



# Moving Beyond

## the Killer B's

The role of school boards in accountability and transformation

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Ongoing efforts to improve public education, specifically to close the achievement gap between our most and least affluent students, focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents, as well as state and federal policymakers.

Largely missing from this debate is a robust discussion of the role or potential of local school boards to advance school reform goals. As the federal government allocates millions of dollars to district-level change efforts through programs such as Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants, local school boards sit at the intersection of these initiatives and the preferences and priorities of their local constituents. If we want to gain traction on scale, school boards have to play an intentional and strategic role in school improvement efforts.

As outlined in state constitutions, school boards are agents of the state charged with fulfilling responsibilities related to operating schools delegated to them by the state. Within specific parameters, local school boards have the legal authority to craft the conditions for districts to operate successfully. Yet, historically, they have focused mainly on the “killer B’s,” (*e.g.*, books, budgets, buildings, and buses) and not academic achievement.

Efforts to transform schools and districts in a meaningful and sustainable way will necessitate engaging

local school boards to look beyond the “killer b’s” to more strategic work — with a laser-like focus on improving student outcomes — while simultaneously remaining responsive to their local communities and associated idiosyncratic priorities.

### ■ Role of Public School Boards

As the federal government expands its influence over public schools, the role of local school boards is evolving. Yet, little attention has been paid to crafting and aligning the work of school boards with these initiatives.

For instance, local school boards appear to be largely absent from the scholarly literature about targeted improvement efforts, as well as the federal program guidance related to

efforts such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Waivers, School Improvement Grants (SIG), and Race to the Top (RTTT). For example, the initial guidance associated with the \$400 million RTTT District grant competition included language regarding evaluating school boards, but this language was dropped from the final regulations. Given their central role in policy development, budget allocation, and superintendent hiring and oversight, the lack of an intentional means to engage school boards in efforts to dramatically improve student outcomes is problematic.

If the efforts to turn around low-performing schools that are the intense focus of federal and state school transformation initiatives are going to gain traction and be scalable within current governance parameters, local school boards need to be part of the equation.

In light of this apparent disconnect, we sought to examine the research available regarding the role of local school boards in targeted improvement efforts and explore emerging practice through interviews with key practitioners in districts engaged in such efforts. This article outlines some of our methods and key findings.

### ■ Strategic Focus

Based on our review of the literature and the interviews we conducted, we identified two primary factors that appear to influence board engagement and ability to support school improvement efforts: strategic focus and fiscal resources.

Intentional, goal-oriented, strategic planning was identified as foundational to effective improvement efforts by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), in the school board literature, and by the board members and superintendents we interviewed.

For instance, a board member noted that, assuming districts have adequate funding, a “strategic plan that identifies priorities is critical to moving the needle on student achievement.” She explained that a strategic plan has a two-fold benefit: “it allows you to make sure the budget and resources are appropriately allocated and enables you to hold the superintendent accountable for the key priorities rather than lauding the ongoing successes that are there.”

Conversely, absence of a clear strategic focus and competing

agendas were identified as barriers to coherent board action related to student achievement. Board members noted that while narrow agendas could motivate individual members, particular constituent issues could also sidetrack members. When asked to identify the greatest challenge he faces, one board chairperson explained that parents could divert board focus. He noted that parents “have a different view about how we should educate their kids,” and they may prioritize “sports and activities over school.”

## The Killer B's On...



Here is a quick look at some other issues covered in “Moving Beyond the Killer B's,” a whitepaper from the Academic Development Institute.

- **Key Responsibilities of Local School Boards:** “The central work of contemporary school boards is codified in the Key Work of School Boards Guidebook produced by the NSBA in collaboration with state school board associations. The eight key areas of focus are vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaboration and community engagement, and continuous improvement ... If the role of the school board can be boiled down to a single critical action, it would be the hiring and supervising of the superintendent.”
- **Board Decision-Making:** “Boards must balance the efficiency of relying on committees and the development of expertise on the part of individual members regarding specific issues — and potentially limiting the voice of some board members on some topics — against the benefits of having full board involvement.”
- **The Unique Role of School Board Chairpersons:** “Effective board leadership can maximize the value contributed by all board members (not just the chair), while an ineffective chairperson can stymie a board's operations, as well as a board's relationship with the superintendent.”
- **Managing the Board-Superintendent Relationship:** “The majority of the [boards'] time should be spent on setting the ‘whats’ of the district such as vision and mission, while allowing the staff to develop and carry out the ‘hows’ of implementing the vision and mission.”
- **School Boards' Role in Improvement Efforts:** “A challenge noted by board members interviewed was their own resistance to change, along with that of their fellow board members — this in spite of clear evidence (e.g., low performance in multiple schools) of the need to change.”
- **School Board Training:** “Training of board members emerged as a critical aspect of building board capacity in both the literature and our interviews. It is seen as an area where boards are under-investing both in terms of time and resources.” □



## Our interviews with board members and superintendents revealed ongoing concerns regarding adequacy of resources relative to expectations of public schools.

Developing a coherent district mission and vision along with a well-aligned strategic plan can ensure that school board and district personnel have a clear understanding of priorities and a road map to achieve goals. A growing body of literature pertaining to effective school turnaround stresses the importance of school districts, as opposed to just individual schools, in achieving sustainable turnaround at scale. Districts, starting with their school boards and superintendents, need to set agendas and thereafter allocate resources and develop policies to support the agenda.

