

## School Board Leadership: What Research Tells Us

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## Review of Research

- What does existing research tell us about our **board role**?  
Relevant for **student achievement**?
- What does research not tell us?  
i.e., What can additional research offer?

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## Reference

- The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation ed. Thomas L. Alsbury. Rowman & Littlefield Education [www.rowmaneducation.com](http://www.rowmaneducation.com)
- *Superintendents, School Boards, and Student Achievement: Dispelling the Myth of the "Blob"* Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) [www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org)
- *School Boards Matter for Improving Student Learning* Iowa Lighthouse Studies <http://www.ia-sb.org/StudentAchievement.aspx?id=436>

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## Our School Board Role

*"Lead, Follow, or Get out of the way!"*

- Thomas Paine

- In our culture – a bias for "Lead"
- Effective boards employ **each**
- The trick is to know **when** to do **which**

"There's a lot of conjecture and opinion out there. Most of those debates are not predicated on research."

-- Thomas Alsbury

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## Our School Board Role

*"Lead, Follow, or Get out of the way!"*

- Thomas Paine

- **Lead**  
What boards can **do** – **leadership role**  
[e.g. – accountability: monitor district outcomes]
- **Follow**  
What boards can **do** – **follower role**  
[e.g. – adhere to community values]
- **Get out of the way**  
What boards can **avoid doing**  
[e.g. – create competing priorities]

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## Policy on Research

- Data-driven decision-making mandated:

*"Decisions will always be guided by the best available research..."*

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## Think

- For your board, what decisions have been guided by research?



## School Board Research

- The cupboard is by no means bare
  - Dissatisfaction Theory Democratic Process Causes Change
  - Alsbury Study Turnover Affects Achievement
  - Iowa Lighthouse Study Board Leadership Matters
  - 2006 McREL Report District Leadership That Works

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## Dissatisfaction Theory

1970's-2007

Q: Can Electoral 'Voice' Bring About Change in Policy? How?

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## Developing the Theory

- Frank W. Lutz and Larry Iannaccone
- Incumbent & Superintendent Turnover
- Bond Issues
- Political Culture of Schools

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## Status Quo: A Steady State

Normal state of American democracy

- Electorate: Not excessively interested... or informed... generally *satisfied*
- Low voter turnout
- Assumption: Incumbents make policy that the public expects
- Electorate stable – at rest

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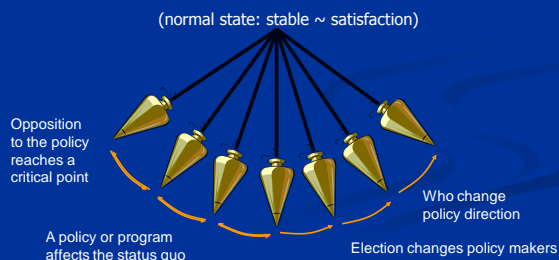
## Change Model



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## Change of Direction

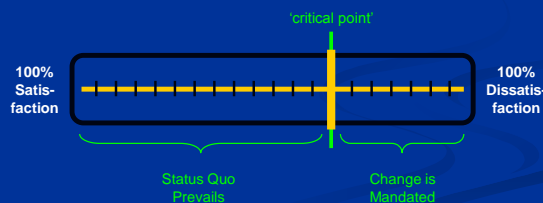
- Political change is like the swing of a pendulum...affecting the status quo



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## Change of Direction

- ...movement of the electorate along a continuum between two states...



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## Alsbury

- School Board turnover
  - 76 WA districts – 176 elections 1993-2001
  - ↑ politically motivated turnover\*
    - related to ↓ student achievement - WASL
    - members spend ↑ time 'tinkering with minutiae'
      - \*election defeat, resignation, retirement
  - If stability follows turnover...
    - ↑ student achievement
  - Findings support Dissatisfaction Theory

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## Implications

- Politics of education
  - Democracy 'works' via incumbent turnover
  - Big swings...doesn't encourage 'fine-tuning'
- Pay attention to the electorate
  - Values, attitudes
  - Single-issue groups
- Understand community's 'mood'
  - ...and reflect community values
  - Grassroots of American democracy

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## Think

- Considering what we have learned from Dissatisfaction Theory, what questions can guide further research?



## Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry

1998-present

Q: With Regard to Student Achievement,  
Does School Board Leadership Matter?

