engage in deep discourse about how they can achieve the goals of the school more effectively. "In the wrong school culture, the time set aside for educators to work together will simply reinforce the negative aspects of the culture… [T]he potential benefits of collaboration will never be realized unless educators work together on matters directly related to teaching and learning. The focus of their efforts and inquiry must be instruction, curriculum, assessment practices and strategies for improving the effectiveness of the school."

Douglas Reeves warns that some attempts at creating shared leadership become mired in the "consensus conundrum." District leaders too often are timid, allowing opposition from a small part of the faculty to stop improvement initiatives, assuming that without full faculty buy-in, you just can't get anything done. "Leaders are human, and it is understandable that they want to be popular with their colleagues… But the notion that the effective leader also ensures that every decision is popular—or worse yet, that a single dissenting voice on a faculty is sufficient to scuttle a necessary initiative—is a prescription for failure," says Reeves in his book, the *Daily Disciplines of Leadership.*

Why Developing Leadership and Collaboration Matters

Board/superintendent teams must find the balance—developing leadership and collaboration around the purpose and work of school improvement, while never wavering from reasonable decisions to focus districtwide improvement efforts. To ensure significant and lasting improvements in education, school improvement can't depend on the vision or drive of one person or even a small group of people. That drive—and the knowledge-base to get results—must be owned by large majorities of educators. Most board members understand that the board can't mandate or require staff members to "own" school improvement efforts. Building a culture of collaboration and shared leadership—around the work of school improvement, with each person or role group leading within the area of their role and expertise—can sustain a lasting impact in achievement.

"Our findings indicate that when district leaders effectively address specific responsibilities, they can have a profound, positive impact on student achievement in their districts."

School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement, McREL

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and Developing Leadership and Collaboration

Lighthouse Study #1
Comparing Boards in High-and-Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving school districts*, board members could consistently describe structures that support connections and communications within the district. For example, board members could describe teaching teams and faculty committees and how they related to school improvement. Interviews with staff indicated that the perceptions of board members were accurate. Board members expressed a high level of confidence in staff. They made frequent positive comments about staff and could give specific examples of how staff members showed commitment, how staff members were improving, and how staff members were working to help students learn. Board members talked about receiving information from many sources, including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals and teachers, along with sources outside the district.

In *low-achieving districts*, board members didn't know or were vague about how teachers and administrators interacted with each other or how teamwork was linked to goals or initiatives. Board members assumed this interaction was happening, while interviews with staff members indicated that it was not.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

Lighthouse Study #2
Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

"When you have everyone on the same page, there isn't much of anything you can't do as a system."

Board Member,
Iowa Lighthouse Study #2

At the beginning of the Iowa Lighthouse Project, the board and administrators described board links with staff as limited to occasional staff reports to the board and periodically acting on the recommendations of some ad hoc staff committees. Frequently, the primary staff leadership groups identified by the superintendent and principals were standing committees such as the parent/teacher association and ad hoc groups that dealt with short-term topics like the district calendar, wellness, etc. It quickly became clear that tighter coordination and collaboration from the board to the classroom level was necessary in order to drive the kinds of improvement these districts had decided to pursue. To get the degree of change they were aiming for, these districts needed to foster leadership and responsibility at all levels of the district, not just in the board room and administrators' offices.

"Once the teachers found out the board was learning what the staff was doing and we were involved rather than just putting a demand on them, and the staff understood we were studying and spending our time on the work, too, that's when I feel everyone got on board. The teachers found out how the board was involved with learning when the board met with the district leadership team. We asked questions and the staff understood how we had been studying about the initiative and were ready to discuss it."

Board Member, Iowa Lighthouse Study #2

In those districts that did not already have one, the board and superintendent worked with building principals to develop an ongoing staff leadership group focused on strengthening teaching and student learning – the district leadership team. As the district leadership teams were being formed, there was some "push" from staff to negotiate membership, but the board/superintendent team committed to avoid forming the leadership teams based on the formal negotiations process.

In those districts that had existing leadership groups, there were some changes in roles as staff learned to take on new responsibilities around instructional improvement

As the district improvement work has evolved in most of the Lighthouse districts, four key groups have emerged as backbone structures for a leadership continuum extending from the board to the staff:

- Board/superintendent team
- Administrators (attending board work sessions and district leadership team meetings)
- District leadership team
- Peer coaching or study teams (groups of two to three teachers at most schools, connected to the district leadership team through broad-based representation and focused on supporting colleagues in implementing teaching strategies that staff members were learning through district professional development)

Among these groups, the district leadership team served as an instrumental group for the board to carry out its role of monitoring and supporting improvement efforts, acting as a conduit between the board/superintendent and the staff.

The work between the boards and district leadership teams was more than just reporting and questioning during formal board meetings. The boards did their homework in preparation for meeting by reading overviews of team recommendations and information about the instructional initiatives prior to meetings. Board and leadership team members came to meetings prepared to discuss what was being recommended, the rationale, and what it would take to implement the initiative, including what kinds of supports would be needed from the board level. The district leadership teams needed time to prepare for the meeting with the board and found it very helpful to have questions in advance. As a result of this more intentional collaboration, both boards and district leadership teams saw each other's commitment to districtwide improvement of student learning and recognized that they were "on the same page."

Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around broad-based leadership and collaboration.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Setting Clear Expectations	**Say what you expect—through policy.** Based on a deeper board team study of effective district leadership and collaboration, frame a board policy clearly stating your expectations that the district operate in a way that builds instructional leadership. Write your policy around the results you expect, while leaving administration flexibility in determining the structures and processes to deliver those results. **Take the time to clarify leadership roles.** As in sports, each player on an effective team has a clear position. Research shows that this leadership comes within their area of expertise and as appropriate to their role. Failure to clarify roles and expectations can lead to chaos as some attempt to "lead" in a way that is not appropriate to their role or expertise. School board leadership does not mean micromanagement; teacher leadership does not mean usurping the board's role as policy makers. Put simply, a defining question for this discussion asks, "What is this leadership group (board, district leadership team, building leadership team,) uniquely situated to do in the improvement effort?"
Creating Conditions for Success	**Spend time as a board with leadership teams in your district around your improvement initiative.** Lighthouse boards found this critical to creating conditions for school improvement work to succeed. Your board can interact regularly with the district leadership team around improvement efforts. Approach this time as opportunities to learn together, solve problems, and build shared understanding. Your district's staff leadership needs confidence the board will back them as they tackle difficult issues. In many districts, this kind of continuous improvement, problem-solving relationship between staff leadership and the board hasn't existed. Building it requires leadership and thoughtful planning by both the board president and superintendent—and a conscious effort to work together as a team. **Pay attention to principals.** No matter what form of leadership structure your district selects, principals will be at the heart. Learn more about what research says about the role of principals in instructional leadership—it's often far beyond what most principals were trained for. Allocate resources to ensure all principals in your district have the training and supports they need to be instructional leaders. Talk with the superintendent about how he or she is evaluating the performance of principals around instructional improvement.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Use data to balance direction with engagement of staff in decisions.** As district-level leaders, the board/superintendent team must constantly weigh the need to build momentum and make decisions for the district as a whole, while allowing people throughout the system to make decisions and shape the improvement effort. Lessons from improved districts show that district leaders find a way to simultaneously empower and

Holding the System Accountable, continued

control. Engage people in decisions, but make decisions about school improvement based on sound data and core values around student needs—and stick to them. As one board member said, "We involved people extensively in shaping how we would go, identifying why it is important to go, what we would need to go successfully, and many other facets. But the fact that we were digging in to improve was not up for debate. We can't and won't make decisions in a vacuum. But in the end, we won't back off from setting the direction. It's our job and the kids depend on us for that."

Monitor the use of collaborative time.

As a board, discuss with administrators how they monitor the use of collaborative time among teachers and supporting teachers in the effective use of that time. For the district to see results from teacher collaboration time, it must be focused on studying data, planning lessons and solving problems related to their own learning around the improvement initiative. Their goal is to improve their daily work to advance the achievement of students around district goals for student learning. If these collaborative teams are distracted by unrelated or "housekeeping" issues, their impact on student learning is lost. Strong school improvement initiatives build avenues for administrators to monitor collaborative time through "principal walk-throughs" or other processes. Ask what supports your administrators may need from the board to ensure they can play their role as instructional leaders.

Building Collective Will

Back the superintendent in creating a leadership structure with the strength to get the job done.

As Jim Collins says in his book, *Good to Great,* a first step in transformations is to "get the right people on the bus." As superintendents realign district leadership teams around student learning goals, they may find themselves facing upset staff members who feel "pushed out" of standing committees or structures. Board members may hear complaints from staff about those changes. Respond by thanking staff members for their contributions, reinforcing the important role everyone plays, and supporting the superintendent's judgment.

Reinforce leaders at all levels.

Teacher and administrative leaders who step up to the plate early to drive improvement efforts often take some heat from colleagues. Find these early "change champions" and communicate your confidence and gratitude to them. Let them know their leadership matters to the board, the community and for the good of students. Moral support from the board/superintendent team helps them maintain their commitment to the work of leadership.

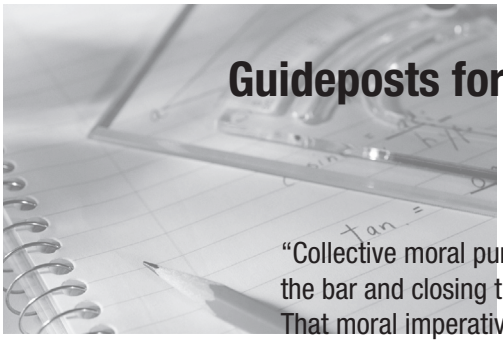
Learning Together as a Board Team

Build trust by walking the talk of leadership and collaboration.

How your board approaches its work and your connections with district leaders around your improvement effort sets a tone that ripples throughout the district. Build staff trust over time by showing your own ability to work as a team, learning together, studying your own work, building your commitment to improvement, your confidence in the staff, and your willingness to be a partner in solving problems in a positive, supportive way.

Support the superintendent's leadership and learning needs.

Superintendents today are asked to do what few have had formal training to do: lead widespread system reform that creates significantly higher levels of achievement. Although it's developing, there's still not much of a support system for superintendents in their leadership role around student achievement. Ensure your superintendent has time and support to be effective.



Guideposts for Superintendents

"Collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gap for all individuals and schools. That moral imperative applies to adults as well as to students. We cannot advance the cause of students without attending to the cause of teachers and administrators. Many passionate, morally driven superintendents have failed because they blindly, even courageously, committed themselves to students, running roughshod over any adults who got in the way. The moral imperative means that everyone has a responsibility for changing the larger education context for the better…The main mark of successful leaders is not their impact on student learning at the end of their tenure, but rather the number of good leaders they leave behind who can go even further."

— Michael Fullan, Al Bertani and Joanne Quinn, "New Lessons for Districtwide Reform, Educational Leadership, April 2004

It's really common sense:

It takes lots of people pulling together to make big things happen.

Develop leadership throughout the district.

THE POWER OF CELEBRATION

Celebration is an important way for leaders to shape the culture of an organization. Rick DuFour, in *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, says that celebration:

- Helps people feel their work is significant, to feel a sense of achievement, and be motivated to give their best.
- Reinforces shared values and signals what is important.
- Provides living examples of the values of the school at work and encourages others to act in accordance with those values.
- Fuels momentum and increases the likelihood the effort will be sustained.

John Kotter, a Harvard business school professor noted as an expert on successful change, says that failure to celebrate short-term wins is one of the main reasons change efforts fail. "Most people won't go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence within six to 18 months that the journey is producing expected results. Without short-term wins, too many employees give up or actively join the resistance," he says.

