

The Role of the Local School Board In Improving Student Learning

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Abstract

Within this era of accountability and educational reform, it is important to consider the role of the local school board in improving student learning. Many books and articles focus on the important elements of effective school board governance; however, recently there has been a trend to gather longitudinal research focusing instead on how school boards influence student achievement. This brief outlines research and findings that demonstrate the importance of having school board members accomplish the following: set clear goals and high expectations for students and staff, support a positive school culture, provide for shared accountability on all levels of leadership, seek to make decisions based upon accurate and reliable school data, and engage and inform stakeholders regarding student needs. In addition, current research identifies how and why board members need to work with school leaders to identify, record, and monitor district-wide student learning goals as they consider the educational needs of all students.

Research Topic

How can local school boards more effectively support the learning of all students within a district?

Introduction

School board member representation as the governing body of local school districts has been a part of U.S. history for more than 200 years. As city populations grew and government representatives experienced an increase in responsibilities, townspeople were appointed to committees that would instead govern their local school districts. These governing bodies continue to retain control over schools, largely due to the desire of local citizens wanting direct control over their schools' initiatives (Land, 2002). As large urban centers grew, board members were elected or appointed to represent area wards. The 1980s saw the first push toward school reform and accountability to the public. The 1990s implemented this accountability through the movement of establishing "educational standards." The emphasis on standards, school reform, and accountability remains a focus today and has positioned school boards in a dramatically different educational climate (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

In the past, school boards did not pay much attention to student performance (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Student learning was left up to the superintendent and staff-- the board was responsible for oversight of the superintendent and district finances. The focus of local school boards has now changed dramatically. Today, movement toward localized control allows school boards to govern in a manner that is more reflective of the needs in the community but which functions within the parameters established by the state government. In addition to the superintendent and school staff, boards now share in the responsibility of student learning and are held accountable for student performance, most commonly through the use of standardized testing (Gemberling et al, 2009; Marzano & Waters,

2009). Performance results are often reported to state authorities and shared with community members as a way of determining the effectiveness of school and board leadership.

This brief will consider how school boards can effectively contribute toward growth in student achievement while fulfilling their respective governance roles. For the purpose of this paper, effective models will be designated as those boards which serve as models of quality leadership that contribute to improvements in student learning (Bartusek, 2000; Castallo, 2001; Land, 2002; Marzano & Waters, 2009). In fact, student achievement is considered the primary purpose of the school board (Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010). While consideration of this research is relevant to spark new thinking and develop new understandings, it is also important to reflect on how each school board and school district is unique. Schools function in an organic, non-linear organizational structure within broader political, social, and institutional realms. This makes the approach to school improvement challenging and further illustrates that there is no “one size fits all” model that will work the same in all districts. To further complicate things, real change takes time—especially when positive improvements in school culture are necessary in order to foster significant changes in teaching and learning.

School boards essentially operate at a distance from the students in the classroom, yet their decisions and policies have a tremendous effect on student learning. While teachers are the most important factor influencing learning (Goodwin, 2010), board decisions impact the classroom environment through curricular determinations, professional development initiatives, and class size provisions. School board members do not need to be certified teachers in order to be effective in their role of serving the school district; however, board members do “need to develop sufficient understanding, knowledge, and beliefs in order to create the conditions within the system which will ensure that the professional educators can grow in their education expertise and generate productive change” (Bartusek, 2000, p. 59).

While the initiatives and interests that influence a board member to run for election can sometimes hinder the effectiveness of board operations and school function, Richard Castallo, a

college of education professor and school board trainer, has yet to find a board member that didn't want students to demonstrate high levels of academic performance (Castallo, 2001). In addition to political agendas and personal vendettas that may hinder effective leadership, board members may know little about effective board service and/or little about pedagogy. Board leaders may believe they are qualified to be in charge simply because they once were educated in public schools or have children attending school within the district. Research demonstrates, however, that it takes much more than good intentions to be an effective school board member that can help lead a school district effectively and have a positive impact on student learning (Alsburry, 2008; Bartusek, 2000; Black, 2008; Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010; Castallo, 2001; Eadie, 2005; Gemberling et al., 2009; LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Reeves, 2004;).