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## Original Lighthouse Study (1998-2000)

**Q:** Are school boards different in high and low achieving districts?

- Studied two different sets of districts
  - Similar demographic characteristics
  - Very different levels of student achievement
- Interviewed boards, admin's, teachers
- Examined
  - Beliefs about what is possible
  - Conditions for productive change

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## Differences in Board Beliefs

- Students' potential
- Confidence in district staff

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## Conditions Affecting Productive Change

### 1. Connections Across the System

*People working together because it is important to them to improve education for students*

### 2. Knowing What it Takes to Change Achievement

*A shared understanding about the type of learning culture needed to improve achievement and how to organize the district to make it happen*

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## Conditions Affecting Productive Change

### 3. Workplace Support

*Staff are supported in ways that help them succeed at improving student learning*

### 4. Professional Development

*An understanding of the purpose for and process of developing people as professionals*

### 5. Balance - Districtwide Direction and Building Level Autonomy

*Reliance on data to establish a balance between focus and direction from a district perspective with latitude at the building level – in order to achieve equity across the system*

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## Conditions Affecting Productive Change

### 6. A Strong Community Connection

*An understanding of how to generate community involvement and shared responsibility for improvement*

### 7. Distributed Leadership

*Broad-based leadership provides direction and focus for improvement work. Strong but sensitive leadership, at all levels of the system*

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## Summary: Original Study

- School boards **do** make a difference
  - Research-based connection between school boards and student achievement levels
- Unknowns:
  - What the **board does** that makes a difference
  - How to **become** a higher functioning board

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## Phase II: The Lighthouse Project (2002-2007)

- Q: How do boards influence the conditions for success that are necessary for improving achievement?
- Q: What supports do they need?
- Q: What do board members and superintendents currently believe about the role of the board for improving student learning and what influences board members' beliefs?

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## Findings: Phase II

- Five main roles of the board are to:
  1. Set clear expectations for **outcomes**
  2. Hold themselves and district staff **accountable**
  3. Ensure the **conditions** for success
  4. Build the collective **will** to succeed
  5. Create time to **learn** together as a board **team**

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## Findings: Phase II

- Seven key areas of performance
  1. Creating **awareness** of need to improve
  2. Applying **pressure** for accountability
  3. Demonstrating **commitment**
  4. **Supporting** quality **professional development**
  5. **Supporting** districtwide **leadership**
  6. Developing deliberative **policy**
  7. **Connecting** with the community

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## Phase III:

- State school boards associations and districts in:
  - California, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa
  - Kentucky, Missouri, Oregon, Wisconsin
- Statewide lessons – best practices on a larger scale

## Think

- Considering what we have learned from the Iowa Lighthouse studies, what questions can guide further research?



## 2006 McREL Report: School District Leadership that Works

Q: Does Superintendent Leadership Matter?

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## Methodology

- Meta-analysis similar to earlier work:
  - Classroom Instruction That Works
  - School Leadership That Works
- 27 studies
- 2,817 districts
- 3.4 million students' achievement scores

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
- II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
- III. "Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement"

Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

Find and Replace:

'superintendent' ... 'school board'

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
    - *Explicit:* Superintendent leadership matters
    - *Implicit:* School board leadership matters
  - II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
  - III. "Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement"
- Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

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- I. "District-level leadership matters"
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- Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
- II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
  - Collaborative Goal-Setting
  - Non-negotiable goals for achievement/instr.
  - Board alignment/support of district goals
  - Monitor goals for achievement/instruction
  - Use of resources to support ach/instr goals

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## 1. Collaborative Goal-Setting

- "Effective superintendents include all relevant stakeholders, including central office staff, building-level administrators, and board members, in establishing goals for their districts."

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## 1. Collaborative Goal-Setting

- Effective school boards include all relevant stakeholders, including superintendent, staff, and community, in establishing goals for their districts.

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## 2. Non-negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction

- "Effective superintendents ensure that the collaborative goal-setting process results in non-negotiable goals...
  - (Ends)...specific achievement targets for schools and students
  - (Means)...consistent use of research-based instructional strategies for all classrooms

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## 2. Non-negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction

- "Effective school boards ensure that the collaborative goal-setting process results in non-negotiable goals...
  - (Ends)...specific achievement targets for the district
  - (Means)...consistent use of research-based instructional strategies for the district

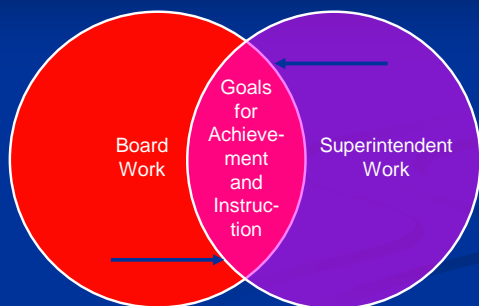
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## 3. Board Alignment and Support of District Goals

- "The local board of education is aligned with and supportive of the non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction.
  - "...the primary focus of the district's efforts..."
  - "...no other initiatives detract attention..."
- This is more likely if the board...
  - 'Owns' district goals Author~Publisher
  - Doesn't just review them Author~Fan Club

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### 3. Board Alignment and Support of District Goals



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### 4. Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction

- "Effective **superintendents** continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure that these goals remain the driving force behind a district's actions."

