Leadership and Policy in Urban Education

Leadership and Policy in Urban Education:

Key Issues

Edited by

Tiffany A. Flowers

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FOREWORD

Leadership and Policy in Urban Education: Key Issues text is an important volume within the subfield of Urban Education. Policy decisions are reshaping schools at all levels. Currently, the emphasis on eliminating or defunding social policies such as the free and reduced lunch program, after-school programming, and funding for improving school safety measures is significant. The leadership and policy chapter focuses on issues which call attention to policy, funding mechanisms, and leadership issues. The leadership and policy issues outlined in this volume point to the priorities of schools, districts, and state and federal-level agencies. Through this text, the authors explore various 21st-century concerns related to urban schools, leadership, and educational policies.

The authors in this edited volume crafted their work during the pandemic. Olivia T. Ngadjui, Camille D. Frank, and Christian D. Chan center on what counselors can do to help students with trauma-informed care in their article titled, *Utilizing Sentipensante as Pedagogical Trauma Informed Practice for Urban P-12 Classrooms***.** Leadership concerns within urban environments regarding professional development are often excluded from both texts and journals outside of school and educational leadership. Lee Westberry and Evan Ortlieb highlight the need to offer ongoing support to principals who struggle with working with populations experiencing poverty. Their article titled, *Principal Support: The Missing Link* includes suggestions for both mentoring and coaching of school principals. Zoila Morell and Yasmin Morales-Alexander explore the changing demographics in both urban and suburban schools. Linsay DeMartino in her chapter titled, *New directions for school principalships: Rejecting White supremacy and the manifestations of Whiteness* argues for transformative leadership practices within the urban school principalship. Lisa Collins explores historic inequities by reviewing relevant literature related to Brown vs. Board of Education. In her chapter titled, *Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)*, she explores the historical explanations for the removal of Black Educators from public schools. Charity Anderson examines the importance of school boards in her chapter titled, *School Boards: A Hallmark of American Education*.

Each chapter in this edited book also includes a relevant review of the research literature, exploring vocabulary, highlighted readings, and chapter activities. The Leadership and Policy text includes issues that help prepare both urban school administrators and graduate students studying urban policy. Educators who read this volume will find the chapters to be salient for their work in urban environments.

Respectfully,

Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers
Series Editor

SCHOOL BOARDS: A HALLMARK OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

CHARITY ANDERSON, PH.D.

Objectives: (1) Provide an overview of school board governance in the United States; (2) Familiarize readers with research on the relationship between school boards and student achievement; and (3) Share best practices of high-functioning boards.

Overview: School boards are a fixture of American public education systems, but their efficacy and necessity are often called into question by scholars and activists. This chapter reviews the common types of school boards in the U.S., research on the relationship between school boards and student achievement, and best practices of high-functioning boards.

Keywords: Accountability; democracy; governance; local control; public education; school board

Introduction

Even in the face of growing state and national influence over public education, the American public has held tight to its belief that local citizens should govern the schools, and the U.S. Supreme Court has frequently reiterated the value of local control.[1] School boards are a unique form of democratic governance meant to carry out states' constitutional guarantees of public education and, for more than a century and a half, have functioned based on the idea that local control keeps educational policy decisions in the hands of local citizens, ostensibly where it belongs.[2] Collectively, the

[1] Abe Feuerstein, "Elections, Voting, and Democracy," *Education Policy* 16, no. 1 (2002): 15. See also Richard Briffault, "The Local School District." In *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*, ed. William G. Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2005).

[2] Deborah Land, "Local School Boards Under Review," *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 2 (2002): 229-78.

nation's nearly 15,000 school boards constitute the country's largest group of elected officials and are responsible for the well-being of 52 million children, expenditures of $600 billion per year, and supervision of six million employees.[3]

Although school boards have been called "the distinctive hallmark" of American education, scholars and education reformers have criticized boards for being ego-driven, conflict-laden amateurs disconnected from their communities and having little, if any, positive influence on student achievement—a "flawed exercise in democracy" as Gene Maeroff argued in his book, *School Boards in America*.[4] Some critics have gone so far as to call for the wholesale abolition of school boards. "In an ideal world," journalist Matt Miller wrote in *The Atlantic*, "we would scrap them—especially in big cities, where most poor children live."[5] Anti-school board sentiment, including threats of violence and intimidation, has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic, and attacks appear unlikely to subside. On the other hand, the National School Board Association (NSBA), a group that has represented school boards since 1940, has called for *increased* involvement by school boards, particularly in programs focused on student achievement.[6] This chapter reviews the most common types of school boards in America, boards' relationship to student achievement, and the practices of high- and low-functioning boards.

