



## **School Boards' Effect on Student Learning Gets New Attention**

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With prominent critics labeling them irrelevant and big-city mayors looking to take them over, the nation's local school boards have seen better times. But what's really the matter with the nearly 15,000 boards, scholars who met here this month say, is that they are understudied.

"There's a lot of conjecture and opinion out there," said Thomas L. Alsbury, a researcher from North Carolina State University and the chairman of the Sept. 13-15 meeting. "Most of those debates are not predicated on research."

Drawing 150 researchers, school board members, and association officials, the conference was the first time since 1975 that scholars and practitioners met at a national level to talk about research on school boards, organizers and scholars said.

Though local boards have governed American schools for more than 200 years, researchers know little about how the 95,000 citizens who sit on school boards do their jobs, apart from a brief spurt in the 1960s and 1970s when such studies were more in vogue.

Yet current research gaps notwithstanding, many experts say the job of school boards is being redefined, and weakened, by changes taking place at the national, state, and local levels.

Those changes include sweeping federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, the growth in the proportion of school funds coming from state coffers, and the trend toward mayoral takeovers of urban school systems.

While some of the studies presented at the Des Moines conference underscored the view that such changes are marginalizing local school boards, others offered a counterpoint, by suggesting that school boards can and do matter.

The meeting was sponsored by the Wallace Foundation of New York City, which also underwrites coverage of leadership issues in *Education Week*; Iowa State Action for Education Leadership and Policy, an education improvement project sponsored by the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers and Wallace; the Iowa School Boards

Foundation and the Iowa Association of School Boards, both based in Des Moines; the Springfield-based Illinois Association of School Boards; and Bank of the West, with headquarters in San Francisco.

## Impact on Achievement

In his own studies, for example, Mr. Alsbury, an assistant professor of educational administration at North Carolina State, in Raleigh, has found that, when school board seats turn over in politically contested elections, a change in superintendents follows soon after.

That finding echoes the long-held “dissatisfaction theory,” which suggests that voters replace their school boards—and, consequently, their superintendents—when they are unhappy with the way their school systems are run.

To take the next step, and measure whether that kind of turnover has an impact on student achievement, Mr. Alsbury studied 176 board elections that took place in Washington state from 1993 to 2001.

On average, Mr. Alsbury found no strong links between changes in school board membership and scores on state exams.

However, when school board seats changed frequently for political rather than for routine reasons, such as retirements, the data showed that student performance tended to drop after a few years.

The opposite occurred when churn at the board level was less frequent and less controversial. In those instances, test scores rose following the turnover, possibly because of the relative lack of controversy in those communities.

Because the increases or decreases in academic achievement occurred four years or more after the turnover elections, Mr. Alsbury said, it’s likely that they reflect changes in school policy made after the elections.

“The results of this study indicate that school board member turnover, especially politically motivated turnover, seems to be related in some way to student achievement,” he writes in a paper on his study. “These findings confirm that school governance is indeed democratic and that the public actively influences their schools through elected school boards. Removing boards would eliminate the opportunity for communities to influence their schools directly and would diminish liberty.”

Mr. Alsbury’s study will be included in a forthcoming book, *Relevancy and Revelation: The Future of School Board Governance*. Scheduled to be published next year by Rowman & Littlefield Education, of Lanham, Md., the book will include the papers presented at the conference.

“School boards do not directly cause student learning,” Mary L. Delagardelle, the deputy executive director of the Iowa Association of School Boards, writes in one of the chapters. But, she adds, the beliefs, actions, and decisions of board members do have an impact.

Ms. Delagardelle helped lead an association study of high- and low-performing districts in Georgia that aimed to gauge what the successful boards were doing differently. The researchers chose Georgia because it had data available that categorized school districts by student achievement.

## Takeovers Eyed

One big difference, the researchers found, was in board members’ mind-sets about their jobs. In academically successful districts, members believed they could improve their school systems and viewed the potential of students and staff more optimistically.