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### 4. Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction

- "Effective **school boards** continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure that these goals remain the driving force behind a district's actions."
- In meetings (where boards go 'live') they spend considerable **board time** on this monitoring function

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### 5. Use of Resources to Support Achievement and Instruction Goals

- "Effective **superintendents** ensure that the necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials, are allocated to accomplish the district's goals."

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### 5. Use of Resources to Support Achievement and Instruction Goals

- "Effective **school boards** ensure that the necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials, are allocated to accomplish the district's goals."
- They do so by **speaking** thru policy/budget... directing goal-directed allocation of resources
- They do so by **acting**...spending **board time** monitoring allocation and use of resources

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### 5. Use of Resources to Support Achievement and Instruction Goals

- "Effective **school boards** require (and allow) **their superintendents** to ensure that the necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials, are allocated to accomplish the district's goals."
- They do so by **speaking** thru policy/budget... directing goal-directed allocation of resources
- They do so by **acting**...spending **board time** monitoring allocation and use of resources

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
- II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
- III. "Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement"

Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
- II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
- III. "Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement"
  - Can be directly related to board action

Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

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## McREL Findings

- I. "District-level leadership matters"
- II. "Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts"
- III. Effective school boards ensure district stability because they know that "Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement"

Surprise: "Defined autonomy"

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## Defined Autonomy

- "Effective superintendents may provide principals with 'defined autonomy'..."
  - ...clear, non-negotiable goals...
  - ...yet provide school leadership teams with...
  - ...authority for determining how to meet those goals."

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## Defined Autonomy

- Continuum of Autonomy



- The district sets non-negotiable goals
- Autonomy in how to meet goals
  - Sets parameters, but does not overprescribe
  - Defined autonomy = "bounded freedom" to act

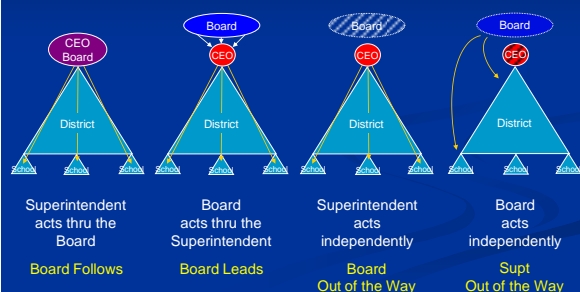
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## Defined Autonomy

- "Effective school boards may provide superintendents with 'defined autonomy'..."
  - ...clear, non-negotiable goals...
  - ...yet provide superintendents with...
  - ...authority for determining how to meet those goals."

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## Board-Supt Relationship Affects How You View Findings



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## Research Questions

The board *serves* community interests

Q: On *whose behalf* do boards serve?

- Q<sub>1</sub> – How much board meeting time do effective school boards spend **listening to representative samples of community members**?
- Q<sub>2</sub> – How much board meeting time do effective school boards spend **listening to self-selected single-issue interest groups**?

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## Research Questions

The board *speaks* through policy

Q: How do effective school boards spend their time during board meetings?

- Q<sub>1</sub> – How much meeting time do effective school boards spend on defining, monitoring/measuring, revising **desired end results**?
- Q<sub>2</sub> – How much meeting time do effective school boards spend on **programs** (deciding how the district will achieve desired end results)?

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## Research Questions

The board *acts* through others (delegation)

Q: How do staff spend their time during board meetings?

- Q<sub>1</sub> – How much time does staff spend in board meetings **explaining and obtaining approval of** programs (staff work)?
- Q<sub>2</sub> – How much time does staff spend in board meetings **accounting for results** for students?
- Q<sub>3</sub> – How much time does staff spend in board meetings **accounting for compliance** with policies?

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## General Conclusions

- Inferences/assumptions...
  - Board leadership matters
  - Board effectiveness is not defined merely by what the superintendent does
  - Board effectiveness is defined by whether or not district leadership is effective
  - Effective boards influence and are influenced by their superintendents, and they let their superintendents do their job
  - We lead...follow...get out of the way **and research can help us decide**

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## Questions?

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