Board members also come into their positions with a wide-range of professional expertise and personal beliefs and values. These skills and understandings influence board decisions. Board decisions and beliefs then transform policies, goals, and actions that have both a direct and indirect influence on the district's schools and students. In addition, school improvement can be difficult to achieve, particularly when attempting to address the needs of students within large urban school districts. School board effectiveness can also be limited when board members are elected to represent specific factions of the community or are pressured to serve at the pleasure of large corporations, governmental institutions, or special interest groups. Bradshaw and Osborne (2010) describe one U.S. study that found that poor achieving school districts seemed to focus more on personal agendas than those of better performing schools.

Role of the Superintendent

In earlier eras of U.S. educational history, the superintendent's responsibilities were initially tightly controlled and largely instructional. The superintendent's role became more professional and managerial in nature as large urban centers began to burgeon throughout the eastern states. As the superintendent's responsibilities developed, school board members

withdrew their management reach and focused more on policy formation (Castallo, 2001). This approach to local school board structure spread throughout the colonies and into rural regions as population centers began to spread west. This system of governance is similar to the approach used today-- although there is a wide variance as to how schools are governed within these general parameters.

The board's role is extremely important in taking the lead for positive change; however, "the superintendent is responsible for setting the stage through discussions with board members about their role and interest in moving student achievement to greater levels" (Castallo, 2001, p. 14). Furthermore, the superintendent is charged with interpreting board guidance and putting goals into action. A strong board and superintendent relationship is a crucial component of a successful school district reaching organizational goals (Carver, 1997; Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999). In turn, the superintendent also has a responsibility to build a productive partnership with the board through systematic board development, to provide the board with quality and accurate information in order to encourage proper communication and information sharing, and to offer clarity to the board on priorities and needs within the district (Carver, 1997; Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999). All of these elements not only lead to good decision-making but also build trust within the superintendent and board partnership that can be vital when working toward district change.

Role of the Board

At times it can be difficult for board members and the superintendent to know where the line exists between board leadership and district leadership (Carver, 1997; Smoley, 1999; Reeves, 2002, 2004). In essence both groups are "in charge" but Reeves (2002, 2004) suggests that all school leaders clearly define their "roles" rather than spend the time and effort vying for power. The board's tool to improve district function and student learning is through effective policy making. While board members have a responsibility to form policy on accurate and relevant information (policy leadership), the superintendent is equally responsible for implementing the

policy (administrative leadership). Good administrative and board decisions are made when both groups have access to relevant and accurate information, discuss issues deliberately, consider alternative actions, and work toward consensus (Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999). Furthermore, integrity and trust are gained inside and outside of the organization when boards monitor, evaluate, and publicize decisions. Leadership and trust are important and matter when it comes to improving teaching and learning.

First and foremost, the board should set the precedent for improvement by supporting the success of the superintendent. Boards do this by hiring a qualified and effective leader, setting mutual and ongoing expectations, and evaluating the superintendent both formally and informally based on district goals and interpersonal skills. A decisive component of monitoring progress is the specific feedback given by board members and the discussion around district goals. Literature reviewed for this brief (Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010; Smoley, 1999) also suggests that boards and superintendents implement self-evaluations and use these as a basis for ongoing discussion aimed at progress.

Role of the State and Federal Government

The federal government began to exert more control over local school boards in the 1950s and 1960s as federal funds came with specific provisions in response to the Civil Rights Movement and with the launch of the Russian *Sputnik* satellite. Today, the state and the federal government continue to extend this authority over local boards and their schools. Political pressure has intensified to increase learning for all students with many states mandating testing programs as a demonstration of “accountability” and student achievement (Bartusek, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2010). This focus and control was intensified in 2001 through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Land, 2002; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Reeves, 2002, 2004). The “involvement of the general governance agencies and the mimicking by local boards of the high-stakes policies radically changed the traditional relationships between general

governance agencies, school board/superintendent teams, and the schools” (Bartusek, 2000, p. 19).

More recently, *The Local School Board Governance and Flexibility Act of 2013* was introduced in the House of Representatives to protect local governance from counter-productive measures initiated by the U.S. Department of Education (Sack- Min, 2013). This legislation, which is supported by both the National School Board Association (NSBA) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), would force the U.S. Department of Education to undergo specific procedural steps before enacting regulations, grant requirements, and rules that affect public education. The intent is to put structures in place that allow local school boards to reclaim their decision-making authority and respond more quickly to the needs of students and the desires of constituents.