Literature Review

Elected vs. Appointed School Boards

Americans formed lay school boards to distance governance from officials with little to no knowledge of the local experience. With little change, this

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[3] Frederick M. Hess and Olivia Meeks, *Governance in the Accountability Era* (NSBA, Thomas Fordham Institute, and Iowa School Boards Foundation, 2010), 12. See also Frederick M. Hess, "Looking for Leadership," *American Journal of Education* 114, no. 3 (2008): 219-45.

[4] Twentieth Century Fund, *Facing the Challenge* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1992), 17; Gene Maeroff, *School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[5] Matt Miller, "First, Kill All the School Boards," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2008, n.p.

[6] Thomas L. Alsbury, "School Board Member and Superintendent Turnover and the Influence on Student Achievement," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 7 (2008): 202.

model has persisted through the 21st century. Historically, there have been two main forms of school district control in the U.S.: *elected* school boards chosen by voters and *appointed* school boards typically selected by mayors. These models are usually established by state legislation but, sometimes, voters have the option of choosing between an elected or appointed board via a referendum.[7] In either case—appointed or elected—the school board typically acts as an independent legal entity, responsible for hiring, spending, and policy implementation.

The public's belief in local control of education is commonly perceived as having a democratically elected school board and, based on Gallup poll data, most Americans do not think mayors should get involved in education by appointing school boards.[8] Similarly, most Americans prefer local boards having the most control over classroom teaching versus federal or state government.[9] Across virtually all school districts in the U.S., the dominant mode for the selection of school board members is a nonpartisan election held in those years when there is not a local general election.[10] In part because they are nonpartisan and off-cycle, school board elections usually garner very low voter turnout, particularly among racial minority and low-income voters.[11] Most professional governing bodies in the U.S. are comprised of professionals from that field: medical boards are comprised of doctors; legal review boards, of lawyers; and boards of accountancy are almost entirely certified public accountants. However, in public education, school boards are comprised of community politicians.[12] Often, candidates have neither prior experience in governance or education

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[7] Ruth Moscovitch et al., *Governance and Urban Improvement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Institute on Educational Law and Policy, 2010).
[8] Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "Gallup Poll," *Phi Delta Kappan* 89 (2007): 38.
[9] Richard S. L. Blissett and Thomas L. Alsbury, "Disentangling the Personal Agenda," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 17, no. 4 (2018): 454-86.
[10] Sarah Diem, Erica Frankenberg, and Colleen Cleary, "Factors That Influence School Board Policy Making," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 51, no. 5 (2015): 712-52. Additionally, see: Briffault, "Local School District" and Kenneth K. Wong, "Redesigning Urban Districts in the USA," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 39, no. 4 (2011): 489.
[11] Kenneth J. Meier, "A Research Agenda on Elections and Education," *Educational Policy* 16 (2002): 219-30. See also Feuerstein, "Elections, Voting, and Democracy" and Land, "Local School Boards."
[12] Michael W. Kirst, "The Evolving Role of School Boards." In *The Future of School Board Governance,* ed. Thomas L. Alsbury (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 37-59.

nor competition for a seat, especially in smaller districts.

