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**What School Board Members Need to Know: Assessing Leadership**

**Introduction**

This chapter reports on research into effective school board behaviors and describes a new MHL district-level school board leadership assessment, as a Balanced Governance approach that associates specific governance practices with student performance. Importantly, it demonstrates higher levels of student achievement test scores in school districts where school board members collectively scored higher on the MHL assessment. This supports our premise that school boards that knowingly or unknowingly practice a Balanced Governance approach report higher student achievement scores on their state’s achievement tests.

This is important because a review of the literature on school governance and student achievement, including decades of performance based educational reform in the U.S., reveals:

1. Increased attention continues to be focused on school board accountability and its impact on student performance.¹
2. Student achievement is the ultimate measure of educational value.²
3. School districts nationwide continue to struggle to raise student achievement and narrow achievement gaps.³
4. Although there continues to be a need for quantitative research and practical tools to help board members raise student achievement, these resources remain scarce/limited.⁴

Indeed, literature on school board research is rife with conclusions and recommendations based on personal experience, observations, opinions, and anecdotal evidence rather than
carefully designed studies. This is supported by Delagardelle’s view that opinion-based writings on the role of school boards and student achievement dominate the literature. Further, Walser perceived that research remains essentially descriptive and lacks a systematic examination of how governance relates to outcomes. Collectively, the need to identify effective school board assessments and training tools is a national issue. District are held increasingly responsible for improving student achievement.

This chapter provides empirical research and practical tools to help school board members improve student achievement. The research established a relationship between the behaviors of school board members and student achievement, within a Balanced Governance model and achieves the following:

1. Explores and explains board members’ beliefs and actions that result in high student performance.
2. Demonstrates that high scores on the MHL school board assessment tool in leadership skills, governance and community relations link to higher student achievement.
3. Provides an effective, research supported training tool for board members.
4. Supports a Balanced Governance model, where each board member shares the leadership responsibilities.

Drawing from years of experience in human resource and development (HRD) and research on school governance and student achievement, this study was guided by the goal to improve learning and an organization’s performance.

Indeed, a review of the literature, as it relates to organizations, education and performance, through an HRD perspective, reveals that:
1. School boards, like any board of directors, serve as the elected or appointed leadership accountable to their stakeholders for their organization’s performance and are responsible to provide the education the community expects.

2. The success of an organization depends on the quality of the product it produces—in this case student achievement.

3. Leadership is most effective when board members transcend the factors that have adverse effects on their duties and decisions (for example; ability to work together, beholding politics and personal ambition).

**Linking School Governance to Student Achievement: The Study**

In this study, data was collected from the school board members of a school district that had the highest student achievement scores in a state highly rated for improving student achievement. In one case study, five board members were selected to participate because their school district had the highest percentage of A and B-rated schools and highest percent of level 3, 4, and 5 composite scores on the state exam in reading, math, and writing during the 2004-2005 school year.

Information was collected from individuals through interviews with the board members with the intent to explore their experiences and perspectives about school governance and how it might predict successful student performance (achievement). Some of the open-ended questions asked were:

- What is unique about your board’s way of working that has resulted in such high levels of student achievement in your school district?
- How do five elected board members with different values and backgrounds work together to make a school board decision that will raise student achievement?
• In your opinion, what is the most important decision your board has made that contributed to your school district’s high student achievement?
• What governance conditions are necessary to raise students’ achievement?

The results were that leadership, community relations and governance (as predictors) were associated with high student scores (performance outcomes).

[Insert figure 1 here]

Developing the MHL Assessment Tool

One outcome of the study was the development of the MHL school board assessment, as a way to measure the relationship between the governance predictors shown in figure 1 above and their students’ test scores (achievement). The MHL school board leadership assessment uses seven or eight questions developed for each of the governance predictors; leadership, community relations and governance style. A sample question for the governance style predictor is:

How effectively does your oversight of the school district's academic performance provide you with the information you need to allocate district resources to raise achievement?

The MHL school board leadership assessment was tested for content validity and piloted with 30 school board members and found to meet statistical criteria for reliability and validity. The school board leadership assessment was applied statewide to school board members across different states with the same results.

What We Learned About Effective Board Governance
As a result of multi-state studies, the following school governance and student achievement findings can help board members and educational leaders nationwide govern effectively to raise student achievement:

1. Regardless of whether school boards knowingly or unknowingly apply a Balanced Governance model, their success in raising student achievement is dependent on the shared leadership and decision making behavior.

2. School board members who score high on the MHL Assessment in leadership, governance style and community relations associate with high district student achievement test scores.

3. The MHL Assessment results in similar positive benefits for school boards regardless of location or size and can be used as part of a district/self-assessment and training tool.

4. Twenty-one (21) governance predictors, associated with leadership, governance style and community relations on the MHL School Board Assessment relate to raising student achievement. For example, in the category of Governance Style, the board’s oversight of the school district’s academic performance to allocate school district resources links to raising student achievement.

**Describing the School Board Training Program**

One outcome of the studies noted above was the ability to use the results of the MHL Assessment tool and design an effective school board training program to improve student achievement. The training program is called the Empowering Leaders Training System (ELT) and organized into six sequential modules or a series of interventions. These modules describe how school board members can operate to improve student achievement and better fulfill other district goals.
Module 1. School board members, as a group, may self-administer the MHL leadership assessment (survey) and: (a) compare, analyze and discuss their individual and collective scores on the leadership, governance style and community relations categories, (b) determine their individual and collective strengths, weaknesses and needs, and (c) use these results, as a baseline, to monitor and assess progress on an annual intervention plan to raise student achievement. The assessment may be re-administered throughout the school year to measure the board's progress.