It is important to point out that none of the research reviewed for this brief identified “competition” as a predictor of school success or as a common characteristic in schools with a positive school culture and high achieving students. Many of the federal and state programs that provide funding for education are competitive and punitive (Fullan, 2005). School districts make a community stronger when they invest in and learn from each other through collaboration and information sharing (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Many communities have passed legislation that moves beyond information sharing and involves spreading out financial resources for school funding, as with the Omaha metro area Learning Community. This is reflected in the summary of findings described below.

Summary of Findings

A research study called the *Lighthouse Project*, conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards, is now reaching its 15th year of an effort to identify a link between board leadership and student achievement. This project, along with other current research, has identified several differences between high and low achieving school districts. A compilation of this research indicates that school boards from high achieving schools have the following in common:

1) They have clear goals. 2) Board members have high expectations for students and staff. 3) A positive and productive culture exists with school leadership. 4) Board members work collaboratively with the superintendent, parents, and stakeholders to improve engagement and information sharing (Bartusek, 2000; Black, 2008; LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Clear Goals and High Expectations

The Iowa Association of School Boards found that after five years of intensive work with local school boards, all districts studied demonstrated an increase in state test scores and board members displayed a far greater understanding of how schools positively impact student achievement (Black, 2008; LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009). These board members were able to set clear goals and work with school leaders to help build school cultures that foster high expectations for all students. The superintendent and board relationship was also vital within these school districts. The board and school leaders started their work toward school improvement by studying research and learning together. They looked for examples of other school districts that had made significant growth and studied their methods and practices. These boards then began investigating multiple measures of district student data to identify where improvements were needed the most. They then used student data to set clear district-wide goals which set a high standard for students and staff. With a more concentrated focus on clearly established goals, boards are better able to allocate the necessary financial resources and provide essential professional development for staff that fosters the conditions for positive change and school improvement.

Positive School Culture

True system change not only takes time—it also takes focus (Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Reeves, 2004). Setting the focus of expectations for the entirety of district staff can be overwhelming, especially if all central office leadership is not prepared to work together. The school board and superintendent collectively provide this focus by not starting through a series of

new initiatives without cutting out old ones. In addition, it is the superintendent that fosters a positive relationship between central office staff and teachers. This relationship between the central office and teachers must move beyond the more traditional compliance and enforcement, and instead focus on support and shared accountability (Fullan, 2005). A successful school district fosters a positive school climate that is focused on eliminating fear and distrust because both prevent knowledge from being implemented into action. Through their extensive research of successful companies, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) found that a fear of failure focuses employee attention on short-term goals and blaming others rather than on long-term sustainable change and collective improvement. In fact, Michael Fullan (2001) in his research found that “the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve” (p. 5). Board members and school staff must have a clear understanding of the district mission, student learning goals, and responsibilities for effective school improvement to take place.

Shared Accountability

Having a set of clearly defined initiatives surrounding student learning and a specific strategy in place for implementation, also helps school leaders set their professional goals and leads to greater shared accountability which can be spread from central office staff to the student (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McAdams, 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2004;). This same literature also describes how school change is most effective when accountability is shared among all levels of school leadership—from the boardroom to the classroom.

School board members, school leaders, and district staff understand that when setting goals there must also be a clear indication of the steps necessary for achievement, a timeline for accomplishment, and an indication of who is responsible for each objective. This applies the pressure of accountability more evenly on the shoulders of all levels of school leadership and does not place it on the individual backs of district teachers (Castallo, 2001; Goodwin, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McAdams, 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2004). It is not only best practice but also morally responsible to distribute leadership and accountability

throughout district levels. When district-wide measures of student progress are collected and recorded, a board is more able to see a clear picture of progress and identify the adjustments needed. However, professional development and deep discussions are also necessary. Board members and school leaders need to understand the importance of basing decisions upon multiple measures of disaggregated data. A balanced, holistic assessment approach that moves beyond test scores and identifies significant environmental, physical, and mental influences behind the data points offers a more clear perspective of a student's challenges and opportunities. Information on family background, student attendance, and classroom behavior are also valuable to consider. "Bluntly stated, teacher quality will be an accident rather than the result of careful design if board accountability systems fail to identify, document, recognize, and reward quality on multiple levels throughout the system" (Reeves, 2004, p. 85). Effective performance evaluations and improvement monitoring require the ability to not only identify elements of quality teaching and learning but also the ability to replicate it (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Informed Decision-making

