

Executive Summary

Reform Governance:

How has it influenced Texas school board members and their boards?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Low academic performance has been widely recognized as a problem for at least two and a half decades, since *A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)* sounded a call of alarm in 1983. Since then, policymakers and educators have tried 1,001 reform ideas, including back-to-basics curricula, teacher professional development, class-size reduction, raised graduation requirements, comprehensive school reform, high-stakes testing, abolition of social promotion, site-based management, and innumerable reading and math programs. But few have succeeded in producing substantial and sustained improvement in academic achievement.

Increasingly, policymakers have identified traditionally organized, heavily bureaucratized school districts as one source of the problem. School boards, particularly those in diverse communities, have been accused of contributing to the school system's ills by not keeping school districts on task and focused on student achievement (Finn & Kegan, 2004).

Some trends in public education reform in the last two decades have tended to diminish the power of school boards. Site-based management took hold in the late 1980's, and weakened school boards and districts' central office. By the mid-1990s, in cities such as Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New York, mayors assumed control of school districts, appointing boards that were frequently little more than window dressing. Moreover, choice-based reforms threaten to limit governmental power more generally and empower parents. The latest policy trend threatening the autonomy of local school boards is the recent push for standards and accountability, epitomized by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, a federal statute that requires schools to administer standardized tests every year to students in grades three through eight. Schools that fail to demonstrate adequate yearly progress toward proficiency (as defined by the states) are subject to sanctions ranging from the potential loss of students to the eventual reconstitution of their operations.

Given these trends and the recent state accountability systems, policymakers are debating the value of school boards and rethinking the appropriate design of a structure for governing public schools. Whatever their role, school boards typically retain a lot of practical power over the day-to-day functioning of schools. They select superintendents, set expectations, approve budgets, oversee major management systems and processes, approve and sometimes create the policy framework within which the district operates, approve contracts and usually personnel appointments, and significantly influence district culture. All of these activities help establish the overall vision and strategic direction of the school district. However, boards also have a strategic leadership role in helping schools focus on and support student achievement, which many boards do not perform very well. To strategically lead a school district, boards have the authority to develop a strategic plan, establish performance criteria for the superintendent, and implement structural changes to the district to improve the delivery or content of education. Because of these wide-ranging responsibilities, boards continue to be a major leverage point for effecting overall district transformation. Despite their power, however, a lot of boards do not demonstrate the kind of leadership and perform the role needed to improve student achievement.

One option is to improve how school boards currently govern school districts by providing boards with professional training. Through professional training, school board members could gain a clearer understanding of their purpose as a governing body, e.g. to strategically lead by setting a reform vision, maintaining a district-wide focus not based on constituents or special populations, focusing the activities and the policies of the district on improving student achievement, evaluating the superintendent based on concrete district performance goals, etc. Professional training on this unique leadership role of a school board could increase board focus on the achievement and learning of students and improve board members' ability to keep school districts focused on student learning.

Board members start out with varying abilities and knowledge of their role and how to govern. Training board members can play an important role by helping boards understand what they can do to support student achievement and teaching them how to perform leadership and policymaking activities, over and above the activities related to the day-to-day functioning of the school district.

To understand the value of professional training for school board members, the Houston Endowment has contracted with Evaluation & Research Services to conduct a large-scale evaluation of the effectiveness of a professional board training offered to new school board members in Texas since 2002, called the Texas Institute for School Boards. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the linkages from the training and its reform governance model to changes in school board behavior that could lead to improved district performance and to improved student achievement.

TEXAS INSTITUTE TRAINING AIMS TO IMPROVE GOVERNANCE

The Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS), a Texas not-for-profit corporation partially supported by the Houston Endowment, has developed a professional training program for newly elected school board members, called the Texas Institute for School Boards. The training is based on a conceptual framework of "reform governance" (McAdams, 2006), i.e., governance focused on whatever reforms are appropriate to improve student academic achievement. Started in 2002, the Texas Institute training provides first-time school board members with an induction experience that focuses on the theory and practice of urban school district improvement and the policy-level roles and responsibilities of urban school board members.

The training is intended to empower individual board members and thereby boards as a whole with knowledge on how to function at a sophisticated, strategic policy level and be in the mode of "reform governance" where the aim of their leadership is to reform the school district in ways that will improve how students are educated. The Texas Institute training focuses on the main components of the CRSS reform governance model with emphasis on core beliefs and commitments; and roles, responsibilities and relationships. They also provide a solid overview of theories of action for change; building blocks of reform governance; policy development and policy oversight; and reform policies. Outside of the Texas Institute training, CRSS also provides subsequent trainings that focus on civic engagement and transition planning. These additional topics are generally offered via the

Texas Institute Alumni Program, which includes breakfast meetings at the annual Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) conference.