Given the low interest in school board politics, studies note the dominance of civic elites and special interest groups in these elections.[13] Voter apathy allows special interests—which may include parent groups, business groups, groups representing racial or ethnic minorities, and unions—to have a disproportionate influence on school board elections and subsequent board policy.[14] In a white paper on school governance from the Stand for Children Leadership Center, Christine Campbell summed up the most often-cited critiques of elected school boards:

> Challenges to locally elected school boards are not new—for decades researchers have called elected-board governance into question. … Critics point to several weaknesses of that current structure: the board members are difficult for voters to hold accountable, easily influenced by special interests and constituent demands, prone to micromanagement and infighting, and often have competing agendas that preclude a unified vision for the district.[15]

Because of these perceived weaknesses, some advocate for an appointed school board instead of an elected one. Arguments in favor of mayoral involvement include increased electoral accountability, coordination of city services for schools, attention paid to education in the city, and philanthropic support for the schools.[16] In *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools*, Wong et al. conducted the most comprehensive empirical analysis to date of the effects of mayoral control on student outcomes.[17] Using a national data set from 104 urban school systems (including 12 that were under mayoral control) to measure the effectiveness of mayoral control on student achievement, the authors found an increase in elementary school performance where the mayor gained more control than previously experienced in that city and also had appointment power over a majority of board seats. Over the past decade, Wong and Shen found that mayoral-controlled school districts have been associated with improved districtwide performance relative to average school district performance statewide, and several cities have made "substantial improvement" in narrowing the achievement gap in their states, though improvement varies

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[13] Howell, *Besieged*.
[14] Frederick M. Hess and David Leal, "School House Politics." In *Besieged*, ed. William Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2005), 228-53.
[15] Campbell, "Putting Students First," 2.
[16] Moscovitch et al., *Governance and Urban School Improvement*, 6.
[17] Kenneth K. Wong et al., *The Education Mayor* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007).

across districts, and it is somewhat uneven by grade and subject.[18]

Henig's quantitative analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, however, resulted in a different conclusion. His analysis of five "mayor-centric" school districts (compared to six traditionally governed districts) indicated that students in the traditionally-governed cities generally made greater improvements in reading and math scores across all measures and sectors of the student population.[19] Cuban and Usdan studied six cities where mayors had either become much more involved in school reform (for example, by appointing board members) or nontraditional superintendents had been appointed. In general, under mayoral control, they found improvement over the previous regime of school boards, but little evidence of reaching higher goals such as widespread instructional improvement in classrooms. Across the six case studies there was a commonality in student achievement: a spike in elementary test scores but no discernible change at the high school level. Mostly, though, the authors concluded that there is no single model of successful school governance, and informed judgments about the effects of any change in governance require at least five to seven years from full implementation.[20]

Main Points

Research on the Relationship Between School Boards and Student Achievement

Regardless of whether a school board is appointed or elected, it has the power to affect the educational quality of a district. The many conditions that might influence student achievement can be placed on a continuum ranging from those closest to the student (proximal influences) to those farther away (distal influences). Proximal conditions might include teacher-student relationships and interaction, instructional strategies, and the learning environment. School board policy decisions are distal, or farther away from the student. While proximal conditions are arguably most likely to have the biggest influence on improving student learning, distal

[18] Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen, "Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement."
[19] Jeffrey R. Henig, "Mayoral Control." In *When Mayors Take Charge,* ed. Joseph P. Viteritti (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2009), 19-45.
[20] Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan, *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

conditions, like school boards, can also affect student outcomes when they directly influence proximal conditions—for example, when a school board's *policies* directly impact the learning environment in schools and classrooms.[21] It is this distal relationship with student learning that leads some to question whether or not local school boards serve a legitimate education function.[22]

Mary Delagardelle, the project director of a multi-year study of school boards known as the Lighthouse Inquiry, argues that recognizing the influence of proximal and distal conditions on student learning "leads to a realistic consideration of the importance of school board decisions and actions and how they can be more effective."[23] Boards can help to create conditions for productive change, which impact the teaching and learning environment throughout the school district and, in turn, impact the learning of students in schools.

Although the literature is saturated with many opinion pieces on effective school board governance, there has been little rigorous research on boards' influence on student achievement. Much of what exists tends to be theoretical or offers "how-to" guidance rather than empirical evidence. In perhaps the most comprehensive review of school board scholarship, Deborah Land found the literature to be "rife with conclusions and recommendations based on personal experience, observations and opinions and a heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence rather than on well-designed research studies"[24] In Land's review of 116 references over 20 years of scholarship, she found just one rigorous study of school board effectiveness in the U.S.: the Iowa Association of School Boards' Lighthouse Inquiry, an important and often-cited examination that now comprises three studies. The first, Lighthouse I (1998-2000), compared a matched sample of three high-achieving school districts in Georgia with three low-achieving districts of similar demographics. Site visits and 159 in-depth interviews with board members, superintendents, and central office and school personnel revealed that boards overseeing higher

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[21] Mary L. Delagardelle, "Board Leadership That Matters Most." In *School Board Effectiveness*, eds. Thomas L. Alsbury and Phil Gore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2015), 16-18.