School improvement efforts and initiatives to raise student achievement are more likely to occur when the decisions are closely connected to the educational environment of the classroom (Black, 2008; Castallo, 2001; Eadie, 2005; Goodwin, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Reeves, 2002, 2004). "The governance processes are yet more distal and are likely to have significant effect only when they affect the conditions for change and those in turn affect the educational environment" (Bartusek, 2000, p. 58). The board, superintendent, and other central office staff are not in a close proximal relationship to the learner, yet it is essential for all key decision makers within the school to have a realistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges within the classroom if they hope to make long-lasting and sustainable change. *The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning* (Goodwin, 2010) found strong correlations between student achievement and school leaders who are: involved with curriculum and assessment development, minimize classroom

discipline issues for teachers, and provide teachers with the needed resources to deliver effective instruction.

Conversely, site-based management has not demonstrated greater innovation nor significant improvements in student learning (Bartusek, 2000; Marzano & Waters 2009). Marzano and Waters (2009) analyzed studies to determine the correlation between site-based management and student achievement. They were surprised to find little correlation. These authors and researchers suggest individual schools should retain the autonomy to select textbooks, set their schedules, and determine how assessments are scheduled and used. However, “this autonomy does not extend to renegotiating or ignoring nonnegotiable goals that have been established at the district level regarding achievement and instruction” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 18). They suggest instead a “coupling” approach that tightly aligns the initiatives of individual schools with all others throughout the district. When tight coupling occurs, student achievement throughout the whole district will increase (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Board action and resource allocation also should tie to district goals. A portion of every school board meeting should be devoted to student achievement where schools can report their progress.

Engage and Educate Stakeholders

The board sends a clear message of high student expectations to the public when district goals and their progress are shared during public board meetings. Effective districts have board members that support nonnegotiable district goals for teaching and learning. These boards make sure that these goals remain a priority and that “no other initiatives deflect attention or resources from accomplishing these goals” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 7). This type of commitment is essential and serves not only as a public display of responsible goal setting but also allows stakeholders an opportunity to become more informed and engaged.

In addition, board members are more effective when they encourage public input and invest time in understanding the student, parent, staff, and community perspective (Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999). “Boards should also guard against the overuse of executive

session or individual, private communications to reach consensus” (Smoley, 1999, p. 27). These actions can prevent the public from understanding important issues and limits the possibility that there will be broader support and trust for district decisions and actions. Adopting long-term goals for achievement and instruction and constantly supporting these goals in private and in public are board activities directly related to growth in student learning (Marzano & Waters, 2009). It is through wide-range public support that effective and long-lasting reforms are made and sustained (McAdams, 2006). Fullan (2005) suggests that school leaders that are serious about implementing effective educational reform spend a considerable amount of time communicating the overall purpose and plan to the general public, special interests groups, and school staff.

Implications of Findings

Build Board Capacity

The research literature reviewed for this brief describes the importance for board members to move beyond good intentions and good governance to focus on student learning. Effective board governance involves more than following a series of broad-based steps to build a board/school leadership team. Board members must also understand the teaching and learning challenges and opportunities within their own schools as members begin to lay the foundation for school district accountability. Findings suggest that boards need to devote more time studying and reading educational research, to build understanding through participation in educational programming and training, and to develop capacity through board work sessions. Board members also need to be provided a comprehensive picture of student need by reviewing data from multiple measures (Castallo, 2001; Eadie, 2006; Goodwin, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McAdams, 2006; Reeves, 2004). This may challenge some boards and their individual members that are comfortable with the traditional corporate model of board governance that encourages a more hands-off approach.

Board members that participated in *The Lighthouse Project* (2000) shared a variety of approaches that helped them partner with school leaders to raise student achievement within their

districts. Some boards added monthly work sessions, which were, devoted solely to the study of educational research and monitoring student data. In addition, these sessions naturally build stronger relationships within school district leadership and among board members. Other board members used their selected school goals and aligned these with the expectations they had for their superintendent in the area of student learning. "As boards remained consistent in their focus, expectations, support, and accountability demands, confidence grew that this improvement work was for real" (LaMonte & Delagardele, 2009, p. 29). In an era of educational reform that often confuses and drains the energy of educators and school leaders, teachers need to know that their board would support them as they all work together toward identified school goals. Some school boards went as far as describing these school-wide student goals within their professional development policy in an effort to define outcomes and measure progress. In summary, one of the most important reasons for building the capacity of the board to understand the goals of the district and the needs of students is to ensure that the board approves the allocation of resources which aligns with these goals. Resources not only involve money, but also effort, energy, inventiveness, and commitment across the system (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Pledge Long-term Commitment

A seven-year study conducted by researcher Tom Alsbury (2008) from Iowa State University found that "in districts of all sizes, board turnover caused by political turmoil, resulting from critical community dissatisfaction with the school board and/or district leadership, is linked to declining student test scores" (p. 262). His study focused on identifying the difference between political and apolitical motivated turnover within school board candidates. There was a statistically significant association with politically motivated turnover and student test scores. Findings indicate that it may be beneficial for school board members to consider running for board positions with the goal of long-term participation in mind (Alsbury, 2008).