Use these tips for building celebration into your leadership work as a board/superintendent team:

- **Praise what you want to raise.** Recognize those who take an active role to reinforce the importance of broad-based leadership. Recognize staff members successfully implementing the learning from professional development to reinforce the importance of changing classroom practice. Recognize those who share ideas or solve problems together to reinforce the importance of collaboration.
- **Plan for meaningful short-term wins.** You may commit to a stretch improvement target, such as substantially increasing the percentage of students achieving at grade level. Reaching that target may take 2-3, or more, years. Identify smaller targets to celebrate along the way to show that progress is being made. A side caution—ensure that the wins you celebrate are meaningful and connected to your improvement focus. Celebrating for the sake of celebrating dilutes the impact.
- **Think both formal and informal.** Many school boards build a time for formal recognition into their board meeting—a time to recognize a specific program or staff group or individual. That can be part of your efforts. But don't overlook informal recognition. A handwritten note from a board member, a phone call, a handshake and personal thank you—are meaningful as well.
- **Celebrate yourselves.** Most board members are extremely humble and would prefer that the staff, students or district receive praise. As a board/superintendent team, you'll need reinforcement and motivation to keep your eyes on the prize. Your "celebration" doesn't need to be a visible public recognition. But you will need time as a board to step back, reflect on progress, and reinforce each other. As a leadership team, you'll need to depend on each other for that support. It's critical to maintaining your passion for leadership.

> "[R]ecognition will have little impact if a staff believes that recognition is presented randomly, that each person is to be honored regardless of his or her contribution to the improvement effort, or that rewards are given for factors unrelated to the goal…"
>
> **Rick DuFour, School Improvement Expert**

Connecting with the Community

7

"Educators have made the professional choice to work diligently to have an impact on schools that frequently reflect larger social and economic problems. We need the help and support of our communities to overcome the significant challenges facing our schools. We can not allow these obstacles to prevent all students from becoming competent and caring citizens in a just American society."

— Beatrice Fennimore, "The Power in Your Words,"
The School Administrator Magazine, 2001

Overview

Most schools that make dramatic improvements in student learning realize they can't do it alone. They identify appropriate ways to involve the community and parents around the improvement efforts, from clarifying community expectations, to identifying roles for community in the effort, to engaging parents in their children's education. As elected representatives and leaders in the community, the school board has a key role in ensuring that improvement efforts reflect community values for students and in building community support for needed improvement.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Engaging the community is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

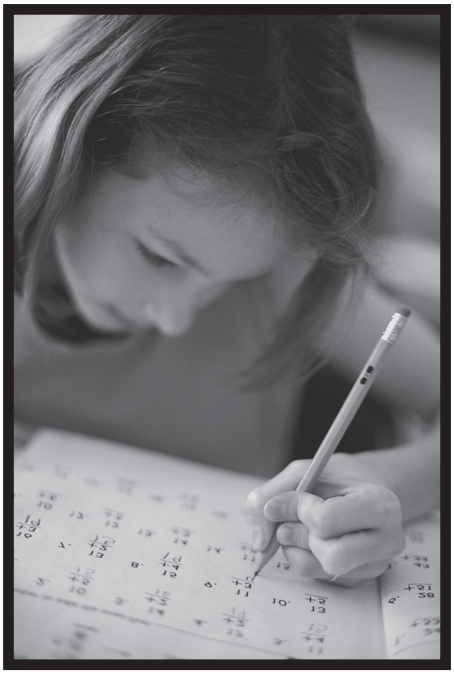
- **School districts and community are integral to each other and must work together to support equitable student learning.** To various degrees in these districts, a shared belief emerged that the district and its community must unite to deliver equitable learning. District leadership and school leadership persistently sought ways to increase participation of their communities. The specifics varied, but the board and superintendent in each district worked to communicate a vision for reform, listen for reactions, engage in conversations about the plan and then refine it. Board members and superintendents worked hard to be visible to the community, rebuild trust in and support for the schools, and gain the political capital they needed for major and lengthy changes. District leaders created alliances with various organizations and entities who could assist schools in improving instruction for all groups of students or who could help emphasize the importance of improving instruction. These alliances broadened the districts' ability to encourage and support improved classroom instruction. There were literally hundreds of examples of productive alliances at work in the great gains districts. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

- **To craft their visions, districts sought the input of educators and community members.** They convened community meetings, held focus groups and issued surveys to learn more about stakeholder goals for children. Seeking stakeholder input in a structured way was a substantial strategy for building broad ownership of the vision. The districts adopted practices to engage parents in instructional reform efforts at the outset of their reforms. In addition to bringing parents to the table in the vision development process, districts commissioned surveys to learn more about parent concerns and ideas. They sought to inform parents about reform measures through newsletters and forums. Schools included parents on leadership committees, distributed newsletters to parents and conducted homework nights that included parents, children and teachers. Much of parent engagement was left to the individual schools; most districts had not developed significant policies and practices related to parent involvement. Indeed, despite the strong rhetorical commitment to parent involvement, most districts advanced their instructional reform efforts without the robust engagement of parents. They concentrated resources and energy primarily on improving instruction and spent fewer resources engaging parents in the general reform effort. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **The board and superintendent in each district worked to communicate a vision of reform, listen for reactions, engage in conversations about their plan and then refine it.** Board members and superintendents all worked hard to be visible to the community, rebuild trust in and support for the schools, and gain the political capital they needed for major and lengthy changes. The strategies varied from district to district, but included persistently communicating key goals, along with reaching out to critics and inviting them to serve on committees charged with developing solutions. Comparison districts sometimes had clear and specific goals, but didn't involve stakeholders or sell the goals to the broader community through outreach efforts. *(Source: Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **At least from our research, gains in student achievement do not appear to hinge on more parents involved in the schools.** Parental involvement is likely a beneficial factor when parents are involved with their kids at home, working on homework or establishing a study space. As far as what to spend time and resources on at school, other things matter more than spending time getting parents to the school to volunteer and participate in committees. *(Source: Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds)*

Why Connecting with the Community Works: What the Experts Say



The studies of school districts making significant gains are somewhat mixed in this area—while community engagement appeared in most, some districts found success without much emphasis on it. There is certainly evidence that engaging families and communities can help improve student achievement. When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more, according to the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, which researched the impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement in 2002. Among the findings:

- When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school.
- When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains.
- When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections aimed at improving student achievement. Effective programs to engage families and community embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff and community members.
- When families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, studies suggest school districts make positive changes in policy, resources, personnel, school culture and educational programs.
- Parent and community involvement linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, the focus should be on improving achievement and be designed

to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills.

(Source: A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement,)

But in itself, parent and community engagement is not enough to overcome deficits in instruction within the school. Joyce Epstein and her colleagues made those points clear in their 1997 study of a family-school partnership in Baltimore. According to that study, "School, family and community partnerships can boost attendance and increase achievement slightly, but excellent classroom teaching will be needed to dramatically improve students' writing, reading, and math skills to meet the state's standards…."

Reality Check: Why Connecting with the Community is Hard

As school districts strive to focus their efforts on "aiming for the core" of improved instruction, they often do so with limited budgets and staffing. Parent and community engagement efforts can be short-changed in the bargain.

While not a panacea, parent and community engagement can maximize or derail the effort if the district's improvement focus disrupts the status quo. Ask leaders in a school district that's expanded time for professional development whether they've heard rumblings from parents about "early outs." In other districts, efforts to raise the bar in mathematics achievement to higher levels of problem solving can result in initially lower test scores on basic computation as students and staff engage in more rigorous instruction. Without community understanding of the change, school improvement efforts can die early.

Authors J. David and P. Shields conclude communities can be critical to successful school improvement. In a 2001 publication called, *When Theory Hits Reality,* they write, "Districts face an uphill battle in attempting to implement major reforms without the support of the organizations that represent educators and without the backing of parents and the business community." The researchers report the actions of various groups that pressured districts to move forward with school improvement efforts, while others have fought to slow reforms or move them in different directions.

Why Connecting with the Community Matters

Success for all children is everybody's business. Real, lasting improvements in student achievement will take the long-term commitment of schools, parents and families working together.

Jamie Vollmer, a former Iowa business leader and today a consultant on community engagement, put it this way in an article in *The School Administrator* magazine: "We want community involvement, but what we need is community permission—permission to fundamentally change our schools. No significant, lasting change can occur without this permission, and permission… is something we can get."

Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and connecting with the community

Lighthouse Study #1

Comparing Boards in High and Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving school districts*, school board members identified how they had sought out ways to connect with and listen to the community. Board members expressed pride in their community and in their efforts to involve parents. Board members could name specific ways the district was involving parents and community and all indicated a desire for more involvement. Board members expressed more value for community involvement and were more aggressive in pursuing that involvement.

In *low-achieving districts*, board members also indicated a desire for more community involvement, but were more likely to express a belief that there was not much they could do about the level of parent and community involvement. They described parents' lack of interest and education as a barrier to student learning but identified few actions being taken to improve involvement.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000

When the boards brought data showing needed improvements and well-designed plans for addressing those needs, community groups were eager to assist and support the district in moving to the next level of success.

Iowa School Boards Foundation,
Preliminary Report, 2007

Lighthouse Study #2

Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

For each Lighthouse district, connecting with the community was both a high priority and a challenge. As boards defined their approaches and engaged with their communities in a variety of ways, two themes emerged about the board's work with these groups.

The first is that the board set and held high expectations. In several Lighthouse districts, the board had to repeatedly insist that the expectation was for *all* students to learn at high levels. The boards reported a variety of conversations, with community groups and with leadership groups from within the district, where this expectation or belief was challenged. It was the boards' study of research about what is possible and their stories from other districts that achieved success for all students that helped them stay firm in their conviction and to convince others of its feasibility.

The second is the power of telling the truth to the community about the need for improvements in student learning. Especially in districts with a history of relatively strong performance (75-80 percent of all students performing at a proficient level), the boards were accustomed to bringing "good news" to community conversations. Many board members were reluctant to bring "bad news" to these conversations for fear of losing community trust and support. What they found was exactly the opposite. When the boards brought data showing needed improvements and well-designed plans for addressing those needs, community groups were eager to assist and support the district in moving to the next level of success.

In one Lighthouse district, the process included:

1. The school board/superintendent sunset their original community advisory committee and formed a new group. The board/superintendent team worked very hard to make sure it was as representative as possible.
2. The school board wrote a formal charge to the committee.
3. The board/superintendent team appointed a board member to the committee.
4. The community committee met under the facilitation of an area education agency staff member.
5. The community committee determined community initiatives for supporting the district improvement goals and provided advice to the board and superintendent.

The result was that the instructional improvement initiative in reading comprehension that the district had selected as its focus began to get reinforcement in other parts of the community. The library incorporated the concepts into children's reading events. One board member heard children using techniques from the improvement initiative in their Sunday school reading. The work infused the community as a whole and reinforced the school district's work in areas that were unexpected and welcome.

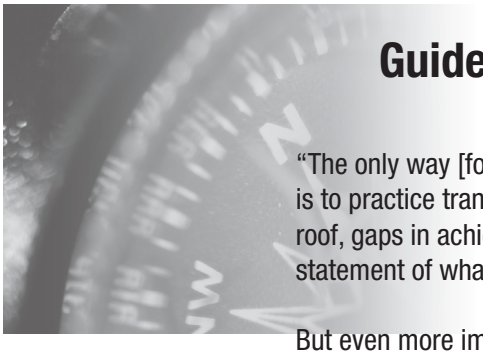
Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007

Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around engaging with parents and the community.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Setting Clear Expectations	**Strive to align district parent and community engagement around your focus area.** The research is clear that family and community engagement efforts are most successful when they directly align with improving achievement. As your district delves into the best approaches for your community, the board plays an important role in ensuring that those efforts link directly to your goal area. If your district's focused goal is to improve reading comprehension, for example, provide supports for parent involvement in reading to their children. This does not mean that the school district should abandon engaging families in school-improvement committees or stop holding open houses, family nights or sports booster clubs. Aim for a balance. But be clear that the tighter your alignment to your goal area, the greater the chances for success. **Embed the commitment to family and community engagement in policy.** Make it clear through policy that—in alignment with the research--your district takes responsibility for engaging families and the community in improving student achievement in alignment with district goals. The philosophy behind your policy should see the total school community as committed to making sure that every single student succeeds at a high level and to working together to make that happen.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Find meaningful ways to involve families and community members in planning, establishing policy and making decisions.** Parents and citizens lose interest when their participation is token. Avoid using parents and community members to merely rubberstamp decisions. Focus on creating meaningful ways to listen to the concerns and perspectives of district stakeholders. As a key advisory body to the board, your district's School Improvement Advisory Committee (required under Iowa law to involve the community) should be a key partner in the improvement effort.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Ensure that information and data about the improvement effort is made public early and often.** Ensure public accountability and reporting to the community. That public reporting of data not only builds community support for improvement, it builds pressure on the school district to change. Frame the reporting as supportive—here's where we are, here's our honest assessment of progress, and here's what we're doing to improve. **Monitor progress in increasing engagement.** In consultation with staff leaders, identify the data your board will monitor to gauge progress in parent and community engagement, and a schedule for discussing that data.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Building Collective Will	**Be the champions for the change effort in the community.** As a board, develop key messages and talking points that allow you to consistently communicate what the district is trying to improve, the specific expectations and targets, what the district is doing to reach the expectations, and how the community can help. Then, actively communicate those messages with parent and community groups to build understanding, involvement and commitment. As representatives of the community, your board should be front and center in building community support. That also means managing distractions and competing interests, so special interests don't fragment the focus.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**As a board, study the research on effective school, family and community engagement in student achievement.** Your knowledge about what works in school/family/community engagement will serve as a filter for decisions you make at the board table. During that study, spend time talking as a board about why each of you values the involvement of parents and the engagement of your community.