[22] Michael R. Ford, "Governing for Results on a Postcollective Bargaining Wisconsin School Board," *Journal of School Choice* 9, no. 4 (2015): 533.

[23] Delagardelle, "Board Leadership," 17. See also Mary L. Delagardelle, "The Lighthouse Inquiry." In *The Future of School Board Governance*, ed. Thomas L. Alsbury (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 191-224.

[24] Land, "Local School Boards," 265.

achieving districts exhibited common governance behaviors that contrasted with the behaviors of boards in low-achieving districts. [25] High-achieving boards in the sample were more likely to have in place what the Lighthouse I authors called the "seven conditions for productive change": (1) Connections across the system; (2) Knowing what it takes to change achievement; (3) Workplace support; (4) Professional development; (5) Balance between district-wide direction and building-level autonomy; (6) Strong community connection; and (7) Distributed leadership.[26]

During Lighthouse II (2002-2007), technical assistance and support were provided to the school boards and superintendents of five pilot districts while researchers studied how and to what extent this assistance affected the "seven conditions for productive change" outlined above. By the end of the third year of the pilot project, board members had perceptions and beliefs that all students could succeed, and data indicated a statistically significant gain in reading or math scores for four of the five sites. By the third year of the project, all districts regularly scheduled extra time for boards to focus on student achievement and agreed strongly that local school boards can positively affect student achievement.

Lighthouse III (2006-present) is an ongoing, multi-state project that aims to test the materials and strategies identified in the previous two studies with the goal of developing a well-tested approach to board leadership. Lighthouse trainers contend that improving student achievement requires commitment from the entire system, and it begins with the school board. Taken together, the Lighthouse studies emphasize the need for high-quality, on-going training for board members and demonstrate that school board governance has the capacity to influence student outcomes.

Additional research points to a relationship between school boards and student outcomes, and many studies look specifically at board member behavior. Waters and Marzano's meta-analysis of 27 quantitative studies examining the influence of school district leaders (i.e., superintendents) on student performance found that districts with higher levels of student achievement had boards that were aligned with and supportive of non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction.[27] To this end, the

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[25] Don Rice et al., "The Lighthouse Inquiry," paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (2001), 5.
[26] Rice et al., "Lighthouse Inquiry," 7.
[27] J. Timothy Waters and Robert J. Marzano, "School District Leadership That Works," *ERS Spectrum* 25, no. 2 (2007): 1-12.

Panasonic Foundation, which has offered direct assistance to over 35 school districts over the past three decades, argues that "the best context for improving student achievement occurs when the school board and superintendent are both unwavering in their vision of a better district and conscious that they are mutually dependent for making that vision a reality."[28] This underscores the need for boards to share a vision among the members themselves *and* with superintendents and other district staff.

Using surveys of 175 school board chairs and administrative data from Pennsylvania districts from the 2004-2007 school years, Saatcioglu et al. reported that school board social capital played an important role in improving financial and academic outcomes, and among the sample, it took about two years for these effects to manifest statistically meaningful changes. Bonding measures—shared vision, information exchange, and trust—appeared to have had larger effects on both expenditures and achievement than bridging measures—external formal and informal ties.[29] Subsequent findings by Saatcioglu and Sargut suggest that eighth grade reading and mathematics performance was highest in districts where boards exhibited high levels of diverse interactions with external actors such as other districts, policy experts, and government officials and harmonious, efficient internal member relations. Student performance was lowest in districts where board members lacked positive external and internal relationships.[30]

Most research on school boards has historically focused on the collective board. However, attention to the behaviors of individual board members as change agents appears to have grown since the Lighthouse Inquiry. Alsbury surveyed 162 superintendents in Washington and found that frequent board member turnover was significantly related to low student achievement.[31] Alsbury argues that high turnover among board members is a sign of instability, which is commonly due to conflict, poor interpersonal processes, and the disruptive politics of board-community relations. Lee and Eadens observed board member behavior in video recordings of 115 school board

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[28] Andrew Gelber, Scott Thomas, and Larry Leverett, "The Panasonic Foundation Experience." In *School Board Effectiveness*, eds. Thomas L. Alsbury and Phil Gore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2015), 128.