Module 2: School board members participate in a short course with the curriculum focused on shared leadership. During the course, board members as a group, demonstrate in writing how the shared leadership theory can be applied to their intervention plan to raise achievement. This same process applies to board members who do not have an intervention plan. For example:

*Shared leadership used to address leadership issues (i.e. fiscal, legal, policy & educational issues) that are aligned with their expertise and organizational role and goals.*

Model 3: School board members, as a group, analyze and discuss the Bevino report as a case study of a district’s comprehensive “turnaround” plan to raise achievement. The board members then list and discuss 10 interventions they believe their district can implement to improve achievement. This case study demonstrates that a board with high student achievement practices the shared leadership model. A synopsis of this case study follows:

The Bevino report, serves as a case study of a designed plan to “turnaround” a school district from 2001 through 2005. This report chronicles the interventions taken by this district’s board and administration in response to their community’s dissatisfaction with student’s performance, operations, and insufficient communication.

The report reveals that the case study district began their transformation when the board
and administration developed goals and specific plans to: (a) increase student achievement, (b) make resource decisions based on student needs, and (c) improve communication with parents and the community. As a result, the district rose from 27th place in student achievement in 2001 to first in the state in 2004-2005. And, the district continues to place within the top six school districts in the state in student achievement.

Bevino describes how the academic and organizational transformation focused the district’s attention on student achievement. Based on their understanding that those closest to the students are the most knowledgeable and responsible for student achievement, the board and administration implemented significant organizational and academic changes including:

- The decentralization of financial and instructional authority to the schools
- Downsizing district departments, allocating 91% of yearly FTE dollars to the schools and reducing district overhead costs to 9%
- Making financial decisions based on students’ academic needs
- Promoting parent responsibility and involvement
- Implementing strategies to differentiate and individualize instruction
- Using research-proven, most effective teaching methods
- Predicting and evaluating school work on results, not process
- Reassigning district personnel to schools for direct support

The comprehensive intervention plan demonstrates how the district’s culture changed, calling for teachers who know how to teach, leaders who know the work of teachers and effective administrators who can: (a) evaluate the teaching in their school, (b) analyze student data to make instructional decisions that increase achievement, and (c) allocate resources to affect those decisions. Collectively, these plans meant that the board, superintendent, and
principals must provide the resources, clarity, and training needed to make the change successful.

This case study of the district’s “turnaround” is congruent with research on school governance, as an exemplar of a Balanced Governance model. Importantly, although school districts have their own culture and challenges, the Bevino report provides an effective tool to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to raise student achievement. The interventions presented only represent a sample of the extensive intervention plan administered.

**Module 4:** School board members may participate in a group discussion related to the research questions used in the case study and the interventions that resulted in improvements in their student achievement. If there are multiple district boards participating, they may participate in a group discussion with board members from other districts. Examples of the discussion questions include:

- What is unique about your board’s way of working that has resulted in high levels of student achievement in your district?
- How do elected board members with different values and backgrounds work together to make a board decision that raises student achievement?

A facilitated question and answer session should follow.

**Module 5:** Role playing or role training is where board members assume a role and review and rehearse real school board issues and situations in order to improve their content and shared leadership, problem solving and communication skills. A board member can view problems and solutions from different perspectives.

The following is an example of steps for a role-playing or training session:
• The facilitator introduces the scenario or problem and encourages an open discussion of issues, before the program starts. For example; formulate district goals and objectives to achieve higher student scores.

• Provide a clear picture of the scenario. For example: (a) establish benchmark to measure student scores, (b) to measure future progress, and (c) what the members are expected to achieve at the end of the session.

• Identify the role each member will play. For example, one member will provide leadership for fiscal matters and financial analysis. Another may provide leadership in legal matters. Another may lead community relations and define roles in a shared leadership model.

• Members can develop a series of strategies to achieve goals and objectives that improve student achievement. When finished with the session, members can discuss what they learned and their strengths and weaknesses.

**Module 6:** School board member's review and analyze responses to community-relations questions on the MHL assessment that resulted in low to moderate relationships between community relations construct and raising student performance (achievement). School board members may want to: (a) review and analyze their community relations program throughout the school year, and (b) use these reviews as a baseline, to monitor and assess their strengths, weaknesses and progress to ensure their program helps raise student achievement. For example, if the district does not have a community relations program they should develop one and follow the above process. During this module, board members as a group, develop or revise their community relations program and develop goals and objectives to improve student achievement.

**Conclusion**
This chapter describes the multi-state study and the MHL assessment tool designed to help address the scarcity of research-supported resources available to help school board members address declining student performance. The 21 research findings allowed for the development of a practical training program; the Empowering Leaders Training System (ELT), that includes six modules and the use of the MHL assessment tool.

This chapter empowers school board leaders to improve their governance skills to raise student achievement by demonstrating that successful school board leaders administer prudent governance and leadership practices, transcend self-serving governance behavior, and focus resources on realistic solutions to raise student achievement. These leaders understand that their success, as well as their student’s, depends on productive shared leadership and decision-making, critical components of a Balance Governance approach.
Figure 1

Governance predictors associated with high student scores.
Endnotes


2 Larry Lashway, "Using Board Policy to Improve Student Achievement," *ERIC Digest*, 2002: 163. ERIC No. ED472183-2002-12-00.


5 Deborah Land, " Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students’ Academic Achievement " (working paper, Johns Hopkins University Report No. 56 published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p33)


8 Wendy E. Ruona, *An Investigation into Core Beliefs Underlying the Profession of Human


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.