

# IASB's Lighthouse Study: **School Boards and Student Achievement**

Do some school boards create higher student achievement than others? The results of a groundbreaking research study by the Iowa Association of School Boards indicate that school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers throughout the districts.

In the arena of educational research, the effect of school boards on student achievement is largely uncharted territory. Studies have shown that some teachers, some schools and some curriculums and instructional methods generate higher student achievement than others, in some cases dramatically higher. But the IASB effort is one of the few to study school boards based on quantifiable, reliable measures of student achievement.

IASB's goal was to identify links between what school boards do and the achievement of students in schools. An IASB research team studied school board/superintendent teams in districts where schools have generated unusually high achievement over a period of several years and compared those teams to ones in districts where schools have consistently generated unusually low levels of achievement.

"Our goal was that the results of this study could serve as a 'lighthouse' to guide other school boards in their efforts to improve student achievement and IASB in our efforts to help them do so," said Mary Delagardelle, IASB director of leadership development and coordinator of the research team.

## **About the Districts Studied**

It was very important that the differences in student achievement be formally documented, quite large and consistent over time. Iowa has not built a reliable statewide database from which to identify high-achieving and low-achieving



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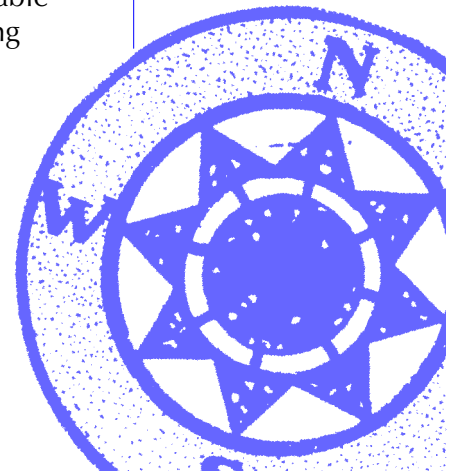
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*Iowa School Board*  
**COMPASS**

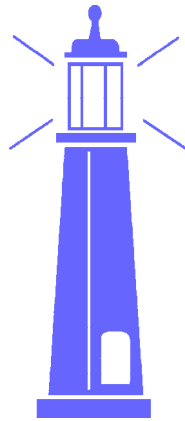
*A Guide for Those Who Lead*

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“Our research confirms that while board members are not professional educators, they have important responsibilities related to teaching and learning, curriculum and instruction, and the learning environment. Their job is to work with the superintendent to create the conditions for a professional learning community to thrive so that all schools can generate results for students. IASB’s challenge is to provide the supports to help them do so.”

—Ron Rice, IASB executive director



### **Our Filter: Conditions for School Renewal**

IASB worked with nationally recognized educational researchers Bruce Joyce and Jim Wolf to create sound, unbiased interview questions and guidelines to gather information from board members, superintendents and school personnel. The interviews were built around research on effective schools, school improvement and change, based on seven key conditions for school renewal:

1. Shared Leadership
2. Continuous Improvement and Shared Decision Making
3. Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives
4. Supportive Workplace for Staff
5. Staff Development
6. Support for School Sites through Data and Information
7. Community Involvement

*continued from page 1*

districts against those criteria. However, in Georgia, the Council for School Improvement maintains a database from which the districts could be identified. Following contacts with the Georgia School Boards Association, the Council for School Improvement gained agreement from six school districts to be studied, with the guarantee of anonymity to the school district and participants.

IASB used census data to ensure that the schools were not only comparable to each other but to districts in Iowa. The districts studied were comparable to Iowa districts in terms of enrollment, percent of children living in poverty, spending per student, household income and other factors.

**Student Achievement:** The districts were selected because they contained one or more schools that ranked very high or very low for all three academic years 1995-96, 1996-97, and 1997-98 on standardized achievement test data and a variety of other indicators. Data available for 1998-99 indicated that the schools maintained their rank, whether high or low. Achievement indicators included the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) which was administered to third, fifth, and eighth grade students, and the Georgia High School Graduation Test administered to high school students.

**Enrollment:** The districts were relatively similar in enrollment, ranging from 1,395 students to 5,163 students. Most of the districts in the study con-

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tain one or two towns, one of which is the county seat, and farms and tracts of timber. All six districts contain only one middle school.