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION RESEARCH

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the linkages from the training to changes in school board behavior that could lead to improved district performance and to improved student achievement. This information also provides feedback to the Houston Endowment on the effectiveness of the Texas Institute for School Boards training and its underlying conceptual model of “reform governance”.

The evaluation has two phases. The first phase of research, described in this report, explored (1) whether there was evidence of influence on the Institute participant’s beliefs and actions vs. non-participant school board members, (2) whether there is evidence that school boards with Texas Institute trained school board members exhibit effective governance and (3) whether there was evidence that the building blocks of the Texas Institute Reform Governance model influenced intermediate outcomes, such as the codification of reform policies. The second phase of this exploratory research, planned for next year, will explore in-depth via case studies the successes and challenges of school board members and their superintendents who are implementing the knowledge and tools gained at the Texas Institute.

Because the ultimate goal of the Texas Institute training is to improve student achievement, any measurable effect will be evident after the completion of the qualitative phase of the evaluation. This report seeks to provide formative feedback on *intermediate* goals that might lead to improvement in student achievement. The intermediate goal is to improve the reform governance of urban school boards in Texas. Accordingly, the evaluation questions that underlie this report touch on not only the Texas Institute training’s effect on school board members’ actions and beliefs, but also collectively on school boards’ governance and adherence to the reform governance model. This report is not able to provide a rigorous estimate of the Texas Institute training’s efficacy in achieving its *ultimate goal* – improved student achievement.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

Evaluation & Research Services chose an evaluation approach that involves a comparison group design that examines the behavioral differences of school board members trained (and not trained) at the Texas Institute training. By choosing this approach, the researchers can describe the variation in influence the Texas Institute training has had on trained vs. non-trained board members, and to test for the statistical significance of these differences. The analysis is also a formative evaluation on intermediate outcomes, not a summative evaluation on the effect of the Texas Institute training on student achievement gains.

This phase of the evaluation research collected self-report survey data on all the school board members and superintendents in the 43 target districts, which include two types of school board members – those trained (and not trained) by the Texas Institute training. Surveys were administered from September to December 2006 via mail and web to all superintendents, school board members, and school board service personnel in the targeted 42 large urban school districts in Texas (43 target districts minus the one pilot district). The survey was sent

to 309 school board members, 42 superintendents, and 42 school board service personnel. Two reminder letters were sent in October and then follow-up phone calls were made in late November and early December. From a total of 309 school board members, 185 responded with a response rate of 60 percent. From a total of 42 superintendents, 29 responded with a response rate of 69 percent. From a total of 42 school board service personnel, 19 responded with a response of 45 percent.

The surveys collected measures not only on interim outcomes but also on the key mechanisms and processes described in the Texas Institute training model – beliefs, roles and responsibilities, operations, theories of action, reform policy. Three of the components of the Reform Governance model were not included, because they are not the focus of the Texas Institute training – policy implementation and oversight, civic capacity, and transition. Similar questions were asked of superintendents and school board members to gain insight from the entire 8 (or 10) member governance team. Some additional factual questions were then asked of the school board service personnel about the school district.

ANALYSIS

Researchers conducted correlational and regression analysis to test the influence of participation, the influence of the building blocks of the reform governance model and the influence of training a percent of school board members on a school board on the codification of reform policies controlling for external factors.

T-tests were calculated to examine the statistical difference between the behaviors and actions of school board members trained and not trained by the Texas Institute training. These analyses were run on the school board member level data (N=185). There are 88 school board members who have attended the Texas Institute training from 2002-2006 and 97 that have not attended.

To analyze the data at the school board level, the school board member level data was aggregated into school board level data by calculating the median (given the small sample sizes) of the school board member and superintendent responses for each school board. Each set of school board data were also analyzed for completeness, i.e. at least half of the trained and untrained school board members on the school board needed to have responded to the school board member survey. If this criterion was met (or exceeded) then the school board data was included in the analyses. Seven school boards had insufficient data to be included in the analyses; the pilot board was also not included. The analysis sample included 35 school boards.

RESULTS: DIFFERENCES IN BOARD MEMBERS TRAINED AND NOT TRAINED AT THE TEXAS INSTITUTE TRAINING

We found that the two groups of school board members are very similar prior to their attendance at the Texas Institute training. Significantly *more* Texas Institute trained school board members (as compared to those not trained by the Texas Institute training) are male: 67 percent vs. 55 percent. However, the two groups are similar in age, education background, race, and employment. The two groups of school board members also have a similar distribution of when they were first elected as board members as well as similar percentages elected at-large vs. single member districts, or ran against an incumbent. The two groups of school board members also

had similar percentages of their election contributions coming from the business community, parent groups, PACs, unions, and their own personal wealth. This similarity prior to attendance establishes the validity of comparing the two groups and allows for making inferences concerning the influence of the Texas Institute training on their beliefs and actions.