In addition, Marzano and Waters (2009) found two studies that indicate the long-term commitment of the superintendent is also important to improving student achievement.

“Specifically, this finding implies that the longevity of the superintendent has a positive effect on the average academic achievement of students in the district (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 9). This commitment goes both ways. The school board and local community should work to provide an environment where the superintendent will want to stay ten years or more, while in turn the superintendent should pledge a commitment to remain long enough to see the full implementation of district goals. School boards need to get a sense from the superintendent they hire that he or she is willing and able to stay with the district for at least a decade and avoid hiring a school leader that is focused more on climbing the professional ladder than on implementing change. Without longevity from school and board leadership, it is difficult and perhaps unfair to ask personnel to take part in significant school reform; furthermore, research indicates that it can have a negative impact on student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Educate and Inform Stakeholders

Board members assist school leaders and all staff in serving as ambassadors of the school within the broader school community. Educating the public on school matters takes time and effort. It is important that district goals be shared beyond the walls of the school and out among the community so parents and citizens can support these efforts as well. There is solid support from educational literature (Black, 2008; Castallo, 2001; Eadie, 2005; McAdams, 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2004) that quality boards invite constituents to be active participants in the development of the district's educational philosophy and in setting district-wide priorities. This participation cannot be achieved through token representation, but rather building the capacity of the board to know how to utilize the steps of shared decision-making effectively. Involving parents and students in decisions is key to sustainability, community understanding, and meaningful discourse. Improvement needs time and energy. Short-term goals taken on through swift implementation use up the energy necessary to sustain long-term change and the time needed for renewal, reflection, and growth (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Board members can participate in community-based groups to initiate discussions about school goals. After individual board members develop their understanding of school goals and challenges, these members could also be encouraged and invited to present to outside community organizations and businesses on behalf of the district. These conversations can draw in the support of local businesses and other public institutions and organizations. For example, the local chamber of commerce and public library may partner in support of a school's goal of improved literacy skills by conducting a community wide book-drive for lower income families. The school and public libraries might also decide to host a parent night to help support literacy efforts at home. By bringing in community partners to aid district goals, boards provide some protection and assurance to school staff that set backs and obstacles won't throw the goals off track. To a certain extent, school boards can help shield the district from external influences and special interest groups. This gives school leaders and staffs the confidence and the time to make necessary changes. Having a concentrated focus and engaging the community in the process, also gives board members the tools they need to educate local legislative representatives in an effort to minimize the interference of statewide political influences.

Application to the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC)

This brief has several direct implications for all metro area schools, their leaders, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and MOEC. As this research has illustrated, board leadership matters in school efforts to improve teaching and learning. This is an important finding due to the current atmosphere of increased "accountability" imposed upon schools by both federal and state mandates. While board leadership is not the single most important factor related to increasing student achievement, it is valuable to consider the strong implications demonstrated by this research brief as board orientations, trainings, work sessions, board meetings, and school board association conferences are planned that support the work done in schools.

With this information, metro school leaders could work with both the Iowa and Nebraska School Board Associations to ensure board professional training and conference sessions focused

on student achievement take place throughout both states. As indicated, board members need to receive accurate and current information about the specific steps that can be taken to help districts: identify, influence, and monitor district goals, analyze student data and learning progress, and allocate resources to support these measures. Furthermore, boards cannot simply adopt a “student achievement policy” and call it a day.