**Demographics:** The Council for School Improvement database ensured that the differences between the selected schools were not a product of demographic characteristics of the students. The high-achieving schools accomplished more in comparison with schools serving similar populations and in comparison with schools in the state as a whole. In addition, information collected during the interviews indicated relative consistency in terms of the occupation, demographics, and personal history of the participants.

## **The Interviews**

IASB's five-member research team and one consultant interviewed a total of 159 people during site visits in the six districts (three high-achieving and three low-achieving districts). The first two districts were studied in May

### **IASB Research Team**

Pictured at right with the many volumes of notes and transcriptions from nearly 160 interviews are members of the IASB research team.

*Front, left to right:* Margaret Buckton, IASB government relations director; Wayne Lueders, IASB associate executive director; Mary Delagardelle, IASB leadership development director and former Iowa school board member.

*Back, left to right:* Jim Wolf, Synergistic Schools, Missouri City, Texas; Carolyn Jons, former Iowa school board member and an IASB past president; Bruce Joyce, Booksend Laboratories, Pauma Valley, California; Mary Jane Vens, IASB board development director, former Iowa school board member.

*Not pictured:* Research consultant Jeannie Weathersby, The National Faculty of Education, Atlanta, Georgia.

1999; the other four in February 2000. Each interview included about 25 questions and took about an hour to complete. The research team did not know which were the high or low achieving districts. The research team and consultants then analyzed the results of the interviews to look for patterns.

## **Key Findings**

### **Similarities**

**Caring about children.** While their specific attitudes were remarkably different, in all cases the people interviewed appeared to care deeply about doing the right thing for children.

**Peaceable relationships.** In all cases the board/superintendent teams had fairly amicable relationships. Typically, board members in all six districts said "We disagree without making it personal."

*—continued on next page*





## Differences

### **Elevating vs. Accepting Belief System.**

In the high-achieving districts, the board/superintendent team and school personnel consistently expressed an “elevating” view of students. Students were viewed as emerging and flexible and the school’s job was seen as releasing each student’s potential. The board/superintendent team and school personnel viewed the school system critically and were constantly seeking opportunities to improve. The social or economic conditions of homes and the community were seen as challenges in the quest to help all students succeed. “This is a place for all kids to excel. No one feels left out,” said one board member. Another said, “Sometimes people say the poor students have limits. I say all kids have limits. I believe we have not reached the limits of any of the kids in our system.”

In the low-achieving districts, the board/superintendent team and school personnel accepted limitations in students and the school system. They tended to view students as limited by characteristics such as their income or home situation, and accepted schools as they were. Their focus was on managing the school environment, rather than changing or improving it. “You always have some parents you just can’t reach,” said one board member. Another said, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink. This applies to both students and staff.”

### **Understanding and Focus on School Renewal.**

In the high-achieving districts, school board members showed greater understanding and influence in each of the seven key areas for school renewal. They were knowledgeable about topics such as improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. They were able to clearly describe the purposes and processes of school improvement initiatives and identify the board’s role in supporting those initiatives. They could give specific examples of how district goals were

**Board opinion of superintendent.** All the boards were fairly well satisfied with their superintendents.

**Tension about roles in a site-based system.** All were feeling some tension in balancing the goal of building-level autonomy in site-based management with the need for equity and continuity across the school system.

**Students in categorical programs (special education, Title I, bilingual programs).** Neither high or low achieving districts had been successful at closing the learning gap for students with special needs.

**Local backgrounds of board members and staff.** Approximately 75-80 percent of the board members and professional staff in all districts grew up in the district, an adjacent county or a similar county within their region.

being carried out by administrators and teachers. This clarity was also evident among school personnel. In the low-achieving districts, board members were, as a whole, only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives. They were sometimes aware of goals, but seldom able to describe actions being taken by staff members to improve learning.

### **Action in Buildings and Classrooms:**

Generally, interviews with central office administrators, principals and teachers confirmed that the board's knowledge and beliefs around the seven conditions for school renewal were connected to action at the building and classroom levels.

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Staff members in the high-achieving districts could link building goals to board/district goals for student learning and describe how those goals were having an impact in their classroom and other classrooms in the building. Staff members identified clear goals for improvement, described how staff development supported the goals, and how they were monitoring progress based on data about student learning.

