

Eight Traits of Effective School Boards

Research is clear: High-achieving boards exhibit different habits and characteristics

Patte Barth

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

But the research that exists is clear, according to a brief published by NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) in late January. The brief, which examined seven research studies conducted between 1993 and 2008, says high-achieving boards exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from those of their low-achieving counterparts.

What makes a board effective?

Here are eight characteristics found in the research:

- 1. High expectations, clear goals:** Effective school boards make a commitment to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction. They define clear goals to meet the vision, make sure the goals remain the top priorities, and allow nothing to detract from them.
- 2. Belief that all children can learn:** Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels. In high-achieving districts, poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors are described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members expect to see improvements in student achievement quickly as a result of initiatives.
- 3. Focused on achievement:** Effective boards are accountability driven. They spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
- 4. Collaboration and communication:** Effective boards have a collabora-

tive relationship with staff and the community. A strong communications structure is in place to inform and engage key groups—internal and external—in setting and achieving the district's goals.

5. Data savvy: Effective school boards embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement. In high-achieving districts, board members identify specific student needs through data, and justify decisions based on that data.

6. Goals and resources aligned: Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals. This occurs even during the most severe budget challenges, such as the ones districts now face.

7. Team leadership: Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust. Boards in successful districts define an initial vision for the district and seek a superintendent who matches this vision.

8. Team training: Boards that are effective take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for the district's improvement efforts. Training is formal, deliberate, and often on specific topics.

Danger signs

The CPE did not set out to specifically focus on what makes boards ineffective. However, some descriptions—we call them “a dozen danger signs”—of ineffective boards emerged in the research review.

Ineffective school boards:

- A** ▪ Are only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and are seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning.
- B** ▪ Focus on external pressures as the

main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parent support, societal factors, or lack of motivation.

C ▪ Offer negative comments about students and teachers.

D ▪ Micromanage day-to-day operations.

E ▪ Disregard the agenda process and the chain of command.

F ▪ Are left out of the information flow, with little communication between the board and superintendent.

G ▪ Describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach.

H ▪ Look at data from a “blaming” perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance.

I ▪ Have little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers.

J ▪ Are slow to define a vision.

K ▪ Do not hire a superintendent who agrees with their vision.

L ▪ Receive little professional development together as a board.

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

Patte Barth (pbarth@nsba.org) is the director of NSBA's Center for Public Education. The full report, *The Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards*, written by researchers Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien, is available at www.centerforpubliceducation.org.