Guideposts for Superintendents

"The only way [for superintendents] to build trust and integrity in your leadership is to practice transparency in all school operations — warts and all. A leaking roof, gaps in achievement, misbehaving staff, etc., all need to be explained with a statement of what you are doing about them.

But even more important is the authentic engagement of community and staff to partner with you in moving forward on a number of key issues. Public engagement is hard and sometimes discouraging work. Consider it like a diet — you start slowly but after more work and sacrifice, you begin seeing the results. Public engagement follows the same course…Don't go into a session with your own solutions, trying to persuade residents to follow them. That's not public engagement.

Authentic engagement is wide open and transparent and eventually leads to much better understanding of the school district's capabilities and needs. And it begins building a culture of integrity and credibility in your leadership."

"Superintendent Success: Eight Communication Maxims That Make It Happen,"
Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents, October 2006, National School Public Relations Association

It's really common sense:

Act like an island, and you'll be all alone.

Make sure your goal is the community's goal.

Staying the Course of Improvement

8

"The processes involved in school improvement are analogous to farming. We must plant the seeds of school improvement, cultivate, nurture and care for them. We must practice patience and celebrate the unfolding of each blossom. We must believe the quality of the lives of our families, friends and neighbors depends on the success of each harvest—because it does! We must realize that one profitable crop will not be grounds for retirement. We must continually plan, monitor and model the best behaviors and practices known. This will only happen if the process is cyclical, if it becomes internalized, if it is how we do business every day."

—Rick DuFour, R. Eaker and M. Rannells,
"School Improvement and the Art of Visioning,"
Tennessee Educational Leadership, 1992.

Overview

Improvements in student learning don't happen overnight. Being successful means staying true to the vision and goals of improvement, while confronting barriers and making adjustments, and celebrating short-term wins to motivate more change. The school board plays an important role through its steady commitment to improvement and focus on results.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement show the importance of committing to a long-term focus on improvement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul, setting their courses and staying with them for years.** They also experienced remarkable stability in the leadership of the board and superintendent, allowing them to grow together in their approaches to change and to better understand the other's work. Even when superintendents departed, boards sought to sustain reforms through continued stability in leadership. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- **Districts continually sought to refine and improve their practices and thus, improve student performance.** Each district paid careful attention to ensure the work of their teachers was paying off in terms of increased student performance. They evaluated programs and discontinued those not producing results. They celebrated successes but did not rest on them. Communities and districts are complex and dynamic. Something new is always emerging. New problems sweep up everyone's attention. Leaders must always bring that back to learning as the primary business of the district. The superintendent must literally sell this and continue to sell it to the community and district staff. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

- **Rather than simply making policy at the district level and then waiting for reform to happen, district leaders committed to ensuring that the policies were implemented in the schools throughout the district.** That commitment to change involved sustained focus, new accountability systems, and a willingness to dismiss staff if necessary. Under this pressure, it became difficult for teachers and principals to treat the reforms as fleeting because they were being required to change specific classroom practices. *(Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*

- **The districts recognized the importance of sustaining multiple research-based changes over a period of years that actually have a positive effect on the daily instructional lives of students.** *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Like any organization under pressure to improve, schools crave the easy answer—the "magic bullet."** But the magic doesn't lie in the program per se. It lies in the school picking a good program inside a rigorous, data-driven process and sticking with it. When all is said and done,

what performance requires is hard, focused, purposeful work. It is focus and hard work that matter most. … Principals help schools succeed… when they stay focused on the things that truly improve schools and keep pushing ahead, no matter what the roadblocks. Beat-the-odds schools are putting in place a set of interlocking practices and policies geared toward winning the marathon. It involves a vital cycle of instruction, assessment and intervention, followed by more of the same. *(Source: Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds...and Others Don't)*

- **The road to school improvement has not been easy and the staff at the high-impact schools saw their journey as ongoing.** Teachers, administrators and counselors talked about the effort school improvement requires and the challenges they have had to confront along the way. They talked about the hours teachers spend with students, both before and after school; the work necessary to align their curriculum and instructional timelines; and in some instances, the process of building trust between faculty and administrators. In each case, they responded to barriers and confronted challenges. *(Source: Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools)*

"When all is said and done, what performance requires is hard, focused, purposeful work. It is focus and hard work that matter most. … Beat-the-odds schools are putting in place a set of interlocking practices and policies geared toward winning the marathon. It involves a vital cycle of instruction, assessment and intervention, followed by more of the same."

Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds

Why Staying the Course Works: What the Experts Say

According to *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research*, improved districts sustain engagement in educational reform over time; district commitment to improvement efforts helps staff internalize the changes. Setting specific targets, establishing deadlines, and holding schools accountable for all students helped districts take reforms seriously and avoid a "this too shall pass" attitude. District stability helps schools "stay the course" of school improvement, to persevere and persist. Change is seen as a long-term, multi-stage process to attain high standards for all students.

"Schools have demonstrated time and again that it is much easier to initiate change than to sustain it to fruition."

Rick DuFour, School Improvement Expert

Rick DuFour in *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, notes, "Schools have demonstrated time and again that it is much easier to initiate change than to sustain it to fruition." Schools need a critical mass of support and implementation to maintain improvement. To sustain improvements, districts must focus on several things, including:

- **Communication:** Effective communication can help sustain the effort but require constant repetition. Mission, vision, values and goals must be continually referenced in the day-to-day workings of the school.
- **Collaboration:** Creating a collaborative environment has been called the single most important factor in sustaining efforts to create professional learning communities.
- **Culture:** Identifying and shaping shared values, reflecting and talking about the work of school improvement, recognizing success and other approaches help to ingrain changes in the way school districts do business.
- **Structures:** Policy, procedures, rules and formal relationships must also be put in place to support the change.
- **Persistence:** Approaching improvement as a process of "perpetual renewal" that calls on each member of the faculty to regard the continual search for better ways of fulfilling the school's mission and responding to change as integral parts of their daily responsibilities.

Reality Check: Why Staying the Course is Hard

Changing the school system in a way that results in increased student learning takes both intense effort and a focus on embedding the change.

"Schools have demonstrated time and again that it is much easier to initiate change than to sustain it to fruition," says DuFour. "Until changes become so entrenched that they represent part of 'the way we do things around here,' they are extremely fragile and subject to regression.

Why Staying the Course Matters

As staff members see their ability to accomplish results for students, it's much easier to set increasingly ambitious goals, much like the "flywheel concept" in the book, *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins. "Those who launch revolutions, dramatic change programs, and wrenching restructurings will almost certainly fail to make the leap from good to great. No matter how dramatic the end result, the good-to-great transformations never happened in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no miracle moment. Rather, the process resembled relentlessly pushing a giant heavy flywheel in one direction, turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough and beyond."

Learning from the
Iowa Lighthouse Research:
School Boards and staying the course

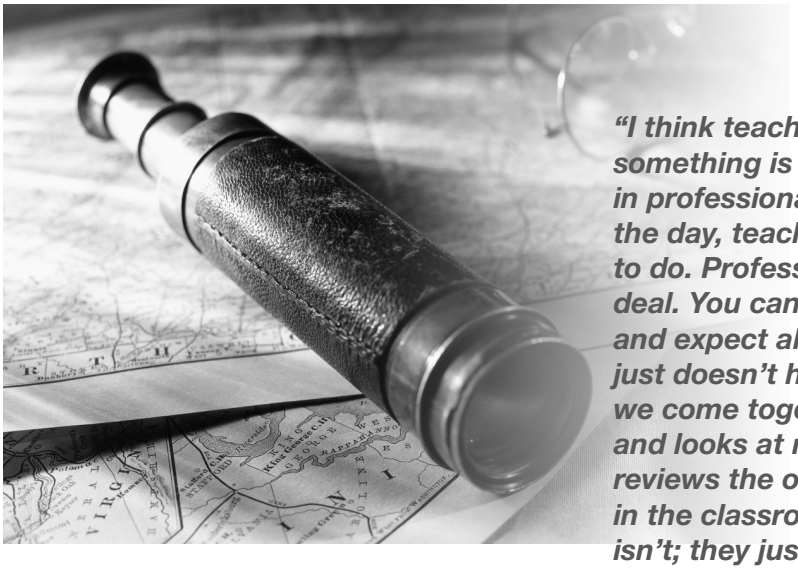
Lighthouse Study #1

Comparing Boards in High and Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving school districts*, board members talked about the importance of school improvement as part of the culture of their school district. They understood the importance of sticking with programs that were working and were able to talk about why those programs were making a difference. Board members often expressed the attitude that "we're not there yet" and the importance of working on what works. They also expressed that while there was no easy solution, the effort was worth it because of the difference they were seeing for teachers and for children.

In *low-achieving districts*, hopelessness and helplessness was the prevailing culture among board members and district staff. As one board member said, "We tried—and it didn't work. It was a disaster." Previous difficulties with school improvement colored attitudes toward any future possibilities.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000



"I think teachers will go along if they see and feel that something is real important. If you switch back and forth in professional development, whatever is the hot topic of the day, teachers never get the focus on what we're trying to do. Professional development needs to be a long-range deal. You can't spend a day learning something new and expect all the teachers to get behind it and use it. It just doesn't happen that fast. But continually, each time we come together, the teaching staff comes together, and looks at new strategies for reading comprehension, reviews the old strategies, talks about what they're using in the classroom, talks about what's working and what isn't; they just know when they come this is what the focus is and this is what we need to be thinking about. So you don't have one thinking about the past one on computers and how that worked and one thinking about what kind of motivational speaker we're going to have. Everybody is coming in focused on the same thing. Just knowing that that's what it's going to be about brings them in with the attitude that we're going to build on what we've learned in the past. It's going to add to our skill as a teacher and on our skill on teaching reading comprehension. The guesswork isn't there anymore."

Board Member, Iowa Lighthouse Study #2

Lighthouse Study #2

Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

Boards across the Iowa Lighthouse project recognized that their improvement work and leadership were an ongoing commitment, not a one-time or even annual process. Rather their leadership for improvement needed to be at the heart of their behavior as a board in order to consistently send the message that this is what the district is about. Sometimes, this was reflected in board decision making about other initiatives or efforts. For example, one school board turned down a technology grant when they realized that it would take 50 percent of the district's professional development time and focus it in a direction other than improving reading comprehension which the board, superintendent and district leadership team had committed to earlier that year. The board/superintendent team recognized this well-intentioned technology grant would compete for time that was already barely adequate to support the teachers in implementing reading comprehension strategies they were learning in professional development.

Sometimes, staying the course required board action to remind others in the system of what the district was focused on and why. For example, during year two of the project in one district, the board and administrative team realized that the sense of urgency related to the goal area of improving reading comprehension for all students was diminishing. Staff study team logs indicated that instructional strategies were not being implemented as strongly as the first year, and some teachers commented that reading comprehension was not important to their content area. In an effort to re-energize the teachers and demonstrate to them why the improvement effort was important, a videotape of 8th grade students from the district was produced to be used with the staff during a professional development day. Teachers were provided examples of ninth grade text that students would encounter in their content areas and asked how successfully a proficient reader versus a struggling reader would interact with the text. A number of teachers wept following the viewing of the videotapes, and others started asking questions about what they needed to do to make sure students succeeded in meeting the goal.

