



Lighthouse 2005 Report: Past, Present, and Future
*The Lighthouse Research on School Board Leadership
 for Student Achievement*

The history of education reform in the U.S. shows some evidence of success in improving education at the classroom and school levels (“pockets of excellence”), but little evidence that those successes were able to extend or sustain beyond the individual classroom or the school involved in the improvement effort. If the United States is to achieve the excellence and equity in public education that is our promised goal, it is essential that we find the keys to broadening excellence to the district and state level and identify the key leaders for this level of impact.

The Lighthouse Research focuses on the role of local school boards and superintendents in leading and sustaining districtwide high and equitable student achievement. School boards are charged with decisions that impact what students learn, how students are taught, how learning is measured, how teachers are supported with professional development, how funds are focused on district priorities, and how effectively the community is engaged around student learning. While, by their nature school boards are removed from the day-to-day work of teaching and learning, they control the conditions that can allow successful teaching and learning to occur throughout the system.

Original Lighthouse Study (1998 – 2000): (LH 1) An ethnographic study of school districts generating unusually high levels of student achievement and school districts with similar characteristics but generating significantly lower levels of student achievement.

- **Purpose:** Research has repeatedly shown that some teachers, some schools, some curricula, and some instructional methods generate higher achievement than others. The question this study attempted to answer was, “Do some school boards generate higher achievement than others? If so, do they do so through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others?”
- **Process:** Researchers looked first for districts with extremely different levels of student achievement but similar in other characteristics such as socio-economic status, size, location, etc; and then conducted individual interviews with board members, superintendents, district

level administrators, principals, and teachers to learn about their school improvement efforts (what they were trying to improve and how they were trying to improve it).

- **Findings** showed that school boards in districts with a history of higher student achievement were significantly different in knowledge, beliefs and actions from the boards in the lower achieving districts. This study became one of the first and only studies that made a credible research-based connection between the work of the school board and levels of student achievement.

The Current Lighthouse Project (2002 – 2007): (LH 2) A five-year, federally funded inquiry into the role of the local governance team in districtwide efforts to improve student achievement.

Purpose: To build upon the findings of the first Lighthouse study and identify the ways in which local school boards influence the conditions for success that are necessary to improve student achievement. This project is also trying to identify the types of development and supports school boards need in order to have a positive impact on district efforts to improve student achievement.

- **Process:** Researchers are using an action research approach with the boards and superintendents in five pilot school districts in Iowa over a period of 5 years while studying the changes in specific conditions that support improvement, changes in beliefs, and changes in student achievement.
- **Findings:** Preliminary results from 3 years of work in 5 pilot districts reveal significant learning about key behaviors of the board/superintendent team that influence district effort to improve achievement. Areas such as creating a sense of urgency, developing a districtwide focus for improvement, creating conditions within the system for success, monitoring progress, deliberative policy development, and developing a leadership continuum have influenced board behaviors and the practices and beliefs of district staff in these pilot districts. Evidence of impact includes:
 - Combined survey data from 4 of the 5 sites show a significant increase, from year 1 to year 3, in the perceived presence of 6 of the 7 conditions that support positive change.
 - Combined survey data from 4 of the 5 sites show a significant positive change and/or met the target, from year 1 to year 3, in agreement with 12 of 15 positive belief statements.

- All sites participating in this project have shown significant improvement in one or more indicators of specific conditions necessary for improving student achievement;
- On average, 91% of all staff and board members across all sites say that there is a clear and focused goal in their district for improving student achievement;
- In 4 of the 5 sites, data show an increase of 48-90% of all staff and the board who could consistently describe the district's school improvement goals;
- In all sites, 83-100% of all staff and the board indicate that there is a clear district-wide focus on improving literacy;
- In 3 of the 5 sites, the amount of time spent in regular board meetings on policy and student achievement issues increased from an average of 16% to an average of 37%;
- The boards in all 5 districts are regularly allocating additional board work session time to focus exclusively on student achievement issues;
- By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that frequently monitoring student achievement, ensuring children's earliest school success, and partnering with the community are critical for improving teaching and learning;
- By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that local school boards can positively impact student achievement;
- In year 3, significant gains on a measure of reading comprehension were seen [from pretest to posttest] at every grade level in one district with an average of 94% of the students K-12 scoring average or above;
- From year 1 to year 4 in one district, a significant increasing trend in the percentage of students proficient on one measure of reading comprehension was seen at grades 3, 6, 8, and 10 and in the cohort classes of 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Lighthouse National/Governance Renaissance: (LH 3) An emerging 5-year national study of best practices of state school board associations and board/superintendent teams in 9 states for developing board leadership for improving student learning.

Purpose: Build on and scale the learnings from the Lighthouse Project across districts and states as well as to expand the interventions to clearly define best practices for school boards and for

the state associations in supporting them. Move the focus from district-wide support for high and equitable student achievement to state-wide support of whole districts.

Key questions include: What does it take to create a state-wide focus on improving student achievement and what supports are necessary to sustain that focus (state school boards association, state education association, state administrators' association, etc.)? What kinds of effort does it take to support and sustain that focus and to build the effectiveness of boards and superintendents?

Process: The research will now move into more of a quasi-experimental approach. We will use the research measures that are shown to be effective in the LH research and test the impact of a variety of interventions with boards to find the most effective approaches for building board/superintendent leadership for high and equitable student achievement.

- Common data tools across all states will monitor (at a minimum):
 - changes in the district conditions for student achievement,
 - beliefs about what is possible to expect and what impacts student learning, and
 - levels of student achievement.
- 9 participating states and one national association:

▪ California	▪ Kentucky
▪ Colorado	▪ Missouri
▪ Idaho	▪ National School Boards Association
▪ Illinois	▪ Oregon
▪ Iowa	▪ Wisconsin

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