Good Practices are for Good Students

Research shows that board governance and consistent policymaking translates into real student gains

SESSION *Making the Most Out of Your School Board: Tips for Translating Governance to Outcomes* | **Presenter** UW-Oshkosh: Michael R. Ford, assistant professor

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> *— Michael R. Ford, UW-Oshkosh*

Today, the overwhelming majority of American K-12 students receive a publicly funded education in a district governed by a democratically elected school board.

Yet, the very concept of the traditional school board is under attack. The model's fiercest critics argue school boards are captured by interest groups, populated by members chosen in low-turnout or uncontested elections, and, on balance, pose a barrier to improving academic outcomes for students.

Here in Wisconsin, this is not just idle criticism, school voucher and independent charter school policies are placing more students into schools outside the authority of a democratically elected school board. But what is really known about school boards and academic achievement? What, if anything, can boards and their members do to improve student performance?

In a series of studies on school boards and their members, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Professor Douglas Ihrke and I find that school boards do in fact have the capacity to impact student outcomes by improving their governance practices.

How? First, we find that adherence to a governance model or philosophy over time allows consistent policymaking and policy alignment with school staff that translates into real student gains.

An effective governance model has several features. It is fully transparent. All stakeholders should have access to organizational structures and processes. Second, it is understood. Both those serving within an organization and the clientele of the organization should have a full understanding of how the organization functions. Third, it fosters efficient communication. Different committees and sub-committees should be able to communicate with each other quickly through established and understood channels. Fourth, it is logical and mission-driven. Organizational governance structures should reflect the mission of the district, and be logically designed to put decision-making authority in the hands of those most qualified in any specific policy area. Fifth, it is inclusive of all stakeholders. Those serving in formal positions should be representative of the organization as a whole.

We also find that school boards that place a higher priority on strategic planning are experiencing test score gains. Though not surprising, the finding suggests boards should engage in some type of planning process whenever a change in board membership occurs to ensure everyone is on the same page as to where the board wants the district to go.

Related, we also found student achievement gains linked to board member agreement as to the meaning of accountability in their district.

From a practical standpoint, boards should create an accountability statement that makes it clear to one another, as well as the superintendent and citizens, what accountability means to them. Doing so creates a real benchmark by which board performance can be judged.

Lastly, we identify a link between positive group dynamics on school boards and higher student attainment. Specifically, boards that minimize relationship conflict, rally around the flag after a decision has been make regardless of individual positions during deliberations, and remain free of ideological coalitions perform better.

So, what does this mean for Wisconsin school board members?

Though governance does not directly impact performance, there are real steps boards can take to create the conditions in which real student performance gains can occur. Mainly, boards should work to create alignment and transparency in their governing structures, group dynamics and modes of communication, planning, and approach to key concepts such as accountability. ■

— Michael R. Ford