Board members in the low-achieving districts assumed that positive changes were beyond their control. The ongoing project, expanded to include eight states, is now testing training mechanisms for spreading successful school board practices to other districts.

Other conference papers suggest that mayors also can have an impact on student learning. Along with Brown University scholar Kenneth K. Wong, Francis X. Shen of Harvard University studied 104 mayoral takeovers that took place after 1992 in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and other large metropolitan districts in 40 states.

On average, they found, elementary-school-level student performance rose more in the mayoral-control districts than in other districts in those states. The difference in reading and math gains, measured after one to two years of the takeovers, ranged from .1 to .15 standard deviations.

“The best way to think about it is to translate it to 1.5 percent increase in student proficiency,” said Mr. Shen, a fellow at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

“Are districts still woefully underperforming?” he said. “Yes, but they’re a little less woefully underperforming.”

Mr. Shen said one possible reason that the takeovers seemed to be effective was that the mayor “stepped up to say the buck stops in the mayor’s office.” His findings are due to appear both in the book on school board research and in a volume called *The Education Mayor*, which the Georgetown University Press in Washington is scheduled to publish Oct. 15.

“We think the mayor is providing a political shield to allow educators to do what they want to do,” Mr. Shen added.

Some participants in the conference, however, took issue with those findings. “So it’s statistically important, but not really,” said Jo Ann Yee, the senior director for urban affairs with the California School Boards Association.

Mayoral takeovers are an “easy fix,” she said. “And the question then becomes how schools are governed, rather than what happens within schools.”

Mr. Shen noted, though, that his findings apply primarily to big-city districts, typically where most of the headline-grabbing tales of mismanagement and discord on school boards have played out. Ninety percent of all districts, though, serve 3,000 or fewer students, according to Mr. Alsbury.

“Context matters,” said Frederick M. Hess, the director of educational policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. “When we talk about reforming boards, we’re not talking about a homogeneous entity.”

Mr. Hess’ own surveys, conducted in 2002, suggest that a school district’s size, the degree to which it is urban, and whether it sets teacher salaries through collective bargaining all affect what school boards look like and how they function.

## Screening Needed?

Urban districts’ troubles stem in part from their reliance on elected school boards, according to Thomas E. Glass, a professor of leadership at the University of Memphis: “Urban board members see themselves as partisan politicians battling with representatives of other groups for their share.”

“Failing districts have failing school boards,” he added in an interview, “and we’ve got to have a new paradigm there.”

In his paper, Mr. Glass suggests several options. One possibility is requiring school board candidates to meet specified qualifications, much as judges or district attorneys do. Then mayors, city councils, or commissions could nominate “qualified” candidates to run for vacant board seats.

Alternatively, Mr. Glass says, nominating commissions, made up of representatives from different sectors of the community, could screen and recommend candidates for mayoral appointments to school boards. He also calls on state legislatures to mandate external evaluations of urban school districts, analyses that would take into account both student achievement and the management in those systems.

Stanford University education professor Michael W. Kirst, who did not attend the conference, recommend splitting off some of the functions of local school boards in a paper also slated for inclusion in *Relevancy and Revelation*. He says superintendents should oversee districts’ finances and management, leaving board members to focus on setting educational standards and policy.

“The historic role of school districts is that they’ve been chartered with doing everything,” Mr. Kirst said in an interview. “All of that made sense in rural Nebraska in 1890, but the statutes that govern them have them doing large numbers of detailed things, including a lot of budget control.”

Board members at the conference might concur. Members once saw their primary job as choosing a superintendent; many said their job now includes tackling instructional issues, lobbying state legislators, and communicating with constituents, among other duties.

“I think the focus has changed dramatically in my district from a perfunctory signing-off to a period of confusion over what we need to do, which resulted in micromanaging and overreaching,” said Alicia Rodman McCray, the president of the school board for Matteson Elementary School District 162 in suburban Chicago. “Now, we’re focusing more on creating organizational capacity.”

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