In the low-achieving districts these connections across the system were not discernable. There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level.

For more complete examples, see the comparisons on pages 6-11.

## **Next Steps**

The IASB study found that the understanding and beliefs of school boards in high-achieving districts were markedly different from those of boards in low-achieving districts.

"It's important to note that, as a result of this study, we can't say that the board caused high achievement or low achievement to happen. Instead, the board's understanding and beliefs appeared to be part of a district-wide culture focused on improvement in student learning," said Delagardelle.

It's tempting to ask how an improvement-focused culture might have emerged so differently in otherwise very similar communities, said Delagardelle. "But the real question for IASB is, can we make it happen for boards in Iowa?"

Ron Rice, IASB executive director, said the study will have several implications for the association:

- IASB services, such as board training and information, will expand their focus on helping board members understand their role in school renewal and student achievement. This continues IASB's focus on student achievement, set by the IASB Board of Directors in the association's strategic plan, said Rice.
- As IASB moves forward, it will be important to clearly define how the board's role differs from that of education professionals. IASB has appointed an administrators advisory committee, composed of superintendents and principals, to assist staff in supporting our members as board/administrative teams.
- IASB will work with a few pilot sites in Iowa to provide intensive training and support based on the findings of this research. "Our work with these 'lighthouse districts' will serve as a guide for other boards and districts as they attempt to create a district-wide culture focused on improving student achievement," said Rice.

"As board members we need to look at our actions based on this research and consider where we can build our skills and become better and more focused in supporting school improvement conditions. From IASB's standpoint, we must build this knowledge into IASB training programs and support board/superintendent teams in their efforts."

—Dick Vande Kieft,  
IASB president,  
Cedar Falls school  
board member



# Boards Show Clear Differences in Knowledge, Beliefs

## ***Seven Conditions for School Renewal Central to Achievement***

IASB researchers interviewed 159 board members, superintendents and school staff members in high- and low-achieving school districts. Their goal was to compare the board/superintendent teams' ability to encourage positive change by exploring the presence of seven conditions for school renewal. These conditions were derived from extensive reviews of research on productive change in education.

For school board members and district administrators, the interviews probed the extent to which the seven conditions existed and were understood by the interviewees. For school personnel the interviews probed the degrees to which the conditions were present in the workplace of teaching. In other words, if board members and the superintendent were aware of and focused on school renewal, was it actually having an impact in buildings and classrooms?

IASB borrowed terms used by researcher Susan Rosenholtz in 1989 to describe the districts in our study as moving—because student achievement was on the move and far above the norm—and stuck—because student achievement was relatively stable and below the norm.

The comparison of the boards in the moving and stuck districts revealed significant consistency within and across districts. On the whole, the vast majority of people expressed knowledge and beliefs matching the descriptions below.

### ***The Seven Conditions for School Renewal***

1. Shared Leadership
2. Continuous Improvement and Shared Decision Making
3. Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives
4. Supportive Workplace for Staff
5. Staff Development
6. Support for School Sites through Data and Information
7. Community Involvement

## ***1. Shared Leadership***

*A focus on student learning through a shared clear vision, high expectations and dynamic leadership among all levels.*

### ***Moving***

✓ Board members were knowledgeable about the learning conditions in the schools, alternatives for improving education and the needs of students. Board members could mention specific initiatives that were underway and could explain the initiative and identify specific ways that the board contributed to the initiative. Board members described a clear direction and focus on specific goals related to improving reading. Board members could describe the work of staff around the goals in clear, specific terms.

✓ Board members could describe what was happening in classrooms and with instruction.

### ***Stuck***

✓ Although some board members said goals and improvement plans existed as written documents, they couldn't describe how they were being implemented. Some board members mentioned that their districts had goals, but seldom knew what they were. In some cases, board members acknowledged that a specific area—such as reading—was an important area for the district's efforts, but were vague about what was being done and why.

✓ Board members said it wasn't their job to know about instruction or they expressed opinions about what was happening in classrooms based on their own child's experience, their spouse's experience as a teacher, or some other personal contact.

## **Shared Leadership, continued**

### **Moving**

✓ Board members expressed their focus on finding ways to reach all children. "We can't just let them fall through the cracks."

