



Lighthouse Study: Board member beliefs make a difference in district success

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Board members rarely see the direct results of their work. But a new study conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) makes clear what a vital role a board of education plays in the success of the school district.

IASB went to Georgia to study the differences between boards of education in three successful school districts and three in less successful ones. Districts were identified as “moving”, that is, making progress and already far above the norm and those which were “stuck,” in other words, student achievement was relatively stable and below the norm.

The findings in the *Lighthouse Inquiry*, indicate that school boards in high-achieving districts are “significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers.”

While the study is quite lengthy, these are the key differences found between the moving and the stuck districts:

Elevating vs. Accepting Belief Systems

In the high-achieving districts, the board/superintendent team and school personnel consistently expressed an “elevating” view of students. Students were viewed as emerging and flexible and the school’s job was seen as releasing each student’s potential. The board/superintendent team and school personnel viewed the school system critically and were constantly seeking opportunities to improve. The social or economic conditions of homes and the community were seen as challenges in the quest to help all students succeed. “This is a place for all kids to excel. No one feels left out,” said one board member. Another said, “Sometimes people say the poor students have limits. I say all kids have limits. I believe we have not reached the limits of any of the kids in our system.”

In the low-achieving districts, the board/superintendent team and school personnel accepted limitations in students and the school system. They tended to view students as limited by characteristics such as their income or home situation, and accepted schools as they were. Their focus was on managing the school environment, rather than changing or improving it. “You always have some parents you just can’t reach,” said one board member. Another said, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. This applies to both students and staff.”

Understanding and Focus on School Renewal

In the high-achieving districts, school board members showed greater understanding and influence in each of seven conditions for productive change that provided one “lens” for the content analysis. They were knowledgeable about topics such as improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. They were able to clearly describe the purposes and processes of school improvement initiatives and identify the board’s role in supporting those initiatives.

They could give specific examples of how district goals were being carried out by administrators and teachers. This clarity was also evident among school personnel.

In the low-achieving districts, board members were, as a whole, only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives. They were sometimes aware of goals, but were seldom able to describe actions being taken by staff members to improve learning.

Action in Buildings and Classrooms

Generally, interviews with central office administrators, principals and teachers con-firmed that the board’s knowledge and beliefs around the seven

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conditions for productive change were connected to action at the building and classroom levels.

Staff members in the high-achieving districts could link building goals to board/district goals for student learning and describe how those goals were having an impact in their classroom and other classrooms in the building. Staff members identified clear goals for improvement, described how staff development supported the goals, and how they were monitoring progress based on data about student learning.

In the low-achieving districts these connections across the system were not discernible. There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level.

What Do These Results Mean to Connecticut Boards of Education?

Although IASB's *Lighthouse Study* was conducted using only six districts and over 160 interviews with board members and educators, certain lessons can be learned. Boards can help increase student achievement by:

- Consistently expressing the belief that all students can learn and that the school could teach all students. This “no excuses” belief system results in high standards for students and an on-going dedication to improvement.

- Becoming more knowledgeable about teaching and learning issues, including school improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development.
- Using data and other information on student needs and results to make decisions.
- Creating goals both for the board of education and for the district as a whole. Progress towards achieving them should, of course, be monitored on a periodic basis. CAFE has helped many districts with this – if we can help you, please let us know.
- High-achieving boards regularly monitored progress on improvement efforts and modified direction as a result.
- Creating a supportive workplace for staff. Boards in high-achieving districts supported regular staff development to help teachers be more effective, supported shared leadership and decision making among staff, and regularly expressed appreciation for staff members.
- Involving their communities. Board members in moving districts identified how they connect with and listen to their communities and focus on involving parents in education.

A summary of the *Lighthouse Study* is available at <http://www.ia-sb.org/Spotlight.aspx?id=4580>. Go to Student Achievement section.