

School boards' effectiveness rarely linked to student achievement

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SCHOOL BOARDS have existed since the early days of American education. They grew out of the governing system by selectmen in Massachusetts. Though school boards' mission of local control of public education has remained fairly constant, they have not been immune to change—or even serious reform. They have, however, rarely been the subjects of scientifically based research.

Most of what is known about school boards, including how effectively they operate, surfaces through observations, personal experience, anecdotes and opinions. An extensive review of literature on school boards, as detailed in a recent CRESPAR technical report, revealed little “data-driven research to illuminate their [school boards'] role in the 21st century,” writes Deborah Land of Johns Hopkins University.

Her report, *Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement* (No. 56), takes a look at the past 20 years of school board literature. The report is a companion to *The Public School Superintendency in the 21st Century: The Quest to Define Effective Leadership* (No. 55). The school board document shows that school systems and communities have few measures by which to gauge the effectiveness of school leadership, especially in regard to student achievement.

It also points out the need for “a solid, rigorous multi-method body of research that clearly identifies key characteristics of effective school boards and clearly links these characteristics to students' academic achievement” if school boards are even to survive, much less thrive, according to Land's report.

There are approximately 15,000 school boards with 95,000 members in the United States, according to a 1999 study.

Recent studies indicate that school board members are well-educated professionals and business leaders with relatively high incomes. School board members are overwhelmingly White, meaning that racial and ethnic minorities are vastly under-represented.

Most school boards are elected, though there is generally little interest in board elections and sometimes even a shortage of candidates. A much smaller percentage of boards is appointed by public officials, such as mayors and governors. School board reforms often focus on selection procedures, though a long-standing debate continues over which type of board is more effective and responsive.

An enduring hallmark of school boards has been local control. But as reforms increased during the 1980s and '90s, even this role has been eroded by state and local governments, state education departments, labor unions and special interest groups—all of whom have stakes in how schools operate and what results they produce. Now, “school boards are often perceived as obstacles to, rather than facilitators of, education reforms,” this report asserts.

For this reason, some reformers suggest that boards be dissolved in lieu of a loose federation of schools or education departments within local governments. Another suggested reform is that school boards become local education policy boards. “The most essential characteristic of the local education policy boards is a focus on policymaking and oversight without involvement in daily administration,” the report states.

But questions remain as to whether such changes would bring better leadership or greater student achievement. Again, research provides few answers.

School board experts have identified characteristics associated with effective boards. Among them are: a focus on student achievement and policy making; good relations among board members and with the superintendent, other agencies, local and state governments and the public; effective leadership and budgeting; adequate training; and evaluation of student, school, and district outcomes.

These outcomes are often measured by test scores, and as test scores rise and fall so do the reputations of school boards. But the literature suggests that there are additional measures of student achievement: graduation and dropout rates, for instance, as well as absenteeism, retention, grades, enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, and scholarship awards. All of these are potentially useful measures of a school system’s achievement—and a school board’s effectiveness.

Multiple quantifiable outcomes that are needed to relate a board’s performance to student achievement. It is these kinds of outcomes, the report asserts, that should determine if school boards are performing effectively in the 21st century.

The report concludes: “Future research must examine what form of school board and educational governance works under which circumstances and for whom. Changes in school board and educational governance are likely to be attempted with increasing frequency in communities across the nation, particularly in urban areas where students’ academic achievement is low. Data to guide these changes are urgently needed.”