✓ Board members had high expectations for all students.

### **Stuck**

✓ Board members indicated student needs were too varied to meet them all. "You can't reach all kids."

✓ Board members had limited expectations for some students.

## **2. Continuous Improvement**

*A continuous focus on improving education with high levels of involvement and shared decision making.*

### **Moving**

✓ Board members seemed to feel an internal desire to improve. They talked about the importance of improving education for the sake of students.

✓ Board members consistently expressed their belief that all children could learn and gave specific examples of ways that learning had improved as a result of initiatives in the district. Poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors were described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses.

✓ Board members expected to see improvements in student achievement quickly as a result of initiatives.

### **Stuck**

✓ Board members referred to external pressures as the reasons for working to improve. For example, state mandates or "not wanting to have the lowest test scores" were cited as reasons for improvement efforts.

✓ Board members often focused on factors that they believed kept students from learning, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation.

✓ Board members expected it would take years to see any improvements in student achievement.

"The Iowa Lighthouse study affirms the National School Boards Association's focus on the Key Work of School Boards, a national initiative that focuses on helping school boards create a vision and structure for the district and engaging the community to improve student achievement. The seven principles in this study parallel the Key Work framework for good boardsmanship. NSBA talks about vision, standards, assessment, accountability and collaboration. The Iowa study talks about focusing on improvement, sustaining initiatives, staff development, community involvement and shared leadership. These are all essential to making the efforts of school board members even more effective in improving student achievement.

The study demonstrates the two very different philosophies and practices between high- and low-achieving districts. High-achieving school districts do not accept limitations, but view them as challenges. These districts are moving in the right direction and can be models for other school districts across the country."

—Anne Bryant, executive director  
National School Boards Association



“It is obviously of critical importance that policy leadership be focused on whether the learning needs of students are being met. With the help of the IASB, Iowa school board members can be national leaders in creating this focus and ensuring higher student achievement.”

—Ted Stilwill, director,  
Iowa Department of  
Education

### 3. Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives

*An understanding of how to organize the people and the school environment to start and sustain an improvement effort.*

#### **Moving**

- ✓ Board members could describe specific ways board actions and goals were communicated to staff, such as a post-board meeting for teachers and administrators.
- ✓ Board members mentioned goal-setting exercises in which the board and superintendent learned together and solved problems together.
- ✓ Board members could describe structures that existed to support connections and communications within the district. For example, board members could describe teaching teams, faculty committees and how they related to school improvement initiatives.
- ✓ Board members described evidence of regularly learning together as a board. They talked about studying an issue together before making a decision.

#### **Stuck**

- ✓ Board members did not describe any clear processes for linking board actions and goals with that of the staff.
- ✓ Board members believed the superintendent “owns” information, and indicated it was the superintendent’s responsibility to learn, interpret information and recommend solutions to problems.
- ✓ Board members didn’t know or were vague about how teachers and administrators interacted with each other or how teamwork was linked to goals or initiatives. The board assumed this communication was happening. (Staff interviews indicated it was not.)
- ✓ Board members did not discuss learning together beyond information that was presented to them by the superintendent or other administrative staff.

### 4. Supportive Workplace for Staff

*A supportive workplace that enables all staff to succeed in their roles.*

#### **Moving**

- ✓ Board members expressed a high level of confidence in staff. They made frequent positive comments about staff and could give specific examples of how staff members showed commitment, how staff members were improving, and how staff members were working to help students learn. Board members could identify specific examples of the way the board showed its appreciation for staff, such as recognition at board meetings.
- ✓ Board members expressed their belief that changes could happen with existing people, including students, staff and community.

#### **Stuck**

- ✓ Board members tended to make negative statements about the staff, such as identifying the need to change principals or get rid of poor teachers. They made few positive comments about staff and seldom indicated how the board recognized staff contributions.
- ✓ Board members expressed their belief that new staff members, more involved parents, higher income families, or perhaps different students would be needed to positively impact student achievement.

## 5. Staff Development

*Regular schoolwide staff development that is focused on studying teaching and learning.*

### **Moving**

✓ Board members described staff development activities in the district and could describe the link between teacher training and board or district goals for students. Board members described a belief in the importance of staff development activities focused on student needs.

