The Role of School Boards in Governance, Leadership & Educational Reform in Florida: An Empirical Approach to Sustaining Student Performance through a Systematic District-level Model

Abstract
This paper reports the findings of a newly developed district-level school board leadership assessment, as a psychometric instrument, that correlates particular governance practices with student’s performance (achievement) in the State of Florida. The assessment incorporates sustainable performance standards and practices derived from learning and leadership theories and practices. Study results show higher levels of student achievement in school districts where school board members collectively scored higher on a school board leadership assessment.

Introduction/Purpose
Throughout the past three decades, attention has been given to school board’s accountability for and impact on student’s performance (Alsbury, (2009); Delagardelle, (2001); Goodman & Zimmerman, (2000); Kirst & Bulkley, (2000); Land, (2002). Recent reform movements have changed the practice from measuring school quality by resources received to evaluating school performance based on students’ academic achievement. As a result, national and state accountability requirements mandated the use of student test data to measure achievement (Guthrie & Springer, 2004), yet to date, school districts nationally continue to struggle to narrow test achievement gaps (Hess & Meese, 2011; Land, 2002). Researchers acknowledged the limited research available to assist the estimated 95,000 school board members on how to administer effective governance practices to raise student achievement. In fact, Delagardelle, (2001) called the links between what school boards do and students’ performance “uncharted territory”.

This study explored highly effective school board behaviors through two phases. First, emerging themes were measured relating school board governance and student performance in the qualitative phase of this study. Second, a correlation between board behaviors and beliefs and student performance was detected in the quantitative phase. The overall purpose of this study was to (a) determine if there existed a correlation between emergent governance beliefs and behaviors and student achievement, and (b) develop and test a multiple regression model for statistical significance. In keeping with UCEA’s theme, this study specifically addressed the need for sustainable leadership “that matters” by reforming and transforming the traditional role and responsibility of district level school board leadership into the emerging trend where board of directors of any educational organization can influence student performance using effective governance practices.

Theoretical Perspective
In order to determine the empirical relationship between school board governance behavior and beliefs and improving student performance, the following theories and practices were researched: (a) school board governance, (b) leadership and learning and (c) performance outcomes.

School Board Governance
Glass (1992) revealed that school boards are seldom mentioned in the literature and overlooked in reform initiatives while much of their decision-making authority was transferred to the school level. As a result of the reform movements, school board governance primarily means meeting state and national student achievement standards (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Goodman and colleagues (1997) found that districts with effective governance tended to have greater student performance as measured by dropout rates, students going on to college, and aptitude test
scores. Although these findings are significant, the study did not describe how they measured quality governances (Land, 2002). Danzberger et al. (1992) suggest that school boards can expand their influence, “if they undertake aggressive policymaking and leadership for education reform within their communities” (p.35). It becomes a fair question to ask whether local school boards had the will or the capacity to take on the responsibility of leading change as an emerging trend for school boards to improve student achievement (Glover, 2004).

Leadership and Learning

The distributed, proximal, transformational, and shared leadership and learning theories and practices were analyzed for this study because they help us understand how the school board governance process can transform educational leadership, teaching and learning into higher academic performance. A school board can assess the school district’s demographics and create and administer a governance process that focuses its policies, resources, and leadership in the most effective proximal relationship with the student learners (Vygotsky, 1978). The distributed leadership perspective is centered on how leadership and resources are distributed within the organization to support this proximal relationship (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 1999), thus, the transformation of teaching and learning. In this study, transformational leadership relates to the school board member’s ability to empower school personnel, parents, students, and the community to bring about major educational change—to raise students’ performance through teaching and learning and support a district-wide culture of student achievement (Land, 2002).

Shared leadership theory enables school board members, with diverse experience and expertise, to complement each other’s leadership and decision and policy making skills to improve and sustain student achievement (Fairholm, 1991).