By comparing the board members who were trained and not trained at the Texas Institute training, the differences suggests that the Texas Institute training influences the intensity of its participants' core belief about children's ability to perform at or above grade level as well as the importance of defining an appropriate superintendent-school board relationship within the governance structure of a school board including the expectation that the Superintendent is a co-leader of reform. The Texas Institute training appears to also influence specific policymaking behaviors in school board members centered on reform, such as seeking outside expert advice on reform strategies, deliberating, voting on and/or adopting reform policies and strategies. These types of behaviors are key aspects emphasized in the Reform Governance model and the Texas Institute training – Core beliefs, Roles and responsibilities, and Reform policy – that can possibly strengthen a school board's role in both approving and creating a policy framework within which the district operates.

Furthermore, the Texas Institute trained school board members rated other school board trainings more harshly than the school board members who had not attended the Texas Institute training. And in terms of all of the training that they had received, the Texas Institute trained school board members felt that the training they had received had been useful to their work as a school board member and they valued their training on governance and reform strategy most highly. In terms of future training, the Texas Institute trained school board members also expressed different needs in terms of the types of topics that they would find most useful to them in their work as a school board member. They wanted more training on policy implementation and oversight, governance, and school board operations.

RESULTS: INFLUENCE OF REFORM GOVERNANCE MODEL ON CODIFYING POLICY

The correlational and regression results indicate that two of the three main elements of the reform governance model – roles and responsibilities and school board operations, but not core beliefs – are independently associated with the codification of reform policies by a school board. The functioning of a board – either in terms of the roles, responsibilities, and relationships, or the operation of school board meetings, or evaluating the superintendent regularly – seem to be more influential than the core belief of the school board that all children can perform at or above grade level or of the possibility of eliminating the achievement gap in shaping a reform policy and getting it codified into policy.

Influencing a school board's governance appears to be more complex than increasing the number of trained members. Neither metric – the current penetration rate or overtime coverage measure – was significant in the multiple regression models, even controlling for district size, district performance, the rating of the superintendent and civic support. These regression findings imply that school boards with none, a mix, or a majority of school board members trained by the Texas Institute training (either measured as a current status or as a accumulative coverage measure) have the same likelihood of codifying reform policies and functioning effectively in their school board roles and in their operations. This finding may be partially explained by the fact that several of the targeted school boards that have none or

very few (up to 30 percent) of their school board members trained by the Texas Institute training reported having positive core beliefs about children performing at grade level, belief in the possibility of eliminating the achievement gap, efficient board operations, and effective roles, responsibilities and relationships among the team of eight.

Moreover, comparing the two metrics, the overtime coverage measure has a stronger influence than the current status penetration rate, albeit not a significant influence. Both measures also explain a similar amount of variation in the model overall. Given that more information is contained in the overtime coverage measure, it has a higher correlation with presence of a fixed faction, and it has a higher level of sensitivity in the model, it is a preferred metric for measuring influence of the Texas Institute training.

We also found that the bivariate associations indicate that the higher the percent of Texas Institute trained board members (currently or overtime), or the increased presence of core beliefs, or the increased presence of effective roles and responsibilities, significantly lower the presence a fixed faction on a board. These influences, however, on reform policy codification were not significant, i.e. they did not have a significant independent association with reform policy codification in the multiple regression models.

Overall, these findings indicate that the percent of Texas Institute trained board members on a given school board (current or accumulatively overtime) significantly influences the presence of a fixed faction on a board, but does not contribute significantly – directly or indirectly – to more effective operations, core beliefs, roles and responsibilities, or reform policy codification. This suggests that there is not a so-called current or overtime percentage of how many school board members it takes to launch a district onto the path of reform. Instead, more effective school board operations and more effective roles and responsibilities of the school board members (regardless of the numbers of members trained) is what significantly influences the codification of reform policies within a given a district.