[29] Argun Saatcioglu et al., "The Role of School Board Social Capital in District Governance," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 10, no. 1 (2011): 18-32.

[30] Argun Saatcioglu and Gokce Sargut, "Sociology of School Boards: A Social Capital Perspective," *Sociological Inquiry* 84, no. 1 (2014): 42-74.

[31] Alsbury, "School Board Member."

meetings across 25 states.[32] When compared to medium- and high-performing districts, the authors found that school board meetings in low-performing districts were more disorderly, devoted less time to student achievement, did not act on policy items, had members who were less respectful and attentive to speakers, and had at least one member who appeared to advance their own agenda and/or monopolize the meeting, all of which led the authors to conclude that board members in underachieving districts might benefit from training on running meetings effectively, focusing on student achievement, and including community voice, among other areas. Likewise, in a survey of 703 school board members and 157 superintendents in California, Grissom found that high levels of conflict on school boards were associated with decreased academic performance.[33]

Where board member behavior is concerned, the negative effects of micromanagement are often cited in the literature.[34] For example, the New England School Development Council conducted 132 interviews across five states and reported that in low-achieving districts, "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."[35] The Panasonic Foundation, in its guide for effective school boards, similarly concluded that board members' micromanagement is a "pervasive problem" that can lead to role confusion and dysfunction.[36] In "10 Mistakes Board Members Make," Caruso affirms this: "Probably the greatest complaint by superintendents is that of the board micromanaging the administration."[37] Substantive research is relatively scarce, though, indicating a need for more inquiry to determine the impact of board members' micromanagement on student achievement.

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[32] David E. Lee and Daniel W. Eadens. "Low-Achieving Districts and Low-Performing Boards," *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 9, no. 3 (2014): 1-13.

[33] Jason Grissom, "Is Discord Detrimental?" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 24 (2012): 289-315.

[34] Nancy Walser, *The Essential School Board Book* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2009), 63. See also: Nicholas D. Caruso, "10 Mistakes Board Members Make"; Paul T. Hill, *School Boards: Focus on School Performance, Not Money and Patronage* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2003).

[35] Walser, *Essential School Board Book*, 6.

[36] Walser, 63.

[37] Caruso, "10 Mistakes," 3.

Implications and Conclusion

On the whole, data seem to indicate that school boards can act as a distal influence on student outcomes and, through district-level policy and practice surrounding teaching, curriculum, and the learning environment, may be able to positively affect student outcomes. In their book, *Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach*, Alsbury and Gore argue that school boards are indeed *capable* of improving student achievement when they prioritize it, but few do. They point to additional empirical work which demonstrates that school boards do not typically put academic benchmarks in superintendent contracts and that student learning has relatively little to do with how, and whether, school boards hold superintendents accountable.[38]

A natural outgrowth of the connection between school board governance and student outcomes is a need for evidence-based best practices. There are a multitude of studies, opinion pieces, and reports on the characteristics of effective school boards, but many, if not most, of those writings are based on anecdotal evidence, opinions, or small qualitative samples that cannot be generalized. French, Peevely, and Stanley reported that school board members generally *believe* they are effective, but there is limited scholarship demonstrating exactly *how* board members can be effective, and in what ways members can govern that might lead to improved student performance.[39]

Arguably the most prominent set of school board governance best practices is the NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards*, which comprises a "key work" and an essential question:

- *Vision*: Where does the board want the district to go?
- *Standards*: Against what should student performance be measured?
- *Assessment*: How should performance against agreed upon standards be measured?

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[38] Julie Trivitt et al., "School Superintendents Have No Contractual Obligation to Improve Learning." See also Howell, *Besieged*.

