

# Governance and Student Achievement

An evidence-based approach to improving achievement by improving governance



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In 2008, Matt Miller opined in the pages of *The Atlantic* that it was time to eliminate local, democratically elected school boards on the grounds that they are barriers to increasing student achievement.

While Miller's piece lacked any hard evidence to support his policy prescription, it was indicative of an ongoing push to supplant traditional school board governance with mayoral-run school districts, state recovery school districts, and school choice options such as charter schools and private school vouchers.

Here in Wisconsin, there has been a steady uptick in the number of publicly funded pupils attending schools that are not governed by a traditional school board. These changes beg the questions, is there evidence that democratically elected school boards impact student achievement and, if so, how?

## Lighthouse Study

Researchers first began to explore these questions in 1998 as part of the Iowa School Board Foundation's Lighthouse Inquiry. They found that yes, school boards can impact student achievement by creating conditions for productive change. Recommended steps included building connections across the education system, providing workplace support and professional development, and finding the right balance between district authority and school autonomy.

The positive findings of the Lighthouse Inquiry demonstrated the need to provide school board members with a guide for improving governance. A host of best practice lists have been created by academics and practitioners, but the most prominent guidelines for effective school board governance aimed at increasing student achievement are

the National School Boards Association's Key Work of School Boards (Key Work).

## A Look at Wisconsin School Boards

In 2013, we set out to test the link between adherence to the Key Work and student achievement in Wisconsin school districts. First, we operationalized the then-eight area Key Work (the newly revised edition of Key Work has five areas) — vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate and culture, collaboration and community engagement, and continuous improvement — through a series of survey questions designed to measure the extent to which school board members adhered to these concepts. Second, we surveyed the population of school board members serving in Wisconsin. The result was a sample that included data from

**Is there evidence** that democratically elected school boards impact student achievement and, **if so, how?**

47.4 percent of all Wisconsin school boards.

Once we collected our surveys, we paired responses with hard data on the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and performance levels of Wisconsin school districts. Finally, we processed the responses and data to determine if greater adherence to the Key Work resulted in higher levels of performance even after accounting for the effects of district size, spending, staffing, and student population.

We found that when school board members who have served for at least five years indicate greater adherence to the Key Work, student achievement increases. Specifically, greater adherence to the Key Work concepts has a statistically significant relationship with a district's reading proficiency levels, and overall accountability score.

Thus, the answer to our first question is yes, school boards can positively impact student achievement in Wisconsin. We recently published our findings in the *International Journal of Public Administration*, concluding: "[A]dhering to these practices will likely yield some academic gains for boards comprised of longer serving board members, and no negative academic consequences."

### ■ Impacting Student Achievement

Now to the second question, how exactly can school boards use governance to positively impact student outcomes?

If a board is already using the Key Work as a model, they should keep doing it. The fact that the positive findings in our research manifest for longer-serving board members suggests that results will take some time, meaning boards recently committed to the Key Work should not abandon them if positive results are not immediate.

Board members that are not using the Key Work should familiarize

themselves with the document and the concepts. Importantly, we did not directly ask board members if they used the Key Work, but rather if they were committed to the concepts they represent (see sidebar).

We have since expanded our study nationwide, and are working to see if the relationship we found in Wisconsin holds true in other states, and if there are other steps school boards can take to improve academic achievement through improved governance. So far we are finding, here in Wisconsin and elsewhere, that calls for the wholesale elimination of school boards on academic grounds have little merit. While there are many factors impacting student achievement that school boards cannot control, they can improve their approach to governance in ways shown to positively impact student outcomes. ■

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## The Power of the School Board

**Michael R. Ford and Douglas M. Ihrke's study** of Wisconsin school boards concluded that school boards focused on certain key tenets positively affect student achievement. Ford and Ihrke found that school boards can positively impact student achievement by:

- Keeping its strategic plan up-to-date,
- Adjusting academic standards and assessment policies in response to student needs,
- Being open and honest with one another,
- Governing in partnership with their superintendent,
- Proactively and regularly engaging with the public, and
- Engaging in formal board development.

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