### **Stuck**

✓ Board members described staff development as chosen by individual teachers or as required for teacher certification. Board members knew there was a budget for staff development, but were unsure whether there was a plan for staff development. Board members made frequent disparaging remarks about staff development, both as an expense of time and as an ineffective strategy for changing/improving practice.

## 6. Support for School Sites through Data and Information

*Using data and information on student needs to make decisions and modify actions at the district and building level.*

### **Moving**

✓ Board members talked about receiving information from many sources, including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals, teachers, along with sources outside the district, such as information about exemplary programs and practices. Information was received by all board members and shared at the board table.

✓ Board members often referred to student needs—as shown through data about students and groups of students—as the focus for decision making. Board members mentioned data on the dropout rate, test scores and student needs. They talked about receiving information on a routine basis, such as monthly reports.

✓ Board members could usually be very clear about their decision-making process in terms of study, learning, reading, listening, receiving data, questioning, discussing and then deciding and evaluating.

### **Stuck**

✓ Board members referred to the superintendent as the primary source of information. Board members discussed concerns that information was not all shared or not shared equally. Some felt left out of the information flow.

✓ Board members referred to data used in decisions as based on anecdotes and personal experiences. Data on student achievement was received as a report to the board, but rarely linked to a decision. The board talked very generally about test scores and relied on the interpretation made by the superintendent.

✓ Board members generally referred to their decision-making process as discussing a recommendation from the superintendent and deciding.



“This research will be of major assistance to board members and administrators around the state as they grapple with what they can do to improve student performance. It focuses and helps to define the board’s role in student achievement and will be a vehicle to help push that agenda statewide. It’s important to look at improving student achievement systemically, however, including the roles of the board, superintendent, teachers, administrators and others. All of those pieces must fit together if we are to make a difference for students.”

—Gaylord Tryon, executive director,  
School Administrators of Iowa

“I am intrigued by the findings from this research but not surprised. Board members reflect the community. If the community is well informed and supportive, they are then on the ‘same page’ as the administration and teachers. This isn’t always easy to achieve but has to be continually developed. Being a quality school, delivering high quality instruction for high quality student learning, is a shared responsibility.”

—Jolene Franken,  
president, Iowa State  
Education Association



## 7. Community Involvement

*A close connection between the school, parents and community.*

“Board members and educators each come to their roles with a toolbox. Your challenge as a school board association—and ours, as board/superintendent teams—is to expand the toolbox. This research does that by emphasizing the board’s role in supporting change and improvement.”

—Bill Wright,  
superintendent,  
Denison

“Our board uses research to make decisions. IASB’s research helps reinforce that the board members’ role is to focus on how the system supports student achievement.”

—Ron Sadler,  
superintendent,  
Howard-Winneshiek

### **Moving**

- ✓ Board members identified how they had sought out ways to connect with and listen to the community. Board members expressed pride in their community and in their efforts to involve parents.
- ✓ Board members could name specific ways the district was involving parents and community and all indicated a desire for more involvement.

### **Stuck**

- ✓ Board members described parents’ lack of interest and education as a barrier to student learning but identified few actions being taken to improve involvement.
- ✓ Board members were less likely to mention specific ways the community was involved and were more likely to express frustration with the lack of involvement. They expressed a belief that there was not much they could do about the level of parent/community involvement. They often stated that the lack of involvement was evidence of a lack of interest from parents.

## **Superintendents**

*Generally, the superintendents of the moving districts expressed belief systems in line with their board and school staff (see below).*

### **Moving**

- ✓ Superintendents described processes they were putting in place so a focus on improvement was ongoing within the district. Superintendents described various means for sharing information frequently and broadly. They were intentional about involving people in decision making.
- ✓ The superintendent and board established district goals based on student needs. School goals were expected to be linked to the district goals.
- ✓ The superintendents described central office administrators, principals, and teachers as all working together to improve student learning.
- ✓ Superintendents discussed how district actions reflected community needs and input.
- ✓ Superintendents had high expectations for all students.
- ✓ Superintendents described initiatives within the district that were focused on student learning needs and improving achievement.