[39] Michael R. Ford and Douglas M. Ihrke, "Do School Board Governance Best Practices Improve District Performance?", *International Journal of Public Administration* 39, no. 2 (2016): 87; P. Edward French, Gary L. Peevely, and Rodney E. Stanley, "Measuring Perceived School Board Effectiveness in Tennessee," *International Journal of Public Administration* 31, no. 2 (2008): 211-43.

- *Accountability*: Do board members take responsibility for their actions and statements?
- *Alignment*: Are the board and superintendent governance partners?
- *Climate and Culture*: Do board members and staff feel comfortable expressing their views?
- *Collaboration and Community Engagement*: Who are the outside stakeholders and how does the district interact with them?
- *Continuous Improvement*: Does the board engage in ongoing efforts to improve their performance as a board?[40]

Ford and Ihrke operationalized adherence to these *Key Work* concepts with multiple survey items answered by over 300 Wisconsin school board members. Using multivariate regression models, they found that adherence to the best practices was associated with improved achievement in districts represented by board members who had served for five or more years.[41]

A meta-analysis of extant research on school boards by the Center for Public Education found that successful boards commit to high expectations for students; share strong beliefs about students' ability to learn; are accountability-driven; align and sustain resources to meet goals; work together; lead as a team with their superintendent; are data-savvy; collaborate with staff and the community; and participate in team development and training.[42] Research by Rice et al. and Walser offers similar practices that emphasize collaboration with stakeholders, staff accountability, and systems thinking. In a 2013 review of school board research, Johnson similarly identified 12 board leadership practices associated with student achievement, regardless of demographic characteristics of school districts: (1) Creating a vision; (2) Using data; (3) Setting goals; (4) Monitoring progress and taking corrective action; (5) Creating awareness and urgency; (6) Engaging the community; (7) Connecting with district leadership; (8) Creating climate; (9) Providing staff development; (10) Developing policy with a focus on student learning; (11) Demonstrating commitment; and (12) Practicing unified governance.[43]

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[40] NSBA, *The Key Work of School Boards* (Alexandria, VA: Author, 2020).
[41] Ford and Ihrke, "School Board Governance," 91-93.
[42] Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien, *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Public Education, 2011).
[43] Paul A. Johnson, "School Board Governance," *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2012): 90.

Perhaps the newest prescription for school board effectiveness is the "balanced governance" approach, which discourages over-reach by individual board members and advocates a constructive role for the board in setting and monitoring goals for student outcomes. According to the approach, the most effective way to govern districts is through balance, avoiding micromanagement on one end of the continuum and "disengaged, rubber-stamping" on the other.[44] At the heart is the idea that the most successful districts "balance the authority of a superintendent to lead a school district with the necessary oversight of a locally engaged and knowledgeable board."[45]

There is some evidence that professional development (PD) for school district leaders is associated with positive student outcomes. Embedded, ongoing professional learning for school district leadership was one of the conditions for supporting student achievement in the first phase of the Lighthouse Study, and Lighthouse II and III underscore the importance of board member PD. Plough's study of nearly 200 board members in California found that members in low-performing school districts believed that commitment was more important than training, while more board members in high-performing districts registered greater disagreement with this statement.[46] Similarly, the findings from Lee and Eadens' observational study of over 100 school board meetings suggest that boards, especially in low-performing districts, could benefit from PD focused on the areas found to be problematic, such as running meetings effectively and respectfully listening to community input.[47]

Research indicates that the school board can play a positive, though indirect, role in student outcomes, but only if the board is a high-functioning, effective one that prioritizes improving student achievement. Best practices indicate that a highly effective board is, in part, one that is collaborative, shares a vision, has measurable goals for their district and a plan to reach them, and is committed to ongoing improvement—both in the district and among the board itself.

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[44] Thomas L. Alsbury, "Call for Balanced Governance." In *Improving School Board Effectiveness*, eds. Thomas L. Alsbury and Phil Gore, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015), 9.
[45] Alsbury, "Call for Balanced Governance," 9.
[46] Bobbie Plough, "School Board Governance and Student Achievement," *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development* 25 (2014): 41-53.
[47] Lee and Eadens, "Low-Achieving Districts."