Board members and members of the Learning Community must learn specifics about how to share in the responsibility for school improvement and student equity, not by micro-managing, but by setting high expectations for themselves and for school leaders in this area while monitoring and evaluating progress toward these goals. For example, on the Iowa Association of School Boards' website (<http://www.ia-sb.org/StudentAchievement.aspx>) there is information relating to student achievement for use by members. This site provides research articles and board study guide materials indicating that this topic is of great importance. *The Lighthouse Project* is also available on the website and is displayed as a link from the homepage. In addition, as the foundation for student achievement is built through board training it is important this professional development not stop with the state school board associations-- individual school districts must also prioritize student learning and training it to make it appropriate to the distinctive needs of their individual schools. This could be implemented through inter-district, association, and/or university collaboration.

Furthermore, school districts in both Nebraska and Iowa could elect to participate in the ongoing *Lighthouse Project* study or identify another researcher to implement a similar project that could help school districts monitor district student learning goals. The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) would be a good starting point to look for interested researchers given the need for improvement demonstrated by many schools in the local area, particularly those showing a significant learning discrepancy between majority and minority student populations. The Sherwood Foundation has been a significant financial supporter of several important educational initiatives in the area, particularly in early childhood. The Sherwood Foundation may

also have an interest in helping board members learn how to become more effective in addressing student achievement.

It is important for members of MOEC to look at their individual school districts and consider how they can further educate their board members regarding important educational matters. As Ted Stillwell, Chief Executive Officer of the Omaha Learning Community stated, “school board members and representatives of the Learning Community all need a common framework to speak from in order to make the most difference” (personal communication, March 23, 2013). It may be possible in the future for MOEC to offer collaborative training and professional development for board members that align to specific priority areas that are established by members in order to lay the foundation for a common framework. This could be coordinated through a partnership with the UNO because the concepts tie directly to course content currently taught through UNO’s College of Education. Courses such as Governance and Politics (EDAD 8020) and Data Driven Decision-making (TED 8000) are intended to help school leaders understand how to make good decisions based upon a broader perspective of the federal, state, and local influences on education. UNO also offers courses directed at obtaining a superintendent’s certification. Having a deep understanding of how school boards can serve as quality partners in the quest for higher levels of student learning could be an integral part of this program.

Furthermore, board members and school leaders serve as important community and state advocates. In the current “high stakes” environment, board members help fulfill an important role in helping community stakeholders better understand the needs and challenges in their community schools. Setting high expectations for our locally elected officials is necessary if a school is to successfully meet their desired goals. Board members play a fundamental role in helping all metro area students improve their ability to learn and grow into successful adults. Providing quality teaching and learning is the fundamental responsibility of all MOEC schools and their representatives.

Conclusion

The current political climate is causing an extraordinary paradigm shift in education that affects all sizes of school districts throughout the country. These changes also influence the governance and function of local school boards. “Unique developments have dramatically altered or ‘flattened’ the environment in which school boards operate, breaking their monopoly on public education within their boundaries, further loosening their already tenuous grip on policy, and empowering citizens, parents, and staff members” (Boyd, 2007, p. xv). This transference of power presents many challenges to local boards as pressure mounts toward an increase in board accountability and transparency while at the same time calling for boards to address concerns regarding student achievement and school funding.

While the research shared throughout this paper may seem to indicate that school board members of today need to become educational experts with an astute interest in micro-managing district affairs, this is not the case. School board members do, however, need to be motivated and willing to learn about the existing needs of all their district’s students while at the same time working to develop an adequate level of understanding regarding the conditions that support effective and quality school improvement. The historic assumptions and traditional practices of many boards may need to change to adapt to current findings if they hope to make a more positive impact on student learning within their schools. “The willingness of boards to evolve, to adapt, to develop their own capacity for leadership, will dictate the extent of their health and longevity” (Williams-Boyd, 2002, p. 73). Board members can be dynamic and productive members of a strong and effective school team when their efforts are focused and their skills are utilized to support the efforts of the superintendent, teachers, and students.

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Author's Information

Cindy Copich is a graduate assistant and full-time doctoral student with the department of Educational Leadership at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). She taught elementary students and pre-school children for more than 12 years before serving as the Executive Director for an Omaha-based nonprofit organization. Seven years of working with an affluent board of Omaha business leaders to grow organizational services provided Cindy with management and leadership experiences have been vital to her professional growth. At UNO, she helps facilitate professional development sessions and courses for College of Education students and writes professionally on a variety of education related topics. Cindy is also a newly elected member of the 2013 Bellevue Public Schools Board of Education. She enjoys building relationships with fellow board members and learning from school leaders as they all work together to improve teaching and learning for the students of Bellevue Public Schools. Cindy resides in Bellevue, Nebraska with her 3 children and husband.

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