Staying the course involved anticipating future changes in leadership and personnel and ensuring that those joining the district understood and shared the commitment to improvement in the focus area. For example, the board in one of the Lighthouse districts recognized that new board members would be joining the board and seven new teachers would be joining the teaching staff at the start of year four of the project. The new board members received an orientation on the district's focus and commitment, the board's role in developing and leading it, and the district structures and processes being used to carry that commitment forward. The board/superintendent team required new professional staff to go through a series of two-hour workshops that were focused on the work of the Lighthouse project – instructional strategies, data study, and collaborative study teams – and agreed to provide a stipend to the new teachers for their learning time.

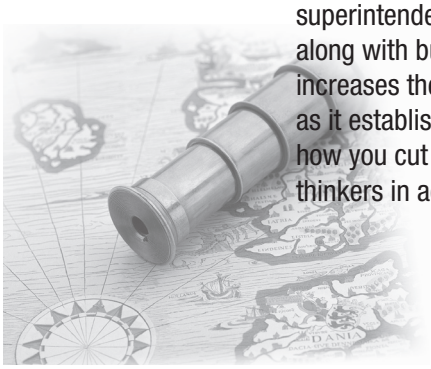
Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around staying the course of improvement.

Roles of the Board	*Guideposts*
Setting Clear Expectations	**Continue to sell the vision.** Communicate, communicate, communicate—with clarity and consistency—why improvement matters for students, the reasons for focusing your energy and effort on improving teaching in the focus area, and the benefits in store for students and the school district when you are successful. Many change efforts fail because leaders underestimate the need to keep that conversation front and center. Without it, focus fades. The board's continued communication of the expectations, the desired outcomes, what's at stake for students, and what's possible to expect, are key to sustaining momentum for change.
Creating Conditions for Success	**Back it with action.** It's imperative that the board show its commitment to your improvement focus not just through words, but through actions. If the board sets expectations or goals for improvement, but doesn't back it with the resources and supports needed for success, it weakens commitment. Rick DuFour, in *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, frames it well: "Often leaders verbally express one set of values, but then pay attention to other things as they routinely do their jobs. [Leaders] must examine what they are being attentive to: what do they plan for, what do they monitor, what questions do they ask and investigate, what do they model, what do they celebrate, what are they willing to confront, and how do they allocate their time?" School boards must sustain their own focus on improvement in order to sustain the district's focus on improvement. And, you must have the will to prioritize the resources needed for the staff to be successful. **Protect the effort from distraction.** After an initial push of enthusiasm and energy, it's easy to let up and allow the many competing demands on schools—and needs of students—to start assuming more and more time and energy. "We've focused on that area long enough! We need to move on!" is a common refrain. But until you're seeing results in achievement, you can't declare victory.
Holding the System Accountable to Expectations	**Make adjustments and learn from experience.** Despite careful preparation, things don't always go according to plan. Take stock and adjust plans and schedules along the way. While maintaining your commitment to accomplishing improvement goals, be willing to take corrective action when needed. The data your board monitors during the improvement process is an important guide. If the data doesn't show results you expected, be willing to problem solve, to adjust and to realign. While adjusting processes and programs, ensure that you stay true to your focus on accomplishing the goal.

Roles of the Board	Guideposts
Building Collective Will	**Pledge to stay the course of improvement.** Principals and teachers have watched countless improvement efforts come and go. As a result, many new efforts are greeted with a "this too shall pass" attitude. To get beyond that, schools and teachers need to hear from the superintendent and school board that a focus on improvement is here to stay. **Celebrate success and progress.** Make a conscious effort to identify and celebrate short-term wins and progress. Even if you don't see results in achievement data early on, there will be many opportunities along the way to recognize staff for their leadership work, to salute teachers for completing professional development training, to encourage and reinforce people in the district who've shown their commitment. This recognition and reinforcement is key to motivating people around the hard work of improvement. **Build leadership in the community.** A board's continuing focus on an improvement effort is only as lasting as the next election. Citizens have a right to run for the school board; communities have a right to elect those who will represent their views and values. Without being manipulative, your board has a legitimate role in ensuring that community leaders are supportive of the district's focus and are ready to step forward to run in future school board elections. The wider the support and understanding within your community, the greater the chances of continuity in commitment at the board table—no matter who the individuals seated there are.
Learning Together as a Board Team	**Take time for reflection and to renew your commitment as a board.** A key part of staying the course is time for reflection and renewal for yourselves as a board/superintendent team. Step back and evaluate your board's work as a leadership team: Where have your strengths been? What has been difficult for the board/superintendent team? Have you allocated adequate time to monitoring and discussing improvement efforts and results? What wins can you celebrate? What additional learning can help you overcome challenges or barriers? Like any living thing, a board striving to "live the mission of improvement" takes constant care and feeding.

Guideposts for Superintendents



"The big plan is sustainability, and what keeps sustainable superintendents going is the combination of moral purpose along with building leadership in others. That combination increases the capacity of the whole system to show progress as it establishes the conditions for going further… No matter how you cut it we need superintendents who are system thinkers in action."

Michael Fullan, "Resiliency and Sustainability," The School Administrator, February 2005

It's really common sense:

Nothing sticks until it becomes 'the way we do things around here.'

Act with lasting commitment—stay the course.

THE POWER OF ALIGNMENT

"Never a checklist, always complexity. There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation. It involves the hard, day-to-day work of reculturing."

--Michael Fullan, "The Change Leader," ***Educational Leadership***, May 2002

Although discussed separately in this book, these ideas and practices are interdependent. One practice cannot work as well alone as it can in combination with others.

As examples: You can't expect to attain high student achievement goals without putting in place structures to improve instruction. The use of data touches not just accountability but nearly all the other areas, from setting clear goals, to determining areas where instruction can be improved, to enhancing collaboration around academic goals of the district. And so on.

It's really common sense:

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Take a big view—focus on alignment.

High expectations, instruction, goals, professional development, accountability, leadership, community engagement all have to fit together, along with many things not directly mentioned in this book, such as your relationship with the teachers union, budgeting and financial issues, personnel decisions, state and federal requirements, and others. Everything is—and must be—connected and aligned.

Reaching success means making the drive to accomplish results a filter for everything you do—at the board table and throughout the district, as you align all parts of the system around meeting the learning needs of students.

Conclusion

The Board/Superintendent Team—Leading and Learning Together

"It has been said that if you want to change the world, start by looking in the mirror. Given the strong correlation that we have found between leadership and student achievement, the same notion may apply to leaders who want to change their schools."

—Tim Waters, Robert Marzano and Brian McNulty,
"Leadership that Sparks Learning," ***Educational Leadership***,
April 2004

For districts to make the dramatic changes necessary to improve achievement, educators must confront a brutal reality: The system of education is not operating in a way that is capable of meeting the needs of students today. Achieving meaningful, lasting improvements in student achievement requires substantial changes in the practice of instruction, the nature of professional development, the ability of the system to measure student performance, and the isolation and fragmentation of the people in the system.

School boards and superintendents have some hard truths to confront, as well. School boards must step up to a stronger level of learning, transform their approach to board policy, and create consistent and focused leadership. And boards and superintendents must be able to see—and support—each other as leaders. IASB's programming and services are evolving in response.

Stepping Up to a Stronger Level of Learning

The Lighthouse Research is clear that board learning matters:

- Board/superintendent teams in high-achieving districts approach their work as a collaborative learning experience: "In high-achieving districts, school board members mentioned goal-setting exercises in which the board and superintendent learned together and solved problems together. Board members talked about receiving information from many sources, including the superintendent and other sources inside and outside the district. Information was received by all board members and shared at the board table. Board members could usually be very clear about their decision-making process in terms of study, learning, reading, listening, receiving data, questioning, discussing and then deciding and evaluating." *(Iowa Lighthouse Study #1: High/Low)*

- As they engaged in leading their district's school improvement efforts, the boards found their understanding and learning together was critical to building the common bond and cohesiveness they needed to lead as a team. *(Iowa Lighthouse Study #2: Action Research with Five Board/ Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey')*

Some hard truths for boards today:

- Four of 10 Iowa school board members attended no formal board learning offering through IASB in 2006-07. (Certainly, IASB workshops and events are not the only learning experiences available to boards. However, a doctoral analysis done by a staff member from the Iowa School Boards Foundation does correlate high participation in IASB training with higher district-level student achievement.) Superintendents and board leaders consistently lament that members of their school boards are too busy to attend workshops. "I just wish I could get my board here, but they're not interested," is a common refrain.

- Of additional concern: When only one or two board members have the deeper knowledge about school improvement issues, it can become a "wedge of expertise" that breaks down trust and teamwork on a board.

- Anecdotal evidence indicates board meetings are often not a learning experience. While more and more boards are building work sessions and retreats into their schedules to accommodate deeper discussions and board learning, others approach their work as if short meetings are their ultimate purpose. "We're in and out in 30 minutes each month," proclaimed one board president. At the other end of the spectrum: Long, tedious meetings fraught with angry debate over trivial issues.

  The practical reality is that school board members are dedicated but busy

people. Most school board members have full-time jobs; many are active in other volunteer or leadership roles in their communities; and three of four are at the stage of life where they have school-aged children. The time they give to board service is precious. But the evidence is clear that improving student achievement will require school boards to commit themselves to learning to be effective leaders around the issues of school improvement.

School boards must commit to learning together as a board team. Learning together, coupled with deep conversations about implications of that learning for your district, is critical to building a shared focus strong enough to maintain your commitment to leading long-term improvement efforts. The job of learning for a board is not to "earn a degree in education." The board's learning is around your role in the context of school improvement. It's also about gaining broader understanding and background, networking with other boards and learning from their successes and experiences.

Evolving Supports from IASB:
IASB will continue to offer high-quality workshops and events like the annual convention and regional ABLE workshops, which many board members find useful and highly relevant as learning and as networking experiences. IASB is developing ongoing, regional training for whole boards. You'll also see more self-study and technology tools emerging to assist boards in learning at the board table in efficient and practical ways.

Transforming the Approach to Board Policy

This book makes several mentions of policy as a way to frame your expectations and set direction for the district. The Lighthouse studies and other studies of high-performing districts identify the power of board policy as a factor in effective school improvement:

- "In official policy documents, the clear focus in high-impact schools is on academics. Average-impact schools focus on rules." *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*
  "Successful boards engaged in activities that provided them with opportunities to articulate and discuss their values and beliefs." (Research study by LaRocque and Coleman)

The hard truth: In the practice of boardsmanship today, the "power of policy" is often diluted or nonexistent. Boards tend to spend more time focused on "management" policies rather than "leadership" policies. "Management" policies address the internal operations of the school district such as employee records or use of school facilities. "Leadership" policies move the district forward in its mission to improve student achievement. While management policies are important for internal operations and compliance with state and federal law, they rarely move the mission of the district. Too often, policy documents are created in spirit but never achieve the potential of impacting actions, of moving people to "live the mission."

School boards must commit to thoughtful, meaningful policy development and implementation. Policy is the board's lasting and formal voice. In school improvement, policy is a way to "push" momentum for change and to embed expectations in the culture of the system. If the board is to have an impact, school boards must make the time to talk together about values and vision, to define their beliefs and expectations, to frame them in leadership policy, and to monitor the implementation of that policy.

Supports from IASB: Working with Lighthouse boards—in the pilot sites and now, in our ongoing development efforts—IASB is working to revitalize the approach to board policy. While acknowledging the need for a broader set of management policies in compliance with state and federal laws, boards today are advised to identify, shape and monitor a smaller set of instructional improvement policies as the drivers of the system. These policies capture the vision and values of change, define the "ends" of improvement, and are intended to receive tight support and monitoring from the board. A new IASB policy service will help boards develop and work with those leadership policies.

