

Executive Summary

Teaching School Boards about Leadership and Strategic Policymaking: The Texas Institute Training and Lessons in Reform Governance

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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 hundreds of reform ideas, including teacher professional development, class-size reduction, raised graduation requirements, comprehensive school reform, high-stakes testing and innumerable reading and math programs. But few reforms 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 low academic achievement. School boards, particularly in ethnically diverse communities, contribute to low academic achievement by what they fail to do, e.g. do not keep school districts on course, do not as the governing body stay focused on student achievement, etc. (Finn & Kegan, 2004). Policymakers, as a result, are debating the value of school boards and rethinking whether another leadership structure, i.e. school districts governed by the mayor, would be more effective at governing public schools.

Whatever their role in leading the effort to improve student achievement, school boards typically retain a lot of practical power over the day-to-day functioning of schools. They select superintendents, set expectations for the superintendent and district administrators, 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.

Professional training may also be one of the only viable options that policymakers, superintendents and board members have for equipping *all* board members with the knowledge they need to effectively govern because, since boards are democratically elected, board members may come into the position with varying levels of education, training, and experience. 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.

Board members need training, in general, on the basic and vital aspects of governance and reform. Effective, in-depth, and targeted professional training has the potential not only to standardize, but also to improve the knowledge base and leadership skills of all school board members. This type of in-depth training could be the vehicle for providing valuable guidance to school board members and boards on how to lead a school system – school board together with the school district – to produce substantial and sustained improvements in student learning and academic achievement.

To understand the value of such a professional training, 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 teach board members 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 intensely on board members core beliefs and commitments, roles, responsibilities and relationships. To some extent, they cover several other aspects of reform governance such as theories of action for change; building blocks of reform governance; policy development and policy oversight; and reform policies.

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 was conducted in two phases. The first phase of research, published in *Reform Governance: how has it influenced Texas school board members and their school boards* (Quigley,

2007), found that efficient board operations and a focus on board roles, responsibilities, and relationships were most associated with boards enacting reform policy. Moreover, Quigley (2007) found that the Texas Institute training did influence individual participant's policy-making actions and beliefs about children's ability to perform and about the importance of the superintendent-board relationship. However, the training did not significantly influence the functioning of a board as a whole, esp. in terms of codifying reform policy. The goals of the second phase of this exploratory research, described in this report, are to: 1) capture the successes and challenges of board members as they apply the reform governance principles taught at the Texas Institute training; 2) identify – at a relatively crude level – what factors were most and least prevalent for both working and non-working boards; and 3) generate hypotheses about mechanisms that are likely to lead to effective governance by school boards that focuses on reforming and improving student achievement.

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 a comparative case-study approach to qualitatively isolate general factors associated with effective and non-effective reform governance and participation in the Texas Institute training. By choosing this approach, researchers can describe the variation in influence the Texas Institute training has had on boards where the reform governance modeling is working and not working, and to test (in some cases) for the statistical significance of these differences. “Working” is defined as a school board with members that were directing their school district on a path of reform; “non-working” is defined as a school board where the members were exhibiting leadership, but there was not yet evidence that a reform policy agenda was taking hold.

Researchers selected six case studies – three as working and three as non-working. During selection, researchers ensured that the two types of case study boards had similar numbers of trained board members. The snapshot of these boards was taken after 78 percent (32 of the 41) of school board members and 83 percent (five out of the six) of superintendents had attended the Texas Institute training at various times since 2002.

In the spring of 2008, interviews were conducted with the full board and the superintendent (i.e., the full “team of eight”) in the six case study districts (N=47; one school district only had six board members). We had 100% response rate and the interviews lasted from 45-75 minutes with two researchers, one designated as the principal interviewer and the other as a notes taker. In this report, we use the term “school board” or “board” to refer to the “team of eight” which includes all of the members on the school board and the superintendent.

ANALYSIS

To identify themes, we utilized a staged technique described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and elaborated on by Ryan and Bernard (2003). Then using the classic comparative case study design approach, we described and compared two groups and tested (in some cases) whether one group differed from the other. We examined the degree to which common themes and indicators were present for each person interviewed. We examined the patterns overall, at the individual school board level, and at the working vs. non-working board level. As we examined these patterns, it became clear that the pattern of variation at the individual school board level was reflected in the working vs. non-working groupings. Therefore, we only report the overall percentages and the working vs. non-working comparisons.