Student Performance

The literature reported that school board members, almost exclusively, defines student achievement in terms of students’ scores on standardized state competency tests (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Land, 2002). In low-achievement districts board members and personnel could not describe how improvement plans were being implemented, focused on factors that they believed kept students from learning, discussed goals as ends rather than means to an end of improving student learning, and could not indicate what was expected or how they would accomplish it (Delagardelle, 2001). Although, they could not conclude that board action caused improved achievement, it did suggest that board actions were a key part of a district-wide culture focused on improvement in student learning (Land, 2002; Delagardelle, 2001). Whatever controversies the accountability movement generated, student achievement is the ultimate highly sought-after measure of educational value (Lashway, 2002).

Methods and Data Sources

For phase one, of the study, a qualitative inquiry was conducted of school board members from districts with the highest standardized test (FCAT) scores in the state of Florida to determine those school board behaviors they perceived influenced the resulting high scores. In the second phase of the study, a psychometric instrument was develop from the results of the qualitative study to test all the school board members in the state of Florida to determine the quantitative relationship between school board governance criterion variables and the outcome variables for student achievement and sustainability.

For the qualitative portion of the study, five Florida school board participants were selected from the school district that earned the highest percent of level 3, 4, and 5 scores on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Tests (FCAT) for the 2004-2005 school years.

Unstructured interviews were conducted in which two open-ended research questions and the
probe (interview) questions were addressed asking (a) how do school board members perceive their governance process raises students’ academic performance? (b) what governance conditions are necessary to raise students’ academic performance? The interview data were open coded and then the coding was grouped into themes and sub-themes. Those that were redundant were consolidated and synthesized to generate the emerging themes and sub-themes (Creswell, 2002) and generated the following themes: leadership, community relations and governance.

For the quantitative study a psychometric instrument was designed from the qualitative analysis to determine the questions for the constructs being measured (Salkind, 2003). The constructs were operationalized with closed-end questions and Likert scale responses (Author, 2006). A panel of five experts with extensive experience related to school board governance reviewed and commented on the survey instrument for content validity.

A pilot survey was conducted using the psychometric instrument with 30 participants selected by the researcher who represented school districts that earned low, middle, and high student achievement scores. A reliability test was conducted on the test pilot using Cronbach’s Alpha correlation coefficients on internal consistency and using SPSS software for each construct. The results were a .6730 for the leadership construct, a .8417 for the community relations construct, and a .8801 for the governance construct. Generally, alpha of 0.75 or above indicates appropriate instrumental internal consistency. When the survey was determined to be reliable and valid, it was sent to the 355 Florida school board members.

For criterion validity a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted. The bivariate correlation between leadership and performance resulted in an r = .423 (moderate to high) and p < .000. For the correlation between community relations and performance, r = .225 (moderate) and p < .000; and for the relationship between governance and performance, r = .493 (moderate to high) and p < .000. They all met the test of significance at the 0.01 level. From this .analysis: high scores in leadership, community relations, and governance result in high scores in students’ performance. Therefore, the measures behave as theoretically expected. Finally, a multiple regression model was developed to determine the statistical relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable as a forecasting model for future student performance.

Findings and Conclusions

For the qualitative study, emergent themes were characterized as leadership, community relations, and governance, common variable in studies on the influence of governance on achievement. The sub-themes, data collection and data analysis, logically linked these emerging themes and are used in the qualitative phase of this study supporting the Likert rating scale in the psychometric instrument.

For the quantitative study data were analyzed using SPSS, to test bivariant correlations and a multiple regression model. A reliability test was run on the constructs of leadership, community relations and governance (oversight) and produced alpha of .7995, .7182, and .8247 respectfully. A scatter plot of the model variables shows that all variable have linearity and normality. The model has predictive value and can be generalized for local school board governance and its relationship on students’ performance (achievement) in the state of Florida. These predictors account for a significant amount of the performance variability, R² = .358, F(3,139) = 25.866, and p < .001. The r value of the predictive model (degree of relationship of our three independent variables and FCAT score) is .599 which is a large coefficient for behavior science (Green, Salkind, & Akey, 2000). In conclusion, this study and the school board leadership assessment instrument, contributes to the limited body of empirical literature available supporting the relationship between effective school board governance and student achievement.
References