Strengthening the Board/Superintendent Relationship

Transforming the culture and practices of schools takes sustained effort over time. It takes clarity on priorities and focus. It takes leaders who are able to "practice what they preach" in collaboration and willingness to learn new skills. It takes the political will to make tough decisions. It takes boards and superintendents who can build lasting, trusting, team relationships around what matters: Student learning.

The research is clear that this relationship matters:

- "Board members worked as a team. They modeled for the entire district a commitment to work together for the benefit of the students. They often described how they might set aside their personal agendas in the interest of helping the board establish policies that were likely to promote equitable and excellent learning." *(Source: Dana Study)*

- "Simply getting along was not the goal; leaders determined that good relationships held little value if they did not create positive change for children… Boards were policy and accountability driven. They held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of the schools." *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*

- The willingness of the board and superintendent to let each other lead from their role perspective and their overall confidence in each other to lead has been critical to work in all Iowa Lighthouse districts. There were points in the project where either the board or the superintendent could have pulled back

and reverted to typical board/superintendent roles, but in general, this has not occurred. Instead, boards and superintendents in the Lighthouse districts have engaged in ongoing conversations about their beliefs and expectations about student achievement in the district, continuously working to build and maintain their clarity about necessary improvements and what is being done to address them.

This mutual support and respect did not develop overnight. In all Lighthouse districts, the board and superintendent committed to adding a monthly work session, in addition to the regular board meeting. The purpose of the work session is to engage in data study and conversation about student learning, improvement efforts and how to continue driving these efforts and improvements throughout the district. Through these conversations, the boards and superintendents have grown interdependent in their leadership of the districts for improved student learning. *(Source: Iowa Lighthouse Study #2)*

There are many hard truths in this area—often evident just by reading a newspaper:

- Boards fragmented by individual agendas or narrow interests.
- Superintendents who are reluctant to share information with boards or who deter board members from asking hard questions about instructional issues.
- Board members who overstep their role and attempt to micromanage.
- Board/superintendent teams with new agendas annually as elections provide a sea-change in leadership and direction for the district.

School boards and superintendents must commit to forging effective relationships as a leadership team. Stephen Covey writes in the preface to his son's book, *The Speed of Trust,* "Low trust slows everything—every decision, every communication and every relationship. Trust produces speed. Trust is the aquifer—the huge water pool under the earth that feeds all of the subsurface wells; the wells of innovation, complementary teams, collaboration, empowerment, initiatives." Boards and superintendents must be partners in a trusting relationship that challenges and supports each team member to fulfill his or her leadership role.

Supports from IASB: IASB, in partnership with School Administrators of Iowa, is shaping supports to help boards and superintendents create relationships focused around effective leadership. Goal-setting and evaluation are key in shaping those relationships, along with understanding the leadership role and potential of each part of the team.

It's really common sense:

You can't lead what you don't know.

Lead as a learning team.

The Common Sense of Leadership for Student Learning

You get what you expect.
Act on the belief that all children can learn.

**If you want to improve,
focus on what matters most.**
Teaching causes learning, so aim for instruction.

You can't do everything at once.
Jumpstart success with a clear, measurable, focused goal.

**It takes time and effort
to become an expert at anything.**
Add to teachers' toolbox through professional development.

What gets measured gets done.
Use data to drive improvement.

**It takes lots of people pulling together
to make big things happen.**
Develop leadership around the goals throughout the district.

Act like an island, and you'll be all alone.
Make sure your goal is the community's goal.

**Nothing sticks until it becomes
'the way we do things around here.'**
Act with lasting commitment—stay the course.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
Take a big view—focus on alignment.

You can't lead what you don't know.
Lead as a learning team.

CASE STUDIES:

Boards on the Journey

The board/superintendent teams profiled in these case studies are quick to tell you three things.

First, they are not finished yet. Their districts are seeing gains in achievement, but more is needed. Each has taken a slightly different path and has been successful in some areas with more attention needed to others. But they are starting to see shifts in thinking, culture and capacity within their districts—and within themselves as a team. They offer their stories not for recognition, but in support of learning from each other.

Second, they are quick to credit the work of their teachers, administrators and other staff. Certainly, this comes from a sense of humility. But it's also an acknowledgement of a core principle in this book: Quality instruction matters.

Third, the work can be challenging, but it's worth the effort. As one said, "The first three to four years I was on the board, I really questioned whether it was worthwhile. We sat around and we paid bills and we talked about the good things we were doing. But it wasn't until we took a hard look at ourselves and wondered whether or not we were really educating our students that I got excited about being on the school board. Now we come to the board and we talk about student achievement. We see progress being made. It makes volunteering on the board much, much more worthwhile than it used to be."

Sioux Center School Board, Iowa

Enrollment: 960

Sioux Center board president Roger Kempers had seen reports at the board table showing the district’s focus on improving reading skills was paying off.

At virtually every grade level, test scores had been increasing due to a focused reading initiative that affected every classroom in the rural northwest Iowa community. With a track record of solid performance to start with, the board and staff leaders had committed to raising the bar even further. “We decided we couldn’t be satisfied if most of our students were learning to read pretty well. We don’t want to be the ones to look a child in the eyes and say that it’s okay if you don’t succeed. We believe all children can learn.”

Then came a “Yes!” moment that every school board member cherishes. “I teach 7th graders in our church an overview of the Old Testament so there is a lot of reading involved,” said Kempers. “I asked the kids how they wanted to work. They started clicking off these reading strategies that I know the teachers had been working on, because we’d talked about them at the board table. That was probably the best evidence I’ve had that what’s going on in the classroom is carrying on to the kids. The real payoff to a board is being part of an improvement in kids’ education.”

There have been several “Yes!” moments in Sioux Center—moments earned through persistence and focused work to improve instruction. But it started with a shift in thinking.

How It Happened

Complete with Dutch bakeries, a Victorian bed-and-breakfast, and welcoming waves around town, on most days Sioux Center, Iowa, looks as if the town has just been scrubbed clean. “People seem happy to live here,” explains board member Bruce Roetman. “It’s a community that kind of molds itself together. We care a lot about education, we care about family values, we care about quality of life issues. I’d say that in the history of our school, we haven’t done a lot of research or even talked about what our expectations are for our kids. We just assumed that we had high expectations and that kids were getting everything they need.”

As a pilot site in the Lighthouse Project, the board/superintendent team studied data and research around some basic questions: How are our students doing? What’s possible to expect in student performance? What’s it like for struggling students, and what’s at stake for their future? What would it take to improve achievement?

In the course of that learning, a shift in thinking occurred: While board members maintained their pride in a good school district, they came to an agreement: If more is possible for our students, why wouldn’t we want it? If even some students aren’t succeeding, can we be satisfied?

“The more we talked about it, the more we realized there’s not a single kid that we’re willing to identify that we’re willing to let fail. People say it’s not possible to get 100 percent success. We respond, do you want to pick the kids that we’re going to allow to fall through the system? They’re not willing to do that. The more you think about a concept like that, that every child is as valuable as the next—and no matter what their background is, or what their gifts are, then people realize that this is an attainable goal,” said Roetman.

That shift in thinking—along with additional board learning and discussion about what it takes to improve instruction—led the board and superintendent Pat O'Donnell to implement several changes districtwide:

- Creating a districtwide focus on improving reading comprehension. "Right now we're focusing on the reading because in reviewing the data we realized that reading and comprehension skills of our students were less than desirable. It's the basis of all learning, so we've set the expectation that all students—every single student—will read at or above grade level," said Roetman.

- Identifying several strategies that all teachers are expected to incorporate into their teaching. These strategies were selected by a teacher/administrator leadership team based on research on effective practices for improving reading comprehension. Professional development time is focused on learning and mastering those strategies. For example, during one half-day set aside for professional development, teachers reviewed videotapes of teachers modeling those strategies and examined student test data to determine next steps. Superintendent Pat O'Donnell describes professional development today as a far cry from what teachers used to experience. "Our PD is not someone standing up and presenting to teachers. It's time for teachers to get down to the nuts and bolts," he said. That commitment to professional development also required board support for changes to the school calendar and other supports.

Initially there was "pushback" from some teachers about a districtwide focus and instructional strategies. "There were a few staff members who didn't want to change, who thought we were doing fine the way it was. As we progressed through the initiative, I think that the staff and the administration who really believed in it and who were just so excited about it overcame that. A lot of people came on board because of that. That barrier has been overcome through the enthusiasm of those who really care," said Roetman. He noted three keys he felt were crucial to building that commitment:

- **Policy:** The board put its expectations in writing. "The way the board can have an impact is to set policy or prepare something close to policy that says this is what we expect for the students in this district, this is what this district is about. It sends a consistent message throughout the district," said Roetman. "It wasn't until we took that leap—a tough meeting when we sat down and said now we are actually going write policies for professional development, which scared us half to death because we didn't know what kind of backlash there was going to be. Once we did that, it was like another level in the whole process. The teachers knew what was expected of them and then they could go for it."

- **Consistency of support:** "I think the key is that we constantly communicate to the staff that we care as much about what they're doing as they do. We want to do everything possible to support them. We try to put as many dollars and resources as we can to help them do the work and frequently tell them how important their work is to the students and community," he said.

- **Engagement:** While the board was firm about a districtwide focus on reading comprehension and selected instructional strategies in professional development, teachers were charged with deciding the specifics in alignment with that focus. "It wasn't until our principals gave their teachers the charge to come up with their own plan that things really started to happen. It's amazing what they came up with…. they found ways to include (reading) and show kids how important it is, that we want them to become excellent readers."

A Teacher's Perspective

For teachers, a districtwide professional development effort around a specific academic area such as reading comprehension was a 180 degree change. "This initiative is completely different than anything we've experienced in the past," said Melanie Cleveringa, who teaches language arts. "The professional development we've experienced in the past we called 'fly-bys.' Someone comes in for a day, teaches us something great, and you can take it or leave it. The expectations aren't followed through on; there's no diagnostic check-up; there's nobody helping you; there's no coaching."

"We've been at this for three years and in that time we have seen commitment from the school board, administration, and teachers. There's accountability because we have to show what we're doing. It makes sense to be thinking about it constantly. We can help each other, we can support each other. We can talk about it in the lounge, the hallway, and share ideas. We can say what worked, what didn't work and know that everybody is on the same page. We have the time to practice the strategies in front of our peers and get feedback so you go into the classroom more confident, where the rubber hits the road in front of students."

Persistence Pays

Sioux Center leaders acknowledge that real progress took years, not months: High, challenging expectations, with the supports of professional development, over several years.

But the "Yes!" moments are worth the effort.

Wall Lake View Auburn Community School Board, Iowa

Enrollment: 545

A "rude awakening" served as the catalyst that sparked the school board, staff and superintendent in Wall Lake View Auburn to make tremendous strides in student achievement, but it was shared leadership and a common mission that continue to make marked differences in student achievement in the district.

In 2002, the district received a letter from the state saying that due to their low student achievement and high poverty rates for K-3 students, they were eligible to participate in the state's "Reading First" program. With that eligibility came the opportunity for grant money that would funnel resources into the highest areas of need and provide support for quality professional development to strengthen the effectiveness of instruction.

Wall Lake View Auburn superintendent Barb Kruthoff explained, "It was certainly a rude awakening to get that letter, but it was a wake-up to the board and to the staff that things aren't going so well here. Once we came up for air regarding our pride, we looked at what we'd have the opportunity to do."

Kruthoff took the letter and accompanying data to her board in one hand, and a strategy to improve the low achievement results in the other, a strategy that included more than 100 hours of professional development time each year for staff to improve reading instruction. Her broad-based approach centered around a shared leadership strategy that focused on improving teaching and learning in the district at all levels. That approach, Kruthoff believes, is why the board embraced the plan.

"They were anxious to know what to do to raise student achievement. Board members serve because they want good things to happen for students and they need that information to make decisions. That is my role," Kruthoff said.

Wall View Lake Auburn board president Chuck Brotherton agrees. "[Kruthoff] is one of the hardest working people I've known. She brought all the data and materials to us, presented us with facts and she didn't soft-pedal any of this for us. She said, 'We can correct this.' She took hold of it and offered us a solution."