RESULTS: COMPARING WORKING AND NON-WORKING BOARDS

By comparing in-depth how working and non-working boards govern, we can identify what behaviors and beliefs are found in boards that are directing their school districts on a path of reform. These characteristics provide information that is potentially important to understanding how boards move from exhibiting leadership without evidence that a reform policy agenda is taking hold to successfully directing school districts toward reforms that improve student achievement.

The main difference in working boards and non-working boards are that working boards are more active in policy development and have clear theories of action for change for their districts. We found some key differences in the working and non-working boards that highlight what actions board engage in when they are directing their districts toward reform and improving student achievement. Board members and superintendents in the working and non-working boards had very similar core beliefs and commitments about children's ability to perform at or above grade level, but the working boards had taken the next step and actually formalized their core beliefs and commitments into policy. They differ the most in that more board members and superintendents on working boards feel that they are active in policy development, they are ensuring that reform policies are codified, and they communicate their goals, plans, and policies to the community. Working boards also differ from non-working boards in that working boards have a clear theory of action for change for their districts to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap. Working boards also believe that they treat themselves and their superintendent with respect, and they do not have fixed factions.

We also found several similarities in the working and non-working boards. The members of working and non-working boards tended to feel similarly about having efficient board meetings focused on student achievement, about exercising their oversight management responsibilities for the district, about having an aligned curriculum and monitoring student data, and about being diligent in monitoring the implementation of policies. Working and non-working boards were also similar in their ability to maintain a close relationship of trust with the superintendent. They both understand that their role is to govern, not manage, and to provide necessary constituent service.

RESULTS: INFLUENCE OF TX INSTITUTE TRAINING ACCORDING TO BOARDS

According to the majority of superintendents and school board members, the Texas Institute training provided knowledge to board members that is essential to strategically leading a district toward reform. The Texas Institute training and the reform governance model increased boards' knowledge of governance roles, relationships and responsibilities. Specifically, the Texas Institute training

influenced both the working and non-working boards by increasing their knowledge of the role of the superintendent, their role as board members, the responsibilities of the team of eight, and how to work as a team.

Besides the Texas Institute training and reform governance model increasing board knowledge of governance roles, relationships and responsibilities, the training provided motivation and focus which then lead to changes in overall board behavior. We found that the Texas Institute training increased board member awareness of the need to have a strategic vision and a set of strategies to improve how the school district educates all children, a.k.a., a theory of action. The Texas Institute also increased board accountability for their vision and long-term strategic plan (primarily by underscoring their responsibilities) and provided motivation and hope that “*change can be done*” (within real live case examples). These changes in turn lead to and motivated board behavior change – increased board unity and teamwork, decreased micromanagement, more focus on achievement, learning, and policy (setting, reviewing, and aligning), improved operating procedures, improved policymaking processes, increased discussions about change to the districts, and the use of a common language related to governance.

We also found some different perceptions in the working and non-working boards. The working boards distinguish themselves in that they also perceived the influence of the Texas Institute training to be primarily on their “*adoption of core beliefs,*” “*focus on long-term strategic vision and theory of action*” and their “*adoption of reform policies.*” Non-working boards perceived the influence of the Texas Institute training to be mostly on their “*knowledge of the role of a board member,*” “*knowledge of how to manage relationships,*” and “*holding their superintendent accountable for ‘how’ to run the district.*”

In terms of the training itself, the majority of attendees found several aspects of the training beneficial. Attendees valued the case study method, the networking at the Institute training and with alumni, the modeling of good civil behavior and good board governance, and the guidelines, next steps, and solutions that were discussed pertaining to their board’s current issues.

RESULTS: MOST COMMON FACTORS OF SUCCESS, CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

According to the superintendents and school board members, several factors helped improve their governance. *The main factor that helped improve board governance was turnover in the team of eight including the hiring of an experienced superintendent.* In the non-working boards, board member turnover, and not a change in the superintendent, was reported as the primary leverage for change because board member turnover eliminated members on the board who had very strong and stubborn personal agendas.

Besides the improvements that come along with a change in members on the team of eight, leadership is key. *Boards mentioned that when a board as a whole focuses on governing, and not micromanaging, they are better able to lead and set a vision.* This is known in the reform governance model as ‘not crossing the management line’. This focus on the management line was attributed to the Texas Institute training by half of those who mentioned it.

Board members and superintendents mentioned that teamwork and board unity lead to better governance. As described by the board members and superintendents in both working and non-

working boards, these two factors appear to play a key role in implementing a change agenda and staying focused on an improvement plan.

