



Research Review: The Role of School Boards

Introduction

Demands placed on public education have changed dramatically over the past 20 years. A clear understanding of the leadership roles that exist in education systems, including the role of school boards, is a key ingredient in meeting increasing demands. Effective school boards are critical components in school systems that continuously provide high quality, equitable education. ASBSD is committed to helping South Dakota school board members develop leadership skills necessary to improve student achievement for all students.

An Urgency for Change

South Dakota has one of the finest public education systems in the nation, evidenced by high student achievement levels. But there is urgency both on the threshold and on the horizon. While many local school districts and entire states continue to make progress in student achievement as defined by No Child Left Behind, the United State is falling behind on a global basis. The U.S. share of world output has decreased from 40 percent to 21 percent. Only 52 percent of all patents filed in the U.S. are U.S. patents - an all time low. World published research shows a drop in the U.S. output from 61 percent to 29 percent. Primary and secondary education declined from number 1 to number 9 in 2003.

Thomas Friedman illustrates this dramatic transformation of worldwide competition in his book *The World is Flat*. Education is an economic driving force. School districts in South Dakota and throughout this nation are not necessarily doing things wrong, other nations are simply catching and passing the U.S. Without an urgency to change, global competitiveness in a flat world will suffer.

Demands placed on local school districts by global competition, along with federal and state mandates, are catalysts for system renewal. School leaders need to rethink how teaching and learning take place in the education system. School boards are now responsible for not only providing opportunities to students, but must provide assurance that annual yearly progress is being made toward all students achieving proficiency by 2014.

School Boards in South Dakota

School districts are governed by publicly elected school board members who must be responsive and responsible to the local community. Since statehood, citizen involvement has been the backbone of South Dakota's representative form of government. The Legislature, charged by the South Dakota Constitution with the responsibility to provide education for our young people, vest local education to school boards. As local residents, school board members, working with educators, are uniquely positioned to: create a shared vision for the district, understand student needs, identify solutions and to hold the system accountable to high and equitable achievement for all students.

The Role of School Boards: A Literature Review

Demands to change the K-12 systems have occurred at the same time as recent evolutionary changes in the role of school boards.

- continued -

The National School Boards Association

In 1992, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) Delegate Assembly endorsed a groundbreaking, four-part statement on the roles and responsibilities of school boards to include:

- Vision: The board, on behalf of and with extensive participation by the community, envisions the community's education future.
- Structure: To achieve its vision the board establishes a structure and creates an environment designed to ensure all students the opportunity to attain their maximum potential through a sound organizational framework.
- Accountability: Because the board is accountable to the local community, it causes the continuous assessment of all conditions affecting education.
- Advocacy: The board serves as education's key advocate on behalf of students and their schools in the community in order to advance the community's vision for its schools, pursue its goals, encourage progress, energize systemic change and deal with children as whole persons in a diversified society.

In 2000, NSBA followed this significant statement with a publication titled *The Key Work of School Boards*, which outlines a framework of eight essential areas on which boards need to focus: Vision, Standards, Assessment, Accountability, Alignment, Climate, Collaborative Relationships and Continuous Improvement. NSBA continues to develop materials around their Key Work documents.

The Lighthouse Project

In 1990, the Iowa Association of School Boards released the *Lighthouse Inquiry*. The innovative research found that school boards and superintendents in high-achieving school districts were significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than those in low-achieving districts. School board members and superintendents in high achieving districts believed all students could learn; no excuses. They understood and maintained a focus school renewal. Findings of the Lighthouse Study were based on knowledgeable existence of seven conditions for school renewal central to improving student achievement. These conditions include:

1. Building a human organization
2. Knowing how to make education better
3. Supportive workplace for staff
4. Comprehensive staff development
5. Knowing how to support school sites
6. Strong community connection
7. Integrated leadership focused on a clear vision

The Lighthouse Study gave rise to the Lighthouse Project, a five-year federally funded project designed to learn what is possible when school boards, superintendents and other educators work together for district-wide improvement. Work within the pilot districts focused on improving achievement for all students through improving the seven conditions for school renewal.

Learning First Alliance: Beyond Islands of Excellence

In 2003, the Learning First Alliance released *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. The analysis of five high-poverty districts making strides in improving student achievement revealed seven common characteristics of school districts working to close the achievement gap.

Using findings from research as a base, *Beyond Islands of Excellence* offered recommendations for education's stakeholders, highlighting the importance of system-wide leadership. In reference to school boards, the Learning First Alliance reinforced foundations of NSBA's Key Works and the fundamental ideas embodied by the Lighthouse Study. Specifically, the Learning First Alliance recommended school boards:

1. Maintain the district focus on improving instruction and achievement.
2. Work collaboratively with the central office, union and other leaders to frame and implement a district vision focus on instruction and achievement; and to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.

- continued -

3. Use data to regularly monitor the efficacy of the school system. Hold yourselves and the central office responsible for results. When results are disappointing, seek solutions rather than discussing blame.
4. Hire top-level leaders - a superintendent and deputy superintendent - who will lead instructional improvement and will make decisions based on instructional and academic needs.
5. Set clear, coherent policies that support better instruction. Avoid involvement in day-to-day decision making that constrains the operation of the district.
6. Recognize that improving instruction and student achievement is an ongoing process. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

The Emerging Understandings about the Role of School Boards

Literature and research, including the Key Work of School Boards, the Lighthouse Project and Beyond Islands of Excellence, have contributed to an emerging understanding about the role school boards have in improving student achievement.

These emerging understandings do not exist apart from the superintendent's roles - they align closely with the superintendent's role to create a governance leadership team.

Five Emerging Understandings about the Role of School Boards

- I. Set clear expectations related to improving student achievement
 - Create a focus to improved student instruction in an area of student learning need.
 - Develop policies that clearly communicate expectations in areas that directly impact learning.
 - Establish clearly shared targets for specific levels of improvement.
 - Establish district wide understanding and commitment to a student achievement goal.
 - Set an expectation for using evidence based strategies to improve instruction.
- II. Create conditions so the work (improving achievement) can succeed
 - Enable staff throughout the system to play a significant role in achieving the goal (establish district wide leadership teams that share the decision making).
 - Reallocate resources and support as determined by the progress monitoring.
 - Ensure staff members have the time and resources to study the content area, their practice the effects for students as they learn and to implement strategies to improve achievement in the target area.
 - Ensure there is sufficient leadership, expert assistance and peer support so that staff members can learn and implement new instructional practices.
 - Celebrate successes.
- III. Hold the system accountable (for both improved practice and achievement)
 - Assure that there are data collection systems that track progress toward achieving the goals and targets.
 - Identify indicators the board will accept as evidence of progress/success.
 - Formally monitor student progress toward the indicators on a regular basis.
 - Formally monitor the implementation of strategies/initiatives to reach the goal.
- IV. Learn as a board team
 - Become informed about necessary conditions (i.e. initiatives, professional development, assessment, etc.) for creating a district-wide culture for learning.
 - Understand what it will take to improve in the target area and insure all of the components.
 - Board members are very clear about current performance levels of students in the district.
 - Attain knowledge and skills to study the data, make appropriate interpretations from the data, ask important questions, and communicate about the progress without alienating the staff.
 - Study the cost effectiveness of strategies being developed to attain the improvement goal.
- V. Create the public will to succeed
 - Communicate commitment o the goal deep into the organization.
 - Create district-wide synergy around the improvement goal -- enlist the entire system to attain the improvement goal.
 - Communicate progress and needs to the community.
 - Engage the community as partners focused on reaching the goal and targets.
 - Consistently communicate the importance and moral imperative of the improvement goal.