How It Happened

How did the Wall Lake View Auburn school district accomplish this? In this case, it started with strong relationships between the board and superintendent, focused on improving student learning. Other characteristics included:

1. **Shared leadership focused on their mission.** The board's commitment and confidence in making significant gains in student reading abilities came about because their superintendent engaged them in leadership and in the study of their data. The superintendent presented data that indicated a strong need for change, as well as possible strategies and solutions for bringing about that change.

The board's full understanding of the problems within the district brought about a clear picture of what must happen to improve student learning, a strong focus that permeated the board's work and soon caught on throughout the district.

2. **Communication of a clear expectation within the district and community.** The Wall Lake View Auburn school board admitted that there was some initial reluctance in accepting there was low achievement within the district. Staff members were leery of changing instructional practices and community members were not aware of the low achievement levels the state had identified. However, the board members were determined to project their commitment with a positive attitude to their staff and to the community. That gave them a credible voice with which they communicated the clear expectations to guide their district toward improvement. They identified what they expected of the staff, and how they would measure their results. Those expectations put in place the framework that would slowly convince the community and the staff alike that board members were committed to working on district goals together. Later, once the board had data showing that these efforts were indeed working, staff and public support grew.

3. **Establishment of conditions that support teachers and facilitate student success.** As the board made a firm and public commitment to improve student achievement, they knew they also needed to support the strategies needed to do so. The superintendent's credibility and reputation helped the staff to embrace the strategies, while the board's investment of time, effort and funding further reinforced those measures. Also at this time, the administration established leadership teams that would focus on how professional development would be used to improve student achievement and work interactively with the staff to share the instructional leadership capacity.

4. **Continuous learning at all levels, from teachers to board members, aligned the focus about what it takes to strengthen student achievement.** Wall Lake View Auburn's large-scale improvement plan began with the administration learning about the professional development efforts and gradually moved toward implementing those same strategies with staff members. Teachers would learn to alter their instructional practices based on 300 hours of paid professional development time over a three-year span. As a result of their dedication to increase student achievement, teachers made a commitment to use the different teaching strategies. Similarly, a tenet in successful shared leadership relies upon the theory that leaders must model the learning they expect of others. So, it was equally important for principals, administrators, the superintendent and the school board to engage in learning what it takes to help more students succeed at higher levels. The board was simultaneously equipping itself with the knowledge and skills needed to lead and connect their work to district goals.

The result was a community of professional learners who had opportunities to collaborate and share ideas and strategies, and to ensure all levels of leadership understood and supported the initiatives to improve these strategies.

5. **Monitored progress of improvement goals.** The board, superintendent and administration consistently reviewed both implementation and achievement data to monitor the district's progress on their goals. As the results started showing signs of improvement based on the Reading First and expanded efforts, support on all levels became self-sustaining: the teachers saw their efforts were worthwhile, the community began to realize the importance for the professional development days, and the board and administration had hard evidence to prove the district's efforts were improving student reading.

As a result of their efforts, and eventual expansion of their original strategy to encompass student achievement for grades K-8, their accomplishments led the Department of Education to identify them as one of 14 "Successful Schools" for increasing student proficiency on reading assessments, and as one of the top five "Reading First" districts making "Greatest Gains" in the 2005-2006 year.

Note: Wall Lake View Auburn is now sharing with Sac Community, forming the East Sac County Schools.

Wake County Board of Education, Raleigh, North Carolina

Adapted with permission from a paper by Karen E. Banks, presented to the American Educational Research Association, 2004

Enrollment: 133,700

In 1998, the Wake County Board of Education, along with their superintendent and his administrative cabinet, held a goal-setting retreat. In the early 1990s, the district had tried goal setting, establishing eight new goals. The eight goals quickly grew to eleven goals, however, when some constituencies complained their concerns were insufficiently addressed. For example, a health advisory committee complained that health and physical fitness were ignored. Soon, a health and fitness goal was added. Having 11 goals was remarkably like having no goals—no organization can focus on 11 things simultaneously.

By the time of their 1998 retreat, school board members and the administration were older and wiser. They worked hard to narrow their focus. Various types of data were shared that showed a dropout rate among high school students of 4.4 percent annually. Achievement test scores at grades 3-8 showed that more than 20 percent of the students were scoring below the state's standard for grade level performance, although this was better performance than in other large North Carolina districts. SAT scores had climbed to 1052, which was 35 points above the national average, but the racial gaps were still quite large on all of these measures.

After much soul-searching, the board and administration decided that any new goal(s) should focus on the earlier grade levels, because if students could reach high school already achieving on grade level, high school achievement and dropout rates should also improve as a direct consequence of students being better prepared. Studying the performance data, the lowest achievement test scores in the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) at that time were consistently found at grade 3. That was the first grade level in which students took a standardized test, and also reflected past practices in WCPSS of focusing on developmental—rather than academic skills—at grades K-2. Research indicated the importance of students being able to read in the primary grades in order to succeed in later grades. The other concern was about scores for 8th grade students, which represented the "exit" grade level for middle school students. If students leaving 8th grade were not prepared, their chances of succeeding in high school were poor.

The board and administration finally decided to set a single, tightly focused goal: By 2003, 95 percent of students tested would score at or above grade level in reading and mathematics. The goal would be benchmarked at grades 3 and 8, although it was obvious that a K-8 effort was going to be needed. It is likely that no one present in the room that day realized the tremendous galvanizing impact of such a simple, inspiring and highly challenging goal.

"People Thought We Were Crazy"

When the board of education first adopted "Goal 2003" in 1998, there were criticisms that expectations were too high. There were concerns that teachers would not support the goal because it seemed unrealistic and concerns that high achieving students would be shortchanged. A backlash from affluent parents of students who were already successful in school was a real possibility and there were fears that the community would not provide the time and resources that were going to be needed to boost student achievement.

But even amidst those concerns, by 2003 WCPSS had raised the percentage of students in grades 3-8 scoring at or above grade level to 91.3 percent, even while large numbers of special education students were added to the results for the first time. Racial gaps were narrowing.

How It Happened

How did WCPSS accomplish this? Obviously, it took a great deal of hard work, beginning with the teachers, students and principals. But there were many other factors, as well.

1. The 95 percent goal, was a stretch goal but not impossible. The distinction turned out to be important. Why not choose 100 percent? District testing staff pointed out that a target of 100 percent is never realistic when you are working with large groups of students. Had WCPSS chosen a goal of 100 percent instead of 95 percent, most people would have shrugged it off. "Oh, yeah, there are hundreds of districts with that goal." Folks in the trenches know that sometimes students have a bad day when taking a test, or that special education students may take a few years longer to master skills and content than other students, and that a 100 percent passing rate would have been impossible for those reasons alone. The 95 percent goal took those concerns into account.

2. WCPSS had a single goal. Having a single goal made it clear to everyone and eventually galvanized the school system, as well as much of the community. Virtually every decision at the administrative level and many decisions at the individual school and board of education level were filtered through the goal. "How should we approach this decision if we want to ensure support of the 95 percent goal?" "Band uniforms can wait, we need after-school tutors."

3. Resources were realigned and reallocated. This reallocation took time and could not be accomplished in the first year, so a corollary was that WCPSS took a long-term view. A five-year timeline gave enough lead-time for things to really change. For example, although central staffing in science and social studies was weak, when the state provided another central office position or a vacancy occurred in another area, these "found" positions were assigned to areas such as middle school mathematics or literacy at grades K-2.

4. Schools were allowed to adapt programs to fit the needs of their particular schools. For example, some of the schools found that "Saturday school" worked well for providing additional instruction, but others found this to be infeasible in their communities.

5. Any funding increases that did occur went straight to the school level, with a requirement that they be spent on direct service to students. As a consequence, five years later, the roofs in WCPSS still leaked, the grass often needed mowing, and schools still had thousands of students in classroom trailers. The difference was that thousands more students could read on grade level.

6. WCPSS enlisted support from the community. Asking people to help not only led to increased volunteerism, it helped avoid conflicts between constituencies over resources, because almost everyone was "on the team."

(Seeking community support may not seem like a big issue in other districts, but WCPSS did not have a good track record in this area.)

The district implemented several initiatives in striving toward the goal. Among them:

- Aligning lessons tightly with curriculum and assessments, while providing teachers with common planning time.
- Intensive, long-term staff development on topics aligned to the goal.
- Leadership development for principals and other district leaders.
- An approach to school assignment that limited the concentration of low-income students at each school.

As "quick wins" or even slight improvements were noted in student achievement, the resulting increase in esprit de corps throughout the school district was almost tangible. Some schools made rapid progress that inspired and challenged other schools.

When the results for Goal 2003 were announced, two grade levels had exceeded the 95 percent level in math, but overall the results fell slightly short of the 95 percent goal. (Remember, when the goal was first announced in 1998, achievement levels were running 71-78 percent at various grades). This fact—that only 91.3 percent of students were achieving at or above grade level (rather than 95 percent) resulted in two actions by the superintendent.

First, he made sure to recognize how far the district had come and how much hard work on the part of teachers, students and the community had contributed to the large gains.

Second, he made sure that the 95 percent goal became incorporated into the next goal: Goal 2008. In addition to the remaining 3.7 percent needed to reach the 95 percent target, data on WCPSS performance showed two other areas of concern: with the exception of SAT scores and dropout rates, high schools had not made the same achievement progress as the elementary and middle schools that were the focus of the previous goal. In addition, students in grades 3-8 who were already scoring at the highest level were not showing the high achievement growth the community expected.

After much discussion and input, the board of education adopted Goal 2008, which included high schools, where progress was needed, and also focused on challenging all students.

Adapted with permission from:
"From Complacency to Excellence Through School District Reform: A Case Study of the Wake County Public School System," by Karen E. Banks.
A paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, California, April, 2004.

Muscatine Community School Board, Iowa

Enrollment: 5,560

Since 2001, the Muscatine Community School district has been charting a new course for student achievement, garnering state and national attention along the way. The district has been featured by *Time* magazine and *Good Morning, America* as a poster child for the positive effect of "No Child Left Behind." Iowa's largest newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*, had this to say about the district's efforts in July 2006:

> "When you think of Iowa school districts considered among the elite academically, Muscatine may not come to mind. But it should. …[T]he deliberate steps Muscatine has taken to improve achievement warrant a close look by schools across the state. Muscatine deserves to be highlighted as a district that has pushed itself and achieved results."

The year 2001 marked the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, and soon thereafter the school district received notice that several of its schools had received a "School in Need of Assistance" designation for failing to make adequate yearly progress.

Muscatine superintendent Tom Williams said, "This was like a wake-up call to our community and staff. Our staff realized that we had to take some drastic measures and thus they were more willing to accept some of the top-down decisions the board needed to make to implement new programs and to take some of the autonomy away from the buildings and individual teachers."

The Muscatine school board, at the urging of the superintendent, strategically, unwaveringly adopted a vision for the district: to "ensure excellence in education for every student." With the daunting vision in hand, the district began the search for a program or process that would indeed guarantee excellence in education for every student.

District leaders knew it would be a challenge to turn a vision of excellence for every student into a reality, given the diverse needs of students. Of the district's 5,500 students, more than 40 percent received free and reduced lunch; 20 percent were Hispanic—including many English language-learners; and 25 percent received special education services.

"We set our goals that would incorporate all we hoped to accomplish to help students achieve: we wanted to raise test scores, address minority and poverty issues manifested in the achievement gap and increase our graduation rates," said Muscatine school board member Ann Hart. Williams also noted that the board focused efforts on setting high goals, not making excuses, using research-based approaches, and using data to drive instruction and decisions.

Hart explained, "It started with strong leadership from our superintendent. He works well with the whole district and the community. Then, we met with the district principals to discuss how they might see these problems. We got their input and collaboration, as they are the backbones. If they want to accomplish these goals, they have to want to do it."

From there, the principals carried the vision to each building. "Our building goal came

from our board goal which came from our Iowa Test data," said Diane Campbell, assistant principal at Muscatine High School. "Student achievement has always been important at Muscatine High, but everyone had their own strategies, their own approach. There was no clear, agreed-to approach. Our building team's purpose was to create a clear, laser-like focus on improving instruction in alignment with our district goal."