In weighing these findings, certain limitations should be considered. First, these findings may not be generalizable beyond urban and suburban Texas school boards. At the same time, little research has addressed this important population. In addition, the measures used in this study were original. Although this was necessary in the context of the current research, to the extent that a different set of measures might better operationalize the constructs of interest, additional research is needed. Additional research is also needed to assess the extent to which socially desirable responding may be a factor.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Texas Institute training appears to promote several important beliefs and actions in *individual* school board members pertaining to good reform governance practices. The importance of efficient board operations and effective roles, responsibilities and relationships appear to be significantly influential in shaping and adopting reform policies by a board. However, the specific percent of trained board members or their accumulative coverage overtime by the Texas Institute training appears not be a direct or indirect mechanism that drives the codification of reform policy, although it does contribute to improving the functioning of boards by reducing the likelihood of a fixed faction on a board.

This implies that the Texas Institute training does influence its individual participant's policy making actions and beliefs about children's ability to perform and about the importance of the superintendent-board relationship, but it appears not to significantly influence the functioning of a board as a whole in terms of codifying reform policy. This may partially be explained because some of the school board members who have not attended the Institute training hold similar beliefs and also practice good governance (as defined by the components of the CRSS reform governance model). This said, for those school board members who are not following the principles laid out in the reform governance model the Texas Institute training could have a significant influence on their individual beliefs and actions. Additionally, if school board members worked together more closely as a governance team (trained or not trained by the Texas Institute training) to implement efficient and good practices in terms of their board operations, roles, relationships, and responsibilities, there could be a significant increase in the codification of reform policies intended to improve district performance.

Based on these findings, we suggest the following recommendations:

The Texas Institute training should focus more on specific strategies that school board members can use to transform their board operations and roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

Given that none of the associations between the building blocks of the reform governance model and the codification of reform policy were moderated by either the percent of Texas Institute trained board members or the overall coverage metric, then increasing the percent of school board members who are trained by the Texas Institute training or the number of school board service years held by trained school board members on a given board may not provide sufficient changes in the functioning of school board governance. It may only reduce the presence of a fixed faction on a board, implying that this should not be the aim of the Texas Institute training. However, significant relationships were found between school board operations and roles, responsibilities and relationships, and the codification of reform policies indicating that these aspects of the reform governance model can promote good governance practices. This implies that the curriculum and training model of the Texas Institute training should be further refined to provide school board members with specific strategies on *how* to transform a school board's operations, *how* to improve roles, responsibilities and relationships, as well as, include more specific information on *how* to reform a district, i.e. reform strategies.

The Texas Institute training should include policy implementation and teamwork in the curriculum.

Individual school board members (rather than a whole school board) appear to be influenced in positive ways by the Texas Institute training in terms of beliefs and policymaking actions centered on reform. However, few of the school boards members are able to translate those changes into actual reform policies established by the whole board. The Texas Institute training seems to fall short in providing the specific strategies for a school board member to actually *implement* their learning and approve or create reform policies as a team of 8. This is evidenced by the fact that reform policy codification was not significantly associated with the percent of school board members trained by the Texas Institute training in a given district. Significantly more Texas Institute trained school board members also wanted additional training in policy implementation, besides policy oversight, governance, and school board operations. These two facts suggest that the Texas Institute training should include (or add)

the policy implementation training component into the Texas Institute training curriculum as well as add specific strategies for individual board members to follow on how to implement policy changes *within a team framework*.

The Texas Institute training should increase the amount of networking and informational support provided to school board members after the Institute training.

The Texas Institute training could strengthen the support structure and networking component they provide to trained members. This support network should build up a set of resources that provide case examples, tools, strategies, pitfalls to avoid, etc which allow school board members who have attended the Texas Institute training to share their experiences, but more importantly interact and learn from each other's successes and mistakes. Providing this type of information and support after school board members have left the Texas Institute training and return home to their school boards should help board members with the specific choices and steps to attempt in *implementing* the new governance concepts and practices. Continued contact and support from other board members at the Texas Institute training should also help school board members initiate and take more action toward creating and approving reform policies.

Further research is needed to understand the specific success factors and barriers that are facilitating or impeding changes in individual board member governance behavior to translate into changes in behavior by the board as whole.

This study indicates that individual school board members do change their governance behavior as a result of being trained in good governance techniques, but that these individual changes are not translating into lasting reform policy changes collectively being made by school boards as a whole. In addition, the findings also suggest that improved board operations and effective roles, responsibilities and relationships do influence the codification of reform policies. Therefore, to be able to improve the functioning of school boards through training individual members it is pertinent to understand how changes in individual's beliefs and behaviors translate into improving board operations and creating effective roles, responsibilities and relationships. Research on the success factors and barriers of how these types of changes occur is part of the case study research that is the second phase of the evaluation. This case study research will be conducted with six boards where there was evidence of (1) school board members directing their school district on a path of reform, and (2) where school board members were exhibiting leadership, but there was not yet evidence of a reform policy agenda taking hold.

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