Boards mentioned several barriers in their efforts to improve student achievement – those external to the board and those related to governing. The external barriers mentioned most often were: the lack of community trust either past or current; being in a community that is apathetic or has low expectations for their students and families; tight budgets; inequities in school facilities throughout the district; and the need for bond funds to improve the facilities.

Board members and superintendents mentioned several barriers related to effective board governance. They indicated that personal agendas, not have a strong desire to change, and being reactionary instead of thinking strategically and maintaining a district-wide focus were the largest barriers to improving board governance. Most often boards described that when personal agendas were at work, teamwork and governance for the good of all students was not possible. They discussed how a strong desire to change was paramount in maintaining the motivation and urgency required to tackle difficult problems. They said it was sometimes easier to deny that a problem exists. Boards also mentioned the barrier of spending too much time on mundane, non-strategic issues, i.e., being too reactionary, instead of spending time on district-wide strategic issues. In addition, boards mentioned the need to have change-minded leadership at the district and on school campuses as a challenge.

Non-working boards mentioned two additional challenges. Non-working boards were challenged primarily by shallow dialogue between their board and their superintendent/administration and by faction voting within their board. Faction voting stymies board progress and signals to everyone – public, school district, and board members – the divisive nature of the board. Faction voting is many times also along racial or socio-economic lines, representing the culture diversity of the community within which boards are based. In addition, the superintendent – board relationship is vital to the governance ability of a board, since the superintendent implements the policies of the board and manages how a district implements board decisions.

Working and non-working boards had similar needs. Both working and non-working boards mentioned the need to develop clear theories of action and actively engaging in policy development. Specifically, this means that they both need to have strategic discussions defining the “how” of changing and improving student learning and performance. They both realize the importance of focusing on policy, reviewing policies, and aligning policies and practice, but admitted they need to perform these tasks in an active, on-going systematic manner. They also both need to set specific goals and benchmarks for their superintendent that are aligned with policies in order to hold the superintendent accountable for change. They need to systematically monitor district functions, rather than having the district report to them in an ad hoc fashion.

Boards also mentioned the need for better communication with the public, either in having any community voice (non-working boards) or engaging all stakeholders (working boards).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a democracy, no one can limit who is elected. Board members or school district administration or policymakers themselves can not control what type of people are elected as board members, so professional training is one of the only options that boards, superintendents and policymakers have

for equipping all board members with the knowledge they need to govern. This evaluation has found that targeted professional training can address the lack of leadership by school boards and their lack of focus on student achievement by training school board members on important aspects of governance.

We found that both working and non-working board members and superintendents did attribute (partially and fully) entire board behavior changes to the Texas Institute training. The boards attributed to the Texas Institute training their decreased levels of micromanagement, increased board unity and teamwork, improved operating procedures, use of a common language around governance, and more of a focus on achievement and learning. Non-working boards also indicated that the Institute training helped them work as an entire board to put in place the mechanisms and expectations to hold their superintendent accountable for “how” to run the district, while working boards indicated that the Institute training influenced them as a whole board by assisting them in also establishing and adopting core beliefs. These findings, however, contrast with findings from Quigley (2007) which did not find significant evidence that board behavior as a whole had changed, particularly in the area of boards developing, enacting or codifying reform policies (as a result of the Institute training or not). Quigley (2007) found that the Texas Institute had significantly influenced individual board member beliefs and behaviors. The training had intensified board member beliefs about children’s ability to perform and about the importance of the superintendent-board relationship. The training had increased policy making actions centered on reform, such as seeking outside expert advice on reform strategies, deliberating and or voting on reform policies and strategies.

This difference in findings may be partially accounted for by the changes CRSS made to the Texas Institute curriculum based on the recommendations from the 2007 Quigley report. In July 2007, CRSS added more in-depth coverage and discussion of policy development, the theory of action for change, and reform policy to the Texas Institute curriculum. It is also possible that the difference in findings is partially attributed to the difference in methodologies used from one study to the next. The qualitative case study work using interviews may be more sensitive to identifying this type of whole board behavior change.

To summarize, the findings from this report indicate that the Institute training is helping individual board members with a minimum set of basic governance principles and policy making skills and is assisting boards (as a whole) who are equipped with varying governance abilities to focus on student learning, improve their operating procedures, use a common language around governance, work more as a team, and focus on governing not micromanaging the superintendent or district. The Texas Institute training is assisting boards (as a whole) to mature and reach a more sophisticated level of governance. Boards have moved from having personal agendas derail their unity, a focus on day-to-day operations and micromanaging to discussing (and in some case adopting) core beliefs and commitments, running more efficient and respectful board meetings, having more discussions and a focus on district-wide issues and student achievement with a more well-rounded and defined understanding of their role and the role of the superintendent. Overall, the training appears to influence how boards as a whole govern – they maintain focus, work as a team, and operate professionally and efficiently in meetings – and not just how individual school board members behave.