As the anchor for advancing student achievement, the Muscatine district adopted the 8-Step Process, a comprehensive approach to increasing academic performance for all students by improving instruction in essential content areas, especially for students who are traditionally low-performing. District staff and faculty learned to:

- Regularly analyze, study and review disaggregated student data (Step 1) from the state achievement tests, ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) and ITED (Iowa Tests of Educational Development).
- Modify their instruction to address the student learning needs by developing (Step 2) and teaching focus lessons (Step 3) that meet students where they are relative to their knowledge and understanding of essential skills.
- Further assess student progress on the essential knowledge and skills (Step 4).
- Modify or enhance instruction by providing tutorial time, reteaching, providing enrichment and ensuring retention (Steps 5-7).
- Monitor progress and engage in professional development so that all teachers have the skills to be successful (Step 8).

The process demanded that student achievement data drive the decisions made in the classrooms, buildings, the central office and at the school board table. As a result, the five-year (2001-2006) reading proficiency trends (using the ITBS and ITED state assessments) demonstrate the advancement of the students and the district:

- 4th grade students have advanced consistently from 74.1 percent of the students proficient to 88.3 percent in 2006.
- 8th grade students: 68.3 percent to 75.7 percent.
- 11th grade: 70.7 percent to 77.3 percent.

The five-year math proficiency trends demonstrate similar achievement advances:

- 4th grade: 78.2 percent to 89.2 percent.
- 8th grade: 68.4 percent to 81.6 percent.
- 11th grade: 75.6 percent to 82.8 percent.

How It Happened

How did the Muscatine school board turn a vision of excellence for every student into a reality, given the diverse needs of students? This success came because the Muscatine school board—working hand-in-hand with the dedicated teachers and administrators in the district—committed to the following:

1. **A common vision that ensured excellence in education for every student.** The board and superintendent forged a common vision that built agreement throughout the district that the core purpose of the district is ensuring excellence in education for every student.

2. **Provided a framework for organized continuous improvement.** The board and superintendent adopted the "8-Step Process" that organized continuous improvement through clear and focused student learning standards, ongoing assessment of student progress, collaborative climate focused on effective teaching and learning, and professional development for staff.

3. **The alignment of resources to include time for teachers to work together to successfully implement improvement processes throughout the district.** The Muscatine school board discussed and then adopted a Monday professional development model that weekly dismisses students two hours earlier than any other school day so that teachers have continuous quality time to review student learning needs.

4. **Continued to raise the bar for student achievement.** Most importantly, the Muscatine school board continues to set improvement goals that raise the bar higher each year. The board consistently reminds staff and community that upward trends in achievement are cause for great celebration--but that the vision is excellence for every child.

Because the Muscatine school board set a vision of high expectations, provided supports for expert training in a well-researched program, provided time for teacher professional development and collaboration, the board/superintendent team established a culture within the district that supports the work of school improvement.

Sioux City Community School Board, Iowa

Enrollment: 14,140

Sioux City offers a plethora of challenges when it comes to the achievement gaps that can exist for minorities or poor students. Creating the commitment and action to take on that issue in one of Iowa's most diverse urban districts took a strong and trusting relationship between the school board and superintendent. "We had a good team to start with. This work challenged us—and made us stronger in the process," reflects Board President Doug Batcheller.

While they're far from done with the challenge, they are seeing some promising results from that leadership, including:

- Significant gains in proficiency for Hispanic students in reading and math. For example, at fourth grade, 34.4 percent of Hispanic students were proficient in math in 2001-2002, improving to 58.6 percent of students proficient in 2005-2006.
- Gains in proficiency for Native American students, such as a jump from 32.8 percent of student proficient in reading at eighth grade in 2001-2002, to 52.7 percent proficiency in 2005-06.
- Improved graduation rates. For example, the graduation rate for the class of 2005 was 84.49 percent, up from a graduation rate of 72.81 percent for the class of 2004.

How It Happened

In 2003, Department of Education leaders asked the district to consider being a partner in an initiative of Governor Tom Vilsack to focus on closing achievement gaps. The goal: to create intense focus from a community-based committee, with direct support from the Governor's Office, to make a difference in closing certain achievement gaps.

In early discussions, the focus was to be on an achievement gap that exists for Latino students. "I told (them) we just couldn't approach our achievement gap with just the stereotypical 'our largest minority is Latino' in mind," said superintendent Larry Williams. "Our Black population faces a challenging achievement gap. Our Native American population has a persistent gap. Both of those populations substantially predate our Latino influx. And in fact, we have a Southeast Asian group of students and there's a different kind of achievement gap—exceeding the Caucasian majority in performance—and we thought we might want to examine why." While the achievement gap for subgroups framed the basis for conversation and looking at data, the leadership of the district has to ensure that that focus is in quest of the broader goal: success for every child, emphasized Williams.

The superintendent and board engaged a community-based committee representing a large number of backgrounds, including students, teachers, principals, parents, business people, and of course, a diversity of ethnicities. The committee worked very hard over a period of about nine months before issuing its report, "A Matter of Expectations." The report was a challenge to the whole community and formed a basis for even broader discussion and action planning through community forums.

The focus expanded through the formation of a specific board-level student achievement committee. "We've always had a strong sense of mission, but the student achievement committee brought about a very significant focus on where we stood with respect to graduation credits, achievement gaps, and high expectations as well as

rigor. It meshed very well with our administration's efforts, but also gave those efforts guidance and a huge boost," said Batcheller. This committee provided an opportunity for the board to study and discuss issues, conduct meetings with students and faculty, and get the story out through the media and to the community—a real opportunity for communication and leadership.

"The committee and in fact the whole board kept their 'eye on the ball.' They made measurable progress in narrowing the issues and educating the public on those issues," said Batcheller. "When the time came a year later to adopt some of the most sweeping change our district has made in probably the last 25 years, the widespread understanding and support was there."

Among the changes put in place:

- Increasing high school graduation requirements and providing supports to help students reach the higher requirements.
- Launching an innovative program to increase attendance and lower dropout rates.
- Creating additional professional development time outside the classroom for teachers to work together on reviewing student needs, learning new skills and improving instruction.
- Modified curriculum to make it possible for more middle school students to take more rigorous mathematics courses.
- Required writing to be part of the standards, benchmarks and core indicators in all secondary curricula.

Strengthening the Board/Superintendent Team

Progress hasn't always been fast—or easy. "It's sobering to realize that we're trying to change a large, complex organization, full of people who were tremendously successful in previous settings, to produce a new result that few schools in the country have ever produced. The paradigm of change is pretty rapid these days—more rapid than some people like. It takes persistence, support and clear direction from the board and the board's relationship with its superintendent," said Williams. "It takes a lot of understanding of our data and commitment to change throughout the system."

Several practical steps have helped to maintain cohesiveness and trust on the board and with the superintendent:

- **Communication, communication, communication.** "Focus for the board/superintendent team doesn't occur in isolation of communication. We've asked a lot of questions along the way. We've taken a lot of ideas into account. We know we have to spend time talking with each other and pay attention to listening to each other, understanding the perspective that each person brings to the table," said Williams.
- **Work sessions and retreats, especially with staff leaders.** Holding work sessions directly with staff has been very effective, says Batcheller. "We've found this to be a great way to get board members off the 'diadem' and on a level playing field with each other and with administration, teachers and even the public." That level playing field allows a degree of honesty and frankness that's important to real progress.
- **Celebrating progress while being honest about further need.** Staying motivated as a team is easier when you can celebrate success but then get back to the problem. "We try not to miss opportunities to highlight improvement and to pay credit where credit is due. But we also believe we have to know the real status

of where our students are—and that's why we look at data often, not just once a year," said Batcheller. Williams adds: "We use the 4-H model of making the best better, taking advantage of a proven track record but not resting on our laurels."

- **Respect for appropriate roles.** Each member of the board and of the senior administrative leadership knows the role of the board in policy and overall goal setting. "As administrators, we must radiate that respect for the board's role in determining the direction. To be sure, as a superintendent, I weigh in on that direction. But the respect of our administrative team for the board's role is every bit as important as the board's understanding and respect for my role—for our role—as professional educators. An effective governance structure is born of respect on both ends," said Williams.
- **Learning.** "The board is able to spend its time on things that matter in improving student achievement and to ask probing questions because it's up to speed in those areas," said Batcheller. "One of the reasons our board is up to speed is that we attend IASB conferences and training seminars at the regional, state and national level. Our focus isn't happenstance; I think it's clearly a result of the training our board has received, as well as the discipline and persistence they exert in communication and decision making."

Romulus School Board, Michigan

Adapted from *The Community Connection Case Studies in Public Engagement,* National School Boards Association, 2000

Enrollment: 4,300

In late 1995, the Romulus school board began a districtwide restructuring process intended to increase student achievement. School leaders say they were inspired by Horace Mann, the first great American advocate of public education, whose words are quoted in a school district publication: "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery."

Although the school board had attempted isolated interventions, it realized that these attempts had had no significant impact on student achievement. Through a focused, strategic plan, this school district's consistent efforts to raise achievement, supported by the community, have clearly paid off: *Within four years, state assessments show continued and often dramatic improvement. In fourth grade, 48.8 percent passed the state's reading assessment in 1998, compared with only 17.4 percent in 1994. Similarly, the percentage of 4th graders passing the math assessment shot up from 43.8 percent in 1994 to 72.5 percent in 1998. Similar gains were seen in other grade levels.*

How It Happened

How did the Romulus school board accomplish this? Certainly, their improvement efforts had many facets. Key among them were:

1. **Engaging the community in strategic planning.** Knowing that a plan to create system change was needed, the board directed administrators to design and implement a strategic plan to increase student achievement and to graduate students who are successfully prepared to enter the fast-changing workforce. This process entailed extensive community involvement, including a two-day retreat with teachers and community leaders; a public hearing at the high school; individual meetings with all members of the faculty; and meetings with parents at each school. After much discussion with the community, the board endorsed a strategic plan. To develop strategies and timelines around the plan, the district formed action committees and empowered them to provide the content, process and assessment tools around the district direction to improve student achievement. Each committee has representation by administrators, board members, teachers, parents, police, city officials and business members. Committees meet monthly and report to the school board at least three times a year. All committee chairs meet with the board twice a year.

2. **Setting expectations for parents and students.** To make sure everyone stayed focused on achievement, the school board endorsed a districtwide Parent Compact, which specifies the roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers, students and schools. The compact, which reflects feedback from many different community and school groups, outlines key areas—study time, nutrition, homework, and parental responsibility, for example—that affect student achievement. District leaders say the compact keeps everyone working together to ensure a quality education for all students. Parents and students must sign the compact, demonstrating their commitment to quality teaching and learning

3. **Providing supports for engagement**. Each school has a paid parent coordinator who is responsible for involving parents in the districtwide initiative. The seven parent coordinators are members of the Parent Compact Committee, which meets monthly. The parent coordinator is a parent from the school, not a professional staff member. With this and other efforts in place, parent volunteerism increased by 50 percent districtwide.

4. **Being realistic and practical in the approach to engagement**. The school district is realistic about the demands on staff members' and citizens' time. Given those demands, district leaders say, it was not easy to find time to engage all the community in the restructuring process. Meetings were scheduled on Saturdays, during the summer, and after school, and principals brought staff members back to school a week early to revisit the mission and work collaboratively on the goals.

5. **Align with the focus on teaching and learning.** Community and parent engagement did not happen in a vacuum. The school district worked hard to improve curriculum and raise standards. A Teaching and Learning Manual clearly identifies goals, philosophies and strategies all teachers are expected to implement. Common assessments for all core K-12 classes determine whether a student is learning the curriculum and can demonstrate proficiency in the material. Teachers receive a good deal of support to improve their abilities, including professional development, release time to work as a team and grade-level meetings across the district to keep a continuing emphasis on collaboration. In alignment with that focus, school improvement teams design and implement programs and monitor their progress. While a faculty member facilitates the meetings, team membership reflects the various components of the community.

