



The Lighthouse Project: Shining the Light on How Boards Can Make a Significant Difference in Student Learning

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Back in the late 1990s, little research existed on the link between school board governance and school improvement efforts to improve student learning. That's when the [Iowa Association of School Boards® \(IASB®\)](#) launched the [Lighthouse Project](#) (or [Lighthouse Study](#)), a multiyear research effort designed to contribute to the body of knowledge to determine if school board teams play significant roles in improving student learning and, if so, how?



The Lighthouse Project, Phases I & II

In the following excerpt from the 2009 article “Seeing the Light,” authors Hilary LaMonte and Mary Delagardelle provide a broad overview of the two phases of the Lighthouse Project.

PURPOSES & FINDINGS

Are school boards in high-achieving districts different from those in low-achieving districts? If so, how can all school boards become more like those in districts with high achievement?

These were the two questions at the heart of the Lighthouse Project, a research effort of the Iowa Association of School Boards.

The first study in this effort, conducted from 1998 to 2000, showed that boards and districts with higher levels of student achievement were different in their actions and beliefs from school

boards in low-achieving districts, when controlling for a wide range of variables. The second study, conducted from 2002 to 2007, looked at how boards learn to lead their districts to become high performing. This research provided evidence about what school boards need to know and do to function in a manner that has a positive impact on a school district's efforts to improve student achievement.

Let's look at the findings from these two groundbreaking studies.

LINKAGES & CHANGES

The first Lighthouse Project study identified the differences between higher and lower achieving districts that were consistently described by board members, administrators and teachers.

Those differences fell into two areas:

- The district's working culture, which we dubbed the "Seven Conditions for Productive Change." The conditions are connections across the system; knowing what it takes to change achievement; workplace support; professional development; use of data to balance districtwide direction and building autonomy; community connection; and distributed leadership.
- What adults in the system believe can be expected in terms of student learning, the degree to which the district can impact it, and what it takes to impact student learning.

In the second phase of our research, we worked with pilot board-superintendent teams to strengthen their leadership and measured whether that produced changes in the beliefs, the seven conditions, and student learning results. The linkages between school boards and teaching and learning in classrooms are often misunderstood. School boards do not directly cause student learning. However, it would appear from findings of the Lighthouse Research and others that the beliefs, decisions and actions of school boards directly impact the conditions within schools that enable district efforts to improve achievement.

The second study was based on the following linkages:

- How the board members' knowledge, skills and beliefs are tied to governance policies, priorities, decisions and actions.
- How those policies, priorities, decisions and actions are linked to the district and school culture.
- How the district and school culture are tied to classroom instruction and student engagement in learning.
- How instruction and student engagement are tied to improved learning outcomes.

Next Steps: What Did We Learn?

The staff at IASB and the Iowa School Boards Foundation (ISBF)—the research arm of IASB—then worked to identify the behaviors of board members that may have influenced change within the school culture.

As stated in the 2009 article “The Lighthouse Inquiry: Examining the Role of School Board Leadership in the Improvement of Student Achievement,” the author describes the actions and beliefs of board members that had a positive impact on the changing conditions inside participating school districts.

WHAT DID THE BOARD MEMBERS DO?

The board-superintendent team assumed leadership responsibilities with a focus on systemic improvement. The board members in the pilot school districts were not passive “rubber stamps” of the superintendent’s recommendations, but they were also not acting as if they were professional educators. At the same time, superintendents did not view their boards as a necessary evil that must be tolerated or merely “managed” in order to keep them from causing harm. Together, the board members and superintendents gained a sense of the leadership role the board could play and made substantial efforts to engage with each other as leadership partners without discounting the diverse perspectives and unique responsibilities each position brings to the team. The board members found a balance of active engagement in extensive dialogue about the district’s focus and direction for improvement and a deep regard for the role of the teachers and administrators charged with moving the district in that direction. Finding and maintaining this balance enhanced the relationship between the board and the superintendent and the confidence they had in each other’s ability to make a difference.

The board and the superintendent built a different type of relationship than is typical in many school districts. Positive, trusting relationships existed between the boards and their superintendents in all pilot districts, which, as in the original Lighthouse Study, appeared to be a necessary but not sufficient condition of the board-superintendent team. Boards and superintendents relied upon the positive trusting relationships to enable them to play strong, interdependent leadership roles, to examine and challenge each other’s views, to study data and confront existing realities, to ask probing questions, and to scrutinize each other’s performance in ways that strengthened and mobilized the entire team.

Five main functions or roles of the board surfaced as being critical for boards as they interacted with district staff around their efforts to improve student learning.

Roles of the Board

The legacy of the Lighthouse Project lives on today as IASB continues to help educate board-superintendent teams on the five key leadership roles for the board to improve student learning.

SET CLEAR, HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- Get clear about the greatest student learning needs—the most important content areas to improve first.
- Believe more is possible and communicate high expectations.
- 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).

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.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Demonstrate commitment to the improvement focus through board actions and decisions.
- Support quality professional development.
- Stay the course; stay focused and committed to the priority effort over time.
- Support and connect with districtwide leadership.
- Develop and nurture the board-superintendent team leadership.
- Ensure all parts of the system are aligned around the learning needs of students (curriculum, instruction, assessment, goals, actions, resource allocation, etc.).

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.

LEARN TOGETHER AS A BOARD TEAM

- Establish board learning time.
- Learn together.
- Talk to each other—have extensive board conversations.
- Develop a willingness and readiness to lead and allow others to lead.

- Build commitment to the improvement focus through shared information and discussion.
- Engage in deliberative policy development—lead through your policies.

Let's close with a summary from 2009's "The Lighthouse Inquiry: Examining the Role of School Board Leadership in the Improvement of Student Achievement" that is still relevant today.

The problems of public education depend upon the leadership of public schools. School boards are critical players in the school change process and must be active leaders on behalf of the students in their schools. Without effective school board leadership, systemic change becomes impossible, and improvement of student achievement will remain episodic, with only "pockets of excellence" sprinkled throughout public schools and school districts. How board-superintendent teams understand and carry out their roles can make the difference between dysfunctional leadership teams incapable of leading change and highly effective leadership teams that build districtwide capacity to ensure every student succeeds.

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Excerpts from "Seeing the Light." Hilary LaMonte & Mary Delagardelle. American School Board Journal, August (2009), and "The Lighthouse Inquiry: Examining the Role of School Board Leadership in the Improvement of Student Achievement." Mary Delagardelle. In T. Alsbury (Ed.), "The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation" (2008).