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Chapter Activities

Vocabulary

Appointed school board: A school board whose members are selected, typically by a mayor or governor, and appointed to their position, rather than elected.

Distal influences: Factors that are removed from the point of reference. Educational factors such as the school board, administration, culture and climate, and community involvement are removed from the student in the classroom but may indirectly affect achievement.

Elected school board: A school board whose members are democratically elected by voters in a given area. An elected board governs schools independently from the formal influence of the mayor.

Lay school board: A school board comprised of members not necessarily possessing experience in governance or education.

Proximal influences: Factors that are close to the point of reference. Educational factors with direct influence on student achievement include not only the student but also their teacher(s), family dynamics and socioeconomic status, and experiences in the classroom.

Topic Questions

(1) School boards are generally either elected or appointed. What are the pros and cons of each?
(2) Americans overwhelmingly prefer elected school boards. What might drive that preference?
(3) How may special interests influence school policy?
(4) How can school boards positively and negatively affect student achievement?
(5) Describe five best practices of high-functioning school boards.

Activity

Visit the website of your local board of elections. Conduct a search of school board elections over the past decade. When were the elections held (i.e., on- or off-year)? How, if at all, has voter turnout changed over time? School

board elections usually attract an extremely low voter turnout, leading some people to fear that special interest groups can dominate a board. Look up your local board members (they may be listed on the school district's website). How do the board's demographics compare to the students in the district? What prior experience do members bring to their positions? Whose interests do board members appear to serve? In what ways, if at all, do special interests appear at play in your local board?

Further Reading

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Relevant Websites/Links

American School Board Journal: https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ

Find your local district and school board: https://xqsuperschool.org/school-board-lookup

National Association of State Boards of Education: https://www.nasbe.org/

National School Boards Association: https://www.nsba.org/

PRINCIPAL SUPPORT: THE MISSING LINK

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Objectives: 1. Elucidate the need for principal support in urban schools and communities; 2. Discuss multiple forms of support including mentoring, communities of practice, coaching, and induction/advanced training; and 3. Provide practical take-aways for school leaders to consider for the professional development of school principals.

Abstract: Urban school leaders face more challenges with larger populations of children living in poverty and higher rate of principal turnover. Cycles of ongoing support for principals in urban schools present the greatest opportunity for school improvement through adequate mentoring, communities of practice, coaching, and attention to induction and advanced training.

Keywords: principal support; systems; cycles of professional development

Introduction

Urban school leaders face more challenges with larger populations of children who live in poverty. The rich opportunities that exist are often clouded by low student achievement results, poor student attendance, and higher dropout rates (Hanushek, 2014). In fact, the urban principal turnover rate is higher than that of nonurban areas (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). As a result, "students from marginalized backgrounds will have less access to the kind of high-quality leadership that can sustain school improvement, likely reinforcing disparities in students' opportunities to learn among schools at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum" (Grissom, et al., 2019, p. 1). So, districts are left to find ways to maintain school leadership while being confronted with innumerable challenges. Some studies have suggested raising principal salaries in these schools (Norton, 2002/2003; Pijanowski, Hewitt, & Brady, 2009); however, that is

not always plausible. Fink and Brayman (2006) proposed a principal rotation to help alleviate burnout, but this is counterproductive to idea of sustainable change. Others point to principal preparation programs to revise curricula to align with the needs of students of color (Wallace Foundation, 2016). However, one must consider that the number of years between when an administrator receives a master's degree in administration and the time one attains a principalship is approximately 10 years on average (Westberry, 2020). The type of supports provided to principals in urban schools is where the greatest opportunity for change exists.

Literature Review

School leaders are regularly asked to forge new pathways of excellence—to take what exists and make it better; to have the vision and foresight for moving the needle despite reason or circumstance. For decades, talk about school improvement has been focused on curricular adjustments (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005), new standards (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985), or innovative materials (Reynolds, et al., 2000) that could support K-12 learners. Simultaneously, teacher training and professional development opportunities were couched as the ingredients for lasting educational change (Burke, 2013). In recent months, concerted efforts have targeted professional development for engaging online learners or positioning teachers to dually focus on social/emotional learning and the affective domain as well as leading their students to build content knowledge through authentic learning activities. While all of these efforts are noteworthy and timely for that matter, the lack of attention to principal support, or the mechanisms that enable principals to improve as educational leaders, has been abysmal (Finnigan, 2011).