Board president Betty Lenossi noted that five factors are particularly important to sustaining public engagement:

- Developing a timeline for implementing initiatives
- Specifying the responsibilities of key staff members
- Developing a Parent Compact that spells out specific responsibilities
- Scheduling meetings and assessments
- Celebrating success

Cedar Rapids Community School Board, Iowa

Enrollment: 17,755

For several years, the Cedar Rapids school district has been building its use of data-driven improvement. "There's no question that the core business of schools is student learning," explains superintendent Dave Markward. Four years ago, data was an important part of the use of action research teams composed of instructional staff. "But to be most effective, our continuous improvement efforts needed to include our whole organization."

"Test scores were flat and some groups were losing ground; we knew we had to do something that involved the board to a greater extent," says Mary Meisterling, Cedar Rapids school board member. "The board was introduced to [improvement] concepts right along with the staff. We developed our mission and value statements as a group and set out to establish our benchmarks through surveys and data collection. We are now in year four and are beginning to see fruits of this initiative."

Today, the entire education organization, from the board to the instructional staff, is involved in the improvement process which is showing slow but consistent growth. Data is also woven throughout the district's strategic plan. As Markward often reminds his staff, "It's a marathon, not a sprint."

Between 2002 and 2006, Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) results have shown the percent of students proficient in reading increasing in grade 4 from 69 to 74 percent; grade 8 from 70 to 71 percent; and grade 11 from 80 to 81 percent. The percent of students proficient in mathematics increased in grade 4 from 69 to 77 percent; grade 8 from 71 to 74 percent; and grade 11 from 79 to 80 percent.

How It Happened

How does the Cedar Rapids school board accomplish improvement using data? Markward recalls that the board made the importance of accountability and data clear during his interview. After he was hired, Markward and the board teamed up to use concepts of the Baldrige quality program, which emphasizes self-study as a way to build momentum for improvement. They incorporated the "plan, do, study, act" cycle previously introduced in the district and also worked to apply the roles of the board set forth in IASB Lighthouse Research.

"Our use of Baldrige gave us the over-arching organizational framework to move forward on all cylinders," explains Markward. A few of the Baldrige categories are explained below, along with examples of how the Cedar Rapids school district uses data to measure progress for accountability:

1. **Shared leadership requires leaders to set and communicate direction consistent with stakeholder requirements.** The board/superintendent team knew that unless senior leaders believed in, understood and got significantly involved with the improvement effort, no one else would take it seriously. District administration modeled significant understanding of the use of action research – referred to as the plan, do, study, act cycle – and the involvement of data teams in decision making. Data from internal surveys shows success under this criterion: 99 percent of the Cedar Rapids school district administrators responded "yes" when asked if they support the district's continuous improvement efforts. One percent said they needed

clarification. And 94 percent agreed that the pace of continuous improvement efforts is "just right."

2. **Strategic planning translates stakeholder needs into goals, measures and action plans.** The district gathered information from its community to make sure the updated strategic plan would meet community needs.

3. **Student and stakeholder focus defines the aim of the district, school or classroom.** District leaders worked with buildings to get work in line with the strategic plan and turned "random acts of improvement" into "aligned acts of improvement." Regardless of position or rank, the district knew that all employees must understand how their work directly contributes to the vision, mission, core values and goals of the district to ensure optimal, system-wide improvements. Data from internal surveys has provided encouraging staff feedback on progress toward this criterion. When asked if they believed the "district has identified the right vision, mission, goals, core values and guiding behavior which I support," 98 percent of the staff responding agreed. Also, 97 percent said that they understand how their actions directly contribute to the accomplishment of school improvement plans and the district's strategic plan.

4. **Information and analysis provide the foundation for aligned decision-making in all areas of the system**. Examples of tools used to organize data for analysis include:
    - Continuous improvement SMART goals require a description of data sources consulted, as well as a summary analysis of the data, that indicate the need for the goal.
    - Individual student data folders connect every student to classroom goals. Each student maintains a data folder for tracking and measuring his or her progress toward those goals.
    - Dashboard data center presents frequent measures through in-process results to monitor student progress. It also provides data to measure the effectiveness of strategies employed by staff members. In-process measures include student results in writing, reading, math and other subjects. The dashboard also charts the percent of students with an A grade, perfect attendance, and who agree that they enjoy the class – but it doesn't stop there. Along with each piece of data is the question, "What is our plan to increase the number?"
    - Performance Results examines how the district, school or classroom performs in key areas. Examples of tools used to organize data for analysis include:
      - District balanced scorecard measures all aspects of the district including ITBS scores, ITED scores, Advanced Placement (AP) participation, student attendance, financial information, food service student participation, bus accidents and more. Each department across the district has measures at each school that are tracked in the scorecard.
      - Data-based superintendent performance goals are developed by the Cedar Rapids school board and superintendent and used as one tool for evaluation.

The board has seen that both employees and stakeholders benefit from data-based improvement. "We have introduced several early intervention programs throughout the district, pre-tested and post-tested to demonstrate results, and have seen a dramatic

improvement," says Meisterling. "Our district is seeing progress in many areas. I believe that over time, through consistent, successful results, that more and more teachers will find value in collaboration and data collection."

REFERENCES

The publications or sources below can help you learn more about the issues discussed in this handbook. Many are available for free download online, while others are commercially available.

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Visit the IASB Website for more about the Lighthouse research and other resources on the board's role in improving student achievement:
www.ia-sb.org

HIGHLIGHTS OF MAJOR LAWS IMPACTING SCHOOLS

This preamble begins Chapter 12 in the *Iowa Administrative Code*, which includes the general accreditation standards for Iowa schools.

> "The goal for the early childhood through twelfth grade educational system in Iowa is to improve the learning, achievement, and performance of all students so they become successful members of a community and workforce. It is expected that each school and school district shall continue to improve its educational system so that more students will increase their learning, achievement, and performance."

State and federal statutes will be adjusted and altered as time goes on. Given those caveats, this is a brief overview, not an exhaustive list, of the major legislation currently in place affecting school improvement in Iowa school districts.

No Child Left Behind 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq. **and Iowa Law in Support of It**
As of September 2007, the No Child Left Behind Act (the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first passed in 1965) was being considered for reauthorization. Currently NCLB requires that all students and identified groups of students be proficient in reading, mathematics and science as measured by a state test by the end of the 2013-14 school year and that schools, districts, and states use trajectories to establish annual measurable objectives (AMOs), points on the trajectory that indicate adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the 100 percent proficiency goals.

NCLB and state law (281 I.A.C. 12.8 (3)(a)(1) also require that at least three performance levels be established to assist in determining which students have or have not achieved a satisfactory or proficient level of performance. In Iowa both the intermediate (41st percentile to 89th percentile) and high performing (90th percentile and above) levels are deemed proficient. The low performing (40th percentile and below) level includes those students that are not yet performing proficiently. In addition to the achievement levels, student performance must be separated by gender, race, socioeconomic status, disability status, and any other subgroup categories as required by state or federal law.

States have been required to develop a single statewide system of high-quality assessments designed to assess the performance of students related to state content standards. In Iowa, the state content standards have been derived from the Iowa Testing Program's core content standards and benchmarks. Iowa's assessment system requires that all children in grades 3 – 8 take the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and all students in grade 11 take the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED). The Iowa Tests are multiple choice assessments that focus on the basic skills. Additionally, second assessments in mathematics, reading and science are required at three grade levels, usually given at grades 4, 8 and 11. The federal law suggests that these assessments must include items that measure accurately the depth and breadth of rigorous academic content standards. These second assessments are chosen in Iowa by each individual school district. Up to 2 percent of students in the district may take an alternate assessment if they have significant disabilities that indicate the test all students take is

an inappropriate measure of their performance.

Attached to those goals of full proficiency are sanctions and some targeted support when schools fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) two years in a row, including being labeled a School in Need of Assistance (SINA) or a District in Need of Assistance (DINA). In Iowa when this happens, schools are said to have been placed on "the list." Increasingly severe sanctions kick in over time including offering transfer options to students in the sanctioned school, potential loss of funding and restructuring, among others. However, even if all students or groups of students don't make the exact target, there are ways in which schools and districts can avoid being labeled and put on "the list." A confidence band, an estimated range of scores a school or district might achieve on any given day, is applied if the school or district doesn't make AYP. That band may allow the district to make AYP. Additionally, if a subgroup fails to make the annual objective, but 10 percent more of students in that subgroup were proficient in the target year than the previous year, they have achieved what is called "safe harbor," and therefore are considered to have made AYP. Iowa also uses a growth model to analyze the growth of students not making AYP. The low-performing category contains three levels: weak, low marginal and high marginal. If a student moves from a lower category to a higher one within the low performing category, that student is considered to have made adequate growth and won't count among those not making AYP.

Developing Readers

Included in Iowa's Early Intervention legislation passed in 1999, were provisions related to reading in grades K-3. This legislation requires districts to report at least twice annually to parents on their child's individual progress on diagnostic reading assessments. If a student is reading below grade level, the district is to inform the parents of what actions will be taken at school to improve the child's reading performance and provide strategies to the parents to enable them to support their student's reading performance at home.
281 I.A.C. 12.5(18)

Other Measures

While test scores are important indicators of student success, there are other areas of school performance that must be reported. Dropout rates and graduation rates, post-secondary success and coursework are among those. Local schools may report more information to their community if they wish. 281 I.A.C. 12.8(1)(b)(1).

Graduation Requirements

The 2006 Iowa Legislature established graduation requirements that had been previously set by local school boards. This law requires that students entering high school in the 2007-08 school year have four years of reading/language arts and three years each of science, mathematics and social studies. Additionally, the legislature has established that in 8th grade, before students begin high school, they must develop a career plan with the school and their parents that spells out what course work the student will be taking through high school. This is an effort to keep students in rigorous, challenging courses and inform parents of the importance of insisting their children participate in challenging academic work. I.C. 256.7 (26), I.C. 279.61.

Model Core Curriculum

The Iowa Legislature established this legislation in the 2006 session when they asked that the Iowa Department of Education establish a model core high school curriculum in

mathematics, science, and literacy. In the 2007 session this mandate was expanded to include curriculum in grades K-8 and to add the discipline of social studies. This Model Core Curriculum integrates the Iowa Testing standards and benchmarks, the National Assessment of Educational Progress frameworks, and national curriculum documents. While its use is not mandatory, it is recommended by the Department of Education. I.C. 279.61.

Professional Development: The Iowa Model

Professional development is an important facet of school improvement work and Iowa has worked diligently to develop a research-based model. District professional development must address academic student learning needs and must include all instructional staff. The focus of the professional development must be on curriculum, instruction and assessment and the new instruction being studied and implemented must be scientifically research-based. Both formative (allowing mid-course corrections) and summative assessment must be used to study the impact of the professional development on student learning. The components of theory, demonstration, practice, observation and collaboration--components that ensure transfer of the new learning into classroom practice--must be integrated into the professional development effort at the local level. Implementation of the new learning must be studied to know if what is being learned in the professional development sessions is being implemented at the classroom level. This Iowa model was developed with preeminent researcher in professional development, Beverly Showers, and stakeholder groups in the state including teachers, administrators, school board members and others. Individual professional development must align with local district goals. 281 I.A.C. 83.6(284)

Process and Planning Requirements

Iowa law sets requirements for districts in planning and conducting their assessment systems. Those requirements include:

Policy: School boards must adopt a policy for conducting ongoing and long-range needs assessment processes. This process, while not part of board policy, must include provisions for collecting and analyzing annual assessment data on the state indicators, other locally determined indicators, and locally established student learning goals. 281 I.A.C. 12.8(1)(b)(1)

School Improvement Advisory Committee: School boards must appoint a school improvement advisory committee to make recommendations to the board based on their analysis of the student learning data. These recommendations need to focus on major educational needs, student learning goals, long-range goals and annual improvement goals. This group is subject to the open meetings law. I.C. 280.12

Comprehensive School Improvement Plan: At a minimum of every five years, each school district must develop a comprehensive school improvement plan designed to increase the learning, achievement and performance of all students in the district. The plan should focus all the district's efforts to improve student learning. 281 I.A.C. 12.8 (2)

What Happens if a District Doesn't Meet the Legal Requirements?

Iowa school districts must meet these requirements, among others, in order to retain state accreditation. If a school district does not meet all of the requirements, the Department of Education will consult with the district, provide technical assistance, require an action plan and set timelines for meeting the requirements. I.A.C. 12.8 (4)