

FAILURE TO GOVERN

BAD BOARD
BEHAVIOR



POOR STUDENT
PERFORMANCE

By Ivan J. Lorentzen and William P. McCaw

Editor's note: As a follow-up to the TASB XG Summit held in January, this is the third of a four-part series of articles on school board performance and its impact on student success, written by education management expert and psychology professor Ivan J. Lorentzen and educational leadership professor William P. McCaw.

Since public education in America is under state and local control, school boards take pride in exercising their independence. This allows boards to tailor schools to reflect local communities. This also produces significant disparity among school districts. However, many aspects of schools are remarkably similar. Third grade is pretty much the same everywhere. So is teacher and administrative training and certification.

But school board membership is different. Since board members come from all walks of life, it is not surprising that their opinions vary widely regarding how a school should function, how a board should behave, and what issues should be addressed. Today, a growing research effort is producing reliable data about the kind of boardsmanship related to higher student achievement across the district. Boards that govern districts with

higher achievement scores are best described by the essential elements detailed in the Board Self-Assessment Survey (BSAS) (see April 2017 *Texas Lone Star*, page 8, for specifics). Boards and the districts they govern that have yet to address low student achievement continue to be derailed by errors in governance. Recent research has begun to identify specific behaviors that serve to distract school boards from their primary mission of improving student achievement.

WHAT SOME CRITICS ARE SAYING

School board critics have a long list of grievances about the failings of public schools, reserving particular blame for school boards. Former US Secretary of Education William Bennett once accused the public school bureaucracy of resisting change in order to maintain the status quo.¹ He referred to the leaders of

public education as the “blob” (bloated educational bureaucracy) and called for reforms to “shrink the blob.” He advocated putting education in the hands of corporations, city majors, or private enterprise, which he thought were more efficient entities. Districts that have experimented with such reforms, however, report mixed results in terms of financial efficiency or improved achievement scores.

In 2003, Paul Hill, founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, identified one particularly troubling way in which individual board members can cause mischief.² Not only do board members have the power to disrupt schools, he wrote, they often gain personally from doing so. This gains favor with special-interest factions within the community. Such behavior by one member breaks down the self-restraint of other board members, who themselves begin initiating their own, not the district’s, agendas for change. Board members who engage in such actions must realize that their behavior is associated with lower student achievement.

In addition, Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, called school boards an “outrage” and advocated “putting this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery and moving on to something that will work for children.”³ However, the alternative structure designed to replace the publically elected school board that might produce better results at lower costs has yet to materialize.

Is it possible the critics are right? Are school boards partially responsible for low student achievement scores? Recent research has begun to answer this question.

GOVERNING ‘FROM THE MEZZANINE’

School boards should focus on district governance and not be involved in administrative leadership. It’s been said that the board governs the district “from the mezzanine,” where it steers the district forward while delegating administrative matters to the superintendent.

Hiring and evaluating the superintendent is one of the most important jobs of the board. Once the superintendent is hired, the board must clarify expectations for the district’s direction and then delegate leadership of the district to the superintendent. It is the superintendent who will decide how the district will get there.

Furthermore, principals lead the schools, and classroom teachers instruct the students. When everyone is clear about – and stays focused on – their primary responsibilities, the system works well. Boards, especially, need to respect how governance, as

described by the BSAS, differs from administrative leadership.

THE PROBLEM OF MICROMANAGEMENT

The negative and harmful effects of micromanagement are often cited in the literature. Nicholas Caruso stated that “the greatest complaint by superintendents is that of the board micromanaging the administration.”⁴ Nancy Walser noted that “over and over . . . micromanagement – usually by one or two members of the board – was criticized by both board members and superintendents as their most common cause of frustration.”⁵

Micromanagement is a failure to respect the proper roles and responsibilities between the board and administration. Simply, when boards take on duties of the superintendent, the result is micromanagement.

BOARD DISARRAY

What happens to student achievement when board members disagree about what boards are supposed to do? In addition to identifying the characteristics of high-performing boards, the Montana study collected data on multiple members of the same board and analyzed the amount of reported variation.⁶ When board members were in agreement concerning the roles and responsibilities of the board, they governed districts with the highest student achievement scores. Conversely, boards who had members holding a wide variety of opinions concerning their roles and responsibilities governed districts with the lowest student achievement scores.

The term “disarray” was used to describe such a board. One of the most important tasks of the collective board is to work toward consensus about what a board does and how board members should conduct themselves. Effort should be made annually to provide for board training in this regard. Effective boards work to keep disarray to a minimum.

AVOID THE ‘KILLER B’S’

Paul Houston identified the “killer B’s” as being distractions for both collective and individual board members.⁷ Boards that allow urgent issues such as buses, buildings, books, budgets, ballgames, and bonds to capitalize time, energy, and attention fail to focus on the essential elements of the Board Standards described in the BSAS. Houston advises boards to focus instead on the “critical C’s,” such as connections, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices. The “C’s” capture the essential issues of boardsmanship.

COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL ERRORS

Effective boardsmanship can be examined in two ways: as a collective body and as individual board members. But it is only recently that the collective board, as well as individual board members, has been studied in relationship with student achievement.

Errors in the board room. David Lee and Daniel Eadens recently conducted a study of school boards across the country by examining video and audio recordings of 115 school board meetings.⁸ Their research established statistically significant relationships between certain boardsmanship behaviors and low student achievement scores. These boards conducted meetings that could be described as: (1) being less orderly, (2) spending little time on student achievement, (3) not listening respectfully and attentively to the person speaking, (4) having members advance their own agendas, (5) having a poor working relationship with the leadership team, (6) having few members rely on the

superintendent for advice/input, (7) having members, other than the chair, taking excessive meeting time advancing an agenda, and (8) being less focused on policy items. These characteristics described boards that governed districts with low student achievement scores.

Errors by individual board members. Being elected to a school board is one of the few occasions in our society where individual citizens with little or no background can quickly acquire power. Most school board members respect this responsibility and are content to sit back for a time and become familiar with typical proceedings. But there are exceptions. And it only takes one or two board members to cause problems for the district. There are several things individual board members should avoid. First, don't be too forward too quickly – you are not automatically an expert on educational governance. Be careful not to micromanage the administration or faculty; take time to learn. Second, don't be too detached. Sitting back, deferring to the administration and

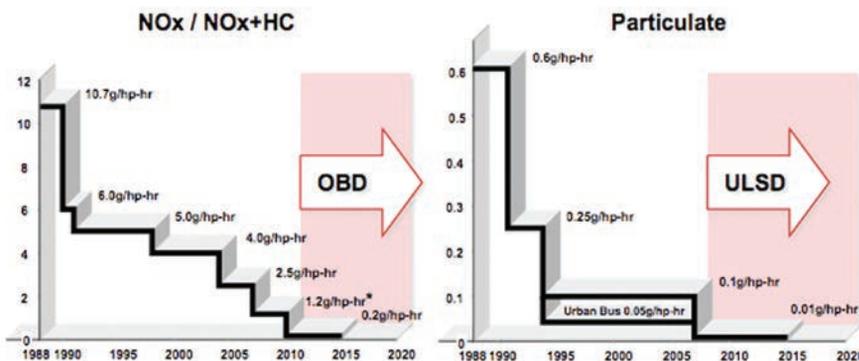
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NEAR-ZERO EMISSIONS



letting the district fend for itself is an abdication of your duty. Become appropriately engaged. Third, don't make impossible or unrealistic demands on the district. Holding the administration accountable for increasing student achievement scores by 30 percent in one year is impossible, as is demanding your favorite sports team take the state championship. Collaborate with your leadership team – understand governance. Transformative improvement takes time and perseverance.

CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS

Author Jamie Vollmer, businessman and former public school critic turned advocate and reformer, argues that school reform is usually not resisted by the school bureaucracy but by the community within which the school is embedded.⁹ He claims that teachers and other educational professionals not only know how to improve student achievement but are willing to implement the needed changes.

For example, from a staff perspective schools could improve by (a) modifying the curriculum, (b) improving student motivation and preparation, (c) rethinking assessment, and (d) altering or lengthening the school calendar, among others. Such ideas are typically embraced by schools but are rejected by the community because of misinformation, misunderstanding, overall expense, and interference with family vacations.

But from the public's perspective, schools could improve by (a) cutting the budget, (b) getting back to "basics," (c) eliminating non-essential administrators, and (d) firing incompetent teachers. When misperceptions about public schools and how they function are ignored by the board, community support declines. Engaging the community is essential.

MORE THAN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Developing and sustaining an engaging relationship with the community is a commonly ignored but essential responsibility of the board. Too often the only time the district engages the community is when votes are sought for a levy or bond. The chances of having a successful election decrease if the community is regularly ignored.

Thriving districts that enjoy community support and pass bonds make a concerted effort to continually inform the community about their schools, consult with the community on issues of importance, involve them in the decision-making process, and collaborate through the creation of advisory committees and focus groups.

It's not difficult to connect with parents of students. But there is a large percentage of district taxpayers who no longer have children in the schools and who deserve attention from the board. Time during each monthly board meeting should be set aside to have a dialogue with a specific segment of your nonparent community to maintain contact with a wide variety of constituents. These are the voters you need. Maintaining an engaged community is a vital part of the board's job.

LESSONS LEARNED

What we learned is that:

- District governance is the job of the school board and is defined by the Board Standards.
- Board disarray and micromanagement are common characteristics of low-performing districts.
- Certain behaviors, by either the collective board or individual board members, can adversely affect student achievement.
- Ideas about how to improve student achievement often differ between educators and the public.
- Efforts to engage the community will improve understanding and generate support. ➤

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