Providing a tangible example of how he works to keep his board engaged and on task, one superintendent explained that he and his staff “developed a robust protocol, tied to a yearly calendar, that is aligned to their strategic plan. I meet weekly with the chair, vice-chair, and clerk and pre-report out on agenda items set for the next meeting. This is mostly for clarification and understanding. These issues are then reported to the entire board and deliberated in open meeting for motions and decisions. Everything we focus on is aligned to our strategic plan.”

### ■ Fiscal Resources

A lack of resources is an ongoing challenge in public education further exacerbated in times of economic downturn. While the federal government has made unprecedented investments in public education, states and local districts across the nation are coping with flat, if not

reduced, annual budgets.

Accordingly, the NSBA survey in 2010 documented that the majority of board members identified budget and finance issues to be urgent board issues, and 75 percent see lack of resources as a barrier to improving outcomes for students.

Our interviews with board members and superintendents also revealed ongoing concerns regarding adequacy of resources relative to expectations of public schools. Multiple board members cited lack of resources as a barrier to achieving goals related to delivering quality education services.

Yet, interestingly, other board members (including those from high-poverty districts) did not identify lack of resources areas a primary concern but reported they face ongoing challenges due to multiple competing demands associated with internal and external structures (*e.g.*, federal and state department of education requirements) that dictate how they allocate the limited resources they have.

While resource limitations have long-reaching implications for instruction, in terms of board capacity, they can have an exponential impact when boards are forced to make decisions regarding allocation of resources. In difficult budget climates, it can be hard to allocate time and funding to board development, yet when resources are stretched, it is arguably the time boards could most benefit from a more in-depth understanding of their role, the external factors influencing

their decisions (*e.g.*, federal and state accountability requirements), and a nuanced understanding of how to optimize district resources to maximize student outcomes.

### ■ Effective Boards = Effective Schools

There is an established link between effective boards and effective schools and districts, but it is unclear whether the link is causal or correlational (*i.e.*, Are high performing districts able to recruit and sustain effective boards, or do effective boards lead to high performance?). [Editor's note: The Lighthouse Research Report conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards found that effective boards do lead to higher student achievement.]

School boards work within parameters established by state and federal laws and are charged with establishing the conditions that will ideally position school districts to successfully educate all students. It is not the job of school boards to run schools; in fact, attempts to do so often result in a level of dysfunction that can be a significant contributor to district decline. A board's most important role is to establish a district vision and mission, and thereafter select, supervise, and evaluate a chief executive officer who is charged with leading the district and ensuring that policies and budget decisions align with an effective vision and mission.

In districts with low-performing schools, school boards can, and arguably should, play a central role in creating the right conditions to

initiate, support, and sustain bold improvement efforts. To assume this important role, boards need to move past focusing on the “killer B’s” to a more sophisticated leadership model in which they intentionally set priorities, develop strategic plans, align resources, and hold key actors accountable for actions required to sustain a laser-sharp focus on student outcomes.

The challenge facing school districts striving to improve is figuring out how to leverage largely volunteer boards of lay citizens to develop coherent and innovative policies and practices in a climate that frequently reduces their role to that of budget hawks or single-issue politicians.

## Conclusion

Factors that impede a board’s posi-

tive contribution include, but are not limited to, politics, a contentious relationship between board members and superintendent, board member and chief executive officer turnover, lack of knowledge, single-agenda bias, and financial insecurities.

Striving to improve the lowest performing schools remains a national priority. As policy leaders at the federal, state, and local level continue to devote increasingly scarce resources to improving schools and districts, local school boards must be part of the conversation if there is hope for dramatic and sustainable change.

Rather than dismiss school boards from the conversations as antiquated holdovers from a different time and short of a massive overhaul of how school districts are governed, local school boards

are positioned to play a critical role in school improvement interventions, especially as the conversation evolves from change to sustainability. ■

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*Content for this article is from Moving Beyond the Killer B’s, a whitepaper from the Academic Development Institute. To view the complete whitepaper, visit [adi.org](http://adi.org) and select “Download ADI Publications.”*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Academic Development Institute offers the following recommendations to school leaders as they work to drive meaningful and sustainable school reform efforts. While some of these recommendations carry a cost, the Academic Development Institute proposes that these investments would add value and potentially reduce other costs.

- **Establish local school board members** as critical stakeholders positioned to shepherd coherent, effective, and sustainable implementation of federal interventions designed to improve public schools (e.g., ESEA Flexibility waivers, Race to the Top for states and districts, School Improvement Grants, and 21st Century Schools) as well as state and district initiatives.
- **Engage school boards and district leadership** in development of shared and strategic goals with companion implementation plans to drive focused, bold change efforts and ensure that the budget process and priorities align with the strategic plan.
- **Engage neighboring school boards** with a track record of success to share best practices developed in similar policy environments.
- **Establish a culture of board professionalism** that includes paying stipends to board members who assume greater positions of responsibility and allocating financial support for individual and group training opportunities (e.g., attend state and national school board association meetings and participate in online training opportunities).
- **Develop policies that facilitate board professionalism** (e.g., structured strategic planning, board evaluations, and board member self-evaluations) and integrate them into the standard board calendar.
- **Establish mentoring relationships** between new and experienced board members. These relationships can extend beyond school board members to include board members working in other nonprofits in the community (e.g., local college, hospital, or social support organization).
- **Enlist superintendents, building administrators, and sitting board members** to promote board service and recruit potential board members with diverse knowledge and skills.
- **Sponsor public awareness campaigns** to encourage more candidates to run for school board positions and for the public to more fully participate in board elections.
- **Expect and encourage board members** to strategically question assumptions when it comes to district and school performance and student outcomes.