### **Stuck**

- ✓ Superintendents were more likely to mandate change or take a “hands off” approach to change. Superintendents were more cautious and deliberate in their sharing of information. Decisions were made with limited input.
- ✓ The superintendents discussed goals and improvements plans as “ends” rather than a “means” to an end of improving student learning. There was little or no evidence that goals were driving actions within the district.
- ✓ The superintendents discussed the need to hold the principals and teachers accountable for improved test scores.
- ✓ Superintendents discussed frustration with lack of community involvement.
- ✓ Superintendents made excuses for why some students didn’t learn or why their test scores were not as high as they would like.
- ✓ Superintendents described initiatives within the district that were focused on facility issues or improving discipline.

**If board members and the superintendent were aware of and focused on school renewal, was it actually having an impact in buildings and classrooms?**



### **Staff Interviews**

*Generally, interviews with central office administrators, principals and teachers in the moving districts confirmed that the board’s knowledge and beliefs were having an impact related to the seven conditions for school renewal at the building and classroom levels.*

#### **Moving**

- ✓ Staff members identified clear district-wide goals and expectations for improvements in student achievement.
- ✓ Staff members could link building goals to board/district goals for student learning and describe how those goals were having an impact in their classroom and other classrooms in the building.
- ✓ Staff members described the board as supportive. They knew who the board members were and what the board believed. Staff members said they felt the board would respect and listen to them.
- ✓ Staff members indicated they felt support from administration and that they had a supportive network, such as mentors, fellow staff members, and/or teams they could turn to for help.
- ✓ Staff members were eager to see data, test scores so they could use them to improve student learning.
- ✓ Staff members indicated it was never acceptable to give up on a student.
- ✓ Staff members described staff development that was more student focused, more collective, and linked to board goals.

#### **Stuck**

- ✓ Staff members said they knew that test scores had to get better, but didn’t indicate a clear idea of what was expected or how they would accomplish it.
- ✓ Staff members couldn’t identify board goals for student learning nor how they had impacted teaching and learning.
- ✓ Staff members often didn’t know who the board members were or only knew individuals by personal contact or relationship.
- ✓ Staff members talked about their independence and isolation. If teams or committees existed, they were often ill-defined, unrelated to student learning, inactive, teachers were unclear about the purpose, or teachers were uncertain how to become a part of the team or committee.
- ✓ Staff members were less likely to refer to data or how it helped them improve instruction.
- ✓ Most staff members indicated that while they wouldn’t give up on a child, they were sure others in the district did so.
- ✓ Staff members described staff development in terms of courses selected to meet individual teacher needs.

*“Some commonly held assumptions—that school boards should avoid matters that deal with teaching and learning—may have drawn school boards away from the very behaviors that are most likely to have the greatest impact on student achievement. It’s important that school boards be dynamic leaders in the school renewal process without ‘micromanaging’ instructional issues.”*

*—Mary Delagardelle,  
IASB research team member*

## Want to know more?

To learn more about the conditions for school renewal that form the research base of the IASB study on school boards and student achievement, see these materials.

*How to Use Action Research in the Self-Improving School*, by E. Calhoun. Alexandria, VA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995.

*The New Meaning of Educational Change*, by M. Fullan and Stiegelbauer. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.

*Getting There From Here; School Board Superintendent Collaboration: Creating a School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement*, by R. Goodman, L. Fulbright and W. Zimmerman Jr. Arlington, VA: New England School Development Council and Educational Research Service, 1997.

*The New Structure of School Improvement*, by B. Joyce, E. Calhoun and D. Hopkins. Philadelphia, PA: The Open University Press, 1999.

*Student Achievement through Staff Development*, by B. Joyce and B. Showers. White Plains, NY: Longman, Inc., 1995.

*Teachers' Workplace: The Social Organization of Schools*, by S. Rosenholtz. White Plains, NY: Longman, Inc., 1989.

*School Board Leadership: The Future*, by the Iowa Association of School Boards and State Board of Education. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Association of School Boards, 1994.

*Key Work of School Boards*, by the National School Boards Association.  
Available on the Internet: [www.nsba.org/keywork](http://www.nsba.org/keywork)

“School board members will get both reinforcement and inspiration from this research. It will help them understand why some things they are already doing are helping children learn. It will also provide new ideas for even more powerful ways to make a difference for students, and that’s what we are all about.”

—Carolyn Jons, IASB research team member, former Ames school board member



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