These findings imply that the Texas Institute training does provide valuable information to school board members and has improved the knowledge base and leadership skills of entire boards. However, even after the majority of board members on a given board have attended the Texas Institute training, both working and non-working boards still specified a strong need for training in strategic, long-term planning and defining a theory of action for change. Non-working boards also voiced the need for more training in policy development and policymaking. Therefore, the Texas Institute training has been an essential component in improving board governance, but it has not been adequate to assist boards in leading districts successfully toward meaningful reforms focused on sustained student achievement.

Based on these findings, we suggest the following recommendations:

The Texas Institute training should continue their case study approach and focus on training newly elected board members. Board members who have personal agendas and board members who do not focus on all students were the most commonly mentioned challenges that boards have while governing. As a result, training newly elected board members in the basics of good governance is appropriate and can reduce the likelihood that board members will fall into this type of single-minded, constituency driven behavior. The Texas Institute intense case-study method and reform governance model was considered valuable by board members and superintendents from boards with varying governance abilities, i.e., working and non-working boards, because it either introduced these basic concepts or reinforced them. The case-study approach to learning, the networking during and after training, the modeling of good governance by CRSS staff, and the structure of the training structured were highly valued by participants.

The Texas Institute training should continue to focus on topics related to effective leadership: core beliefs and commitments; theories of action for change; building blocks of reform governance; policy development and policy oversight; and roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

The Texas Institute training appears to improve the knowledge base of board members and superintendents in boards of varying leadership and governance capacity in terms of their roles and responsibilities; the importance of a board having and acting on a set of core beliefs and commitments; and the need for policy development aimed at district reform. Besides this transfer in knowledge, the Texas Institute training also assisted boards to become more efficient in their operating procedures and be able to focus more on their important work – student achievement. In many cases, the training empowered and motivated individual board members and superintendents to have the courage to try and take the necessary next steps in their districts. These elements – core beliefs and commitments, defined roles and responsibilities, good working relationships including teamwork, and efficient operating procedures – are the basic foundation for good governance. We found that there is a general need for this type of governance knowledge across a varied range of boards, one that the Texas Institute can address.

Any follow up training to the Texas Institute training should be designed by CRSS and offered in several stand-alone training modules, so as to address the specific needs of boards. Given that boards are in all states of healthy functioning and willingness to change and that as CRSS trains more boards the number of boards with higher levels of board functioning will increase, there is and will continue to be a growing need for training that focuses on defining the specifics of a theory of action and of policy development and oversight (as was seen in the working boards in the study).

CRSS could develop several stand-alone training modules to address these training needs. The modules should be on:

- Policy development and policy making;
- District reform models and how to clearly define a theory of action for change based on a district's current structure, i.e., site-based management, centralized management, etc.;
- How to conduct a thorough policy review of district policies and guidelines with a focus on the role of school board members and the superintendent in the policy review process;
- Gaining community support and how to engage all stakeholders; and
- Basics of team building with a particular emphasis on how to gain consensus on major issues or core objectives with a focus on policy.

To assist in targeting the specific needs of the boards with the CRSS training modules, CRSS may want to invest in the development and testing of a set of reform governance indicators as a diagnostic tool. Further research would be needed to pilot and test a set of indicators with a larger pool of boards with a range of governance abilities alongside a set of cognitive interviews with a small subset of the boards included in the pilot. These data would enable the creation and design of a psychometrically sound and cognitively valid tool which could assess both the “readiness and willingness of a board to change” and the specific “maturity” level of a board in terms of its reform governance behavior. This type of diagnostic tool could be used to assess the needs of a board, target training and start discussions among board members and superintendents about next steps.

CRSS should focus on boards where it has leverage through the Texas Institute and consider training discrete boards (i.e., full teams of eight) – either one board at a time or in groups of boards. The interviews did not specify how many board members it takes to influence a board to work more successfully as a team, primarily because some non-trained board members may have basic governance skills and knowledge. However, in the absence of a valid tool that can identify an entire board's level of functioning or sophistication in reform governance principles, CRSS will have more opportunity to influence boards where (1) there are several newly elected board members, (2) over four members have been trained, or (3) the superintendent has been trained. In these districts where there is more of a potential to influence an entire board, CRSS should consider training discrete boards (i.e., full teams of eight) – either one board at a time or in groups of boards.

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