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2015) provided school districts "the flexibility to fund principal leadership, as there are no great schools without great principals…" said former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. Specifically, Title II funding aims to prepare, train, and recruit high quality teachers, principals, or other school leaders. Principal and other school leader preparation academies (Wallace Foundation, 2016) were established to engage these professionals in "clinical preparation that partners the prospective candidate with an effective teacher, principal, or other school leader" who has already demonstrated success in increasing student achievement in their respective school. Whether one is transitioning to a new assistant principal position, refining one's practice, becoming a principal, or even shifting to a new

school, every junction point warrants ongoing, timely professional development for sustained excellence. Despite policy change and research to support its worthiness, principal support continues to take a back seat to other priorities in K-12 schools.

Principals are tasked with innumerable roles and responsibilities as are all educators; their ongoing professional development warrants time and space amidst their productive work schedule. Inattention to these evolving needs exacerbates the leadership voids seen throughout school districts. With the preponderance of educators reaching their retirement, others experiencing burnout, and still others feeling isolated and/or inexperienced in online and hybrid leadership capacities, a cyclical model of principal support for the optimal professional development of these educators is long overdue.

There will always be shifting dynamics within education systems from political and societal movements to even fiscal and academic ones and as a result, cycles of ongoing support are duly needed. This chapter situates principal support as a staple towards school improvement through a calculated and comprehensive effort to provide multiple forms of support. Practical takeaways are included for educational leaders to consider augmenting their own programs through mentoring, communities of practice, coaching, and attention to induction and advanced training.

Main Points

Now that the need has been established for principal support, the conversation must turn to the types of support that exist. Support, by its very definition, means to provide a foundation for and/or assistance. Understanding support structures that provide sustainable aid and opportunities for growth are imperative, as the principal has a direct impact on teacher effectiveness (Ma & Marion, 2017; Naidoo, 2019).

Administrative Teams

Administrative teams' compositions may vary by school. For example, one school may only consider the principal and assistant principals as the traditional administrative team. Other school leaders may consider instructional coaches and even athletic directors as part of the team. Either way, it is important to note that a principal is not alone, that a team is charged with the "administration" of a school.

The role of the assistant principal has long been debated as the roles and duties of the assistant principal have been unclear (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Searby, 2016; Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, & Wang, 2017). In fact, student discipline has been considered the top responsibility by some assistant principals (Militello et al., 2015; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2017), but the increased demand on principals to become instructional leaders in addition to the dealing with the changing demands of technology, legislation, and community engagement to name a few have all necessitated a shift in the role and expectations of the assistant principal (Hillard & Newsome, 2013, Porter, et al., 2008). Therefore, finding the best suited assistant principals for one's specific administrative goals is crucial.

Hiring Practices

The hiring practices of assistant principals are important to examine. How are assistant principals selected for schools and who selects them? Are these key positions considered as a part of succession planning? Rothwell et al. (2015) define succession planning as "a systemic, long-term approach to meeting the present and future talent needs of an organization to continue to achieve its mission and meet or exceed its business objectives" (p. 27). With principal turnover rates, burnout, as well as the number of vacancies expected in school leadership roles (Fuller, 2012; Tyre, 2015; Westberry, 2020) this succession planning is quite necessary.

However, succession planning should not be the only consideration. In order to provide for optimal support for a principal, the administrative team should encompass diversity in skill and talent. Nevertheless, research has shown that people feel compelled to hire those who mirror themselves (Casoria, Reuben, & Rott, 2020; Rivera, 2012). Since no one person can be an expert in all of the roles and responsibilities, there is considerable value in hiring a diverse team where at least one person on the team is technologically savvy, well-versed in special education law, and experienced in coaching, for example. This skill diversity in the staff will afford a greater support for the principal.

Before an assistant principal is hired, the principal should conduct an inventory of the skills on the existing administrative team, and equally important, consider what is missing. This conversation between school leaders could and should be held with the existing administrative team. What skills are needed to create a more complete team? How can those skills represented on the team assist with administrative functions? That