

An effective school board invests time and energy into student growth and achievement through studying appropriate and timely data, to drive informed and educated decision-making. When administration engages, a board in discussions focused upon accountability, goals, and policy, the board enables the administration and the staff to carryout operations and regulations free from a board's tendency to micro-manage day-to-day operations.

## EIGHT TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARDS

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*"Research is clear: high-achieving boards exhibit different habits and characteristics."*

**Patte Barth, Director, NSBA's Center for Public Education**  
**American School Board Journal, March 2011**

What makes an effective school board – one that boosts student achievement? From a research perspective, it is a complex question that involves evaluating virtually all of a board's functions, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators, and the public.

However, the research that exists is clear, according to a brief published by NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) in late January. The brief, which examined seven research studies conducted between 1993 and 2008, says high-achieving boards exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from those of their low-achieving counterparts.

### **What makes a board effective?**

Here are eight characteristics found in the research:

**High expectations, clear goals:** Effective school boards make a commitment to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction. They define clear goals to meet the vision, make sure the goals remain the top priorities, and allow nothing to detract from them.

**Belief that all children can learn:** Effective school boards have strong-shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels. In high-achieving districts, poverty, lack of parental involvement, and other factors are described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members expect to see improvements in student achievement quickly, as a result of initiatives.

**Focus on achievement:** Effective school boards are accountability driven. They spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.

**Collaboration and communication:** Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community. A strong communications structure is in place to inform and engage key groups – internal and external – in setting and achieving the district’s goals.

**Data savvy:** Effective school boards embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement. In high-achieving districts, board members identify specific student needs through data and justify decisions based on that data.

**Goals and resources aligned:** Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals. This occurs even during the most severe budget challenges, such as the ones districts now face.

**Team leadership:** Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust. Boards in successful districts define an initial vision for the district and seek a superintendent who matches this vision.

**Team training:** Boards that are effective take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for the district’s improvement efforts. Training is formal, deliberate, and often-on specific topics.

### **Danger signs**

The NSBA’s Center for Public Education did not set out to specifically focus on what makes boards ineffective. However, some descriptions – we call them “a dozen danger signs” – of ineffective boards emerged in the research review.

### **Ineffective school boards:**

- Are only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and are seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning
- Focus on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parent support, societal factors, or lack of motivation
- Offer negative comments about students and teachers
- Micromanage day-to-day operations
- Disregard the agenda process and the chain of command
- Are left out of the information flow, with little communication between the

board and superintendent

- Describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach
- Look at data from a “blaming” perspective, describing teachers, students, and families as major causes for low performance
- Have little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers
- Are slow to define a vision
- Do not hire a superintendent who agrees with their vision
- Receive little professional development together as a board

Although the research on school board effectiveness is in the beginning stages, studies clearly indicate that school boards in high-achieving districts have attitudes and knowledge that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts. In this era of fiscal constraints and a national environment focused on accountability, boards in high-performing districts provide an important blueprint for success.

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## THE BOARD’S SUPPORTING ROLE

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“We see what we are prepared to see, not what is.”

~ William Barker

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**T**he leadership of the superintendent must aid the board to understand that standards are driven by what students need to know and what they must be able to do. In general, state standards provide the starting point. District personnel ensure that students meet the standards through appropriate strategies for teaching and learning. Those standards are also met by using effective tools to measure success. Because students come to the classroom with a broad spectrum of skills and abilities, the district must ensure that resources are allocated in a fair and equitable manner.

Once the framework described above is in place, the board will support administrative decision-making by:

- Working in cooperation with administration to provide a plan for communicating the standards to the parents/community
- Reviewing progress through the assessment data with guidance provided by administrators in these areas:
  - How to interpret the data
  - Identify areas of success in student achievement