# Lighthouse Phase II – Brief Summary

Source: This article is an excerpt from: Delagardelle, M. (2008). The Lighthouse Inquiry: Examining the Role of School Board Leadership in the Improvement of Student Achievement. In T. Alsbury (Ed.), *The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation*. Blue Ridge, PA: Rowman & Littlefield.

Introduction

The Lighthouse Study demonstrated that school boards in high-achieving districts are different in their actions and beliefs from school boards in low-achieving districts. The continuing research also provides emerging evidence about what school boards need to know and be able to do to function in a manner that has a positive impact on a school district's efforts to improve student achievement. This line of research has evolved in a systematic approach through various phases of study with each phase focusing on slightly different research questions. The phases and research questions guiding each phase are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Lighthouse Research Phases and Questions
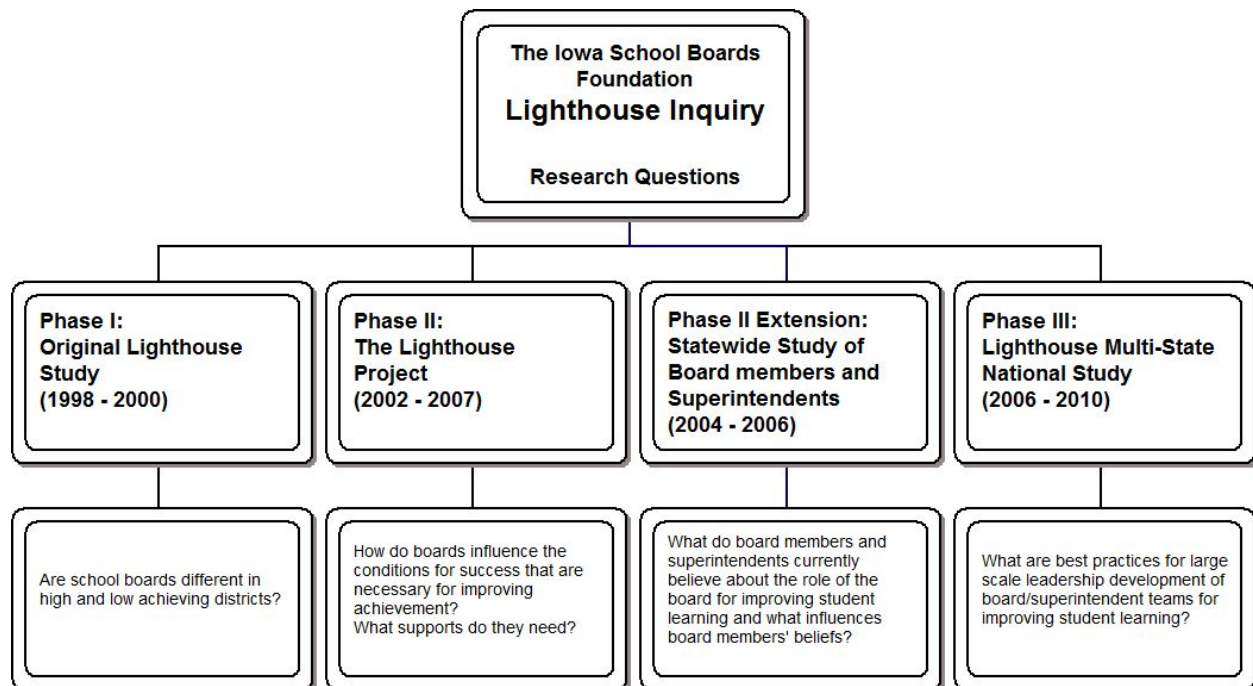
**Phase II of the Lighthouse Inquiry:
A Closer Examination of the Role of School Board Leadership for the
Improvement of Student Achievement**

Following Phase I of the Lighthouse Inquiry, which demonstrated that school boards in high-achieving districts were significantly different in their beliefs and actions from school boards in low-achieving districts, Phase II of the inquiry set out to understand more about the actions of local boards of education that positively impact school cultures and student outcomes and to understand how they learn to perform in those ways. The linkages between school boards and teaching and learning in classrooms are often misunderstood. School boards do not directly cause student learning. However, it would appear from findings of the Lighthouse Research and others, the beliefs, decisions, and actions of school boards directly impact the conditions within schools that enable district efforts to improve achievement to either succeed or fail. These linkages are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Key linkages between school boards and student learning
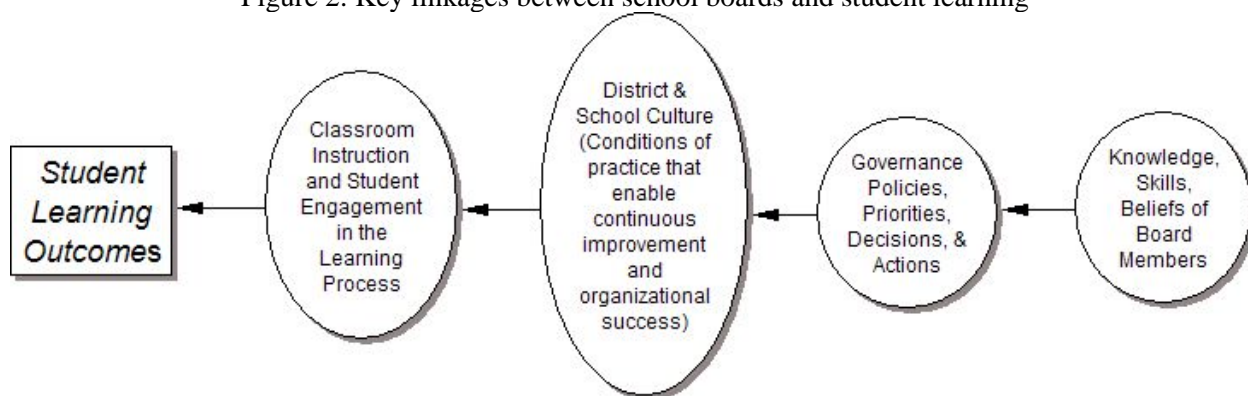
This phase of the research built upon the earlier study, Phase I, by identifying pilot school districts and providing technical assistance and support to the board, superintendent, and, in some districts, a districtwide leadership team in order to strengthen their leadership for ensuring key conditions for productive change exist within the district. The challenge was to move an entire district, a very complex system, from a set of deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and practices to a renewed focus on academic results and high levels of performance by all students. The main premise guiding this phase of the research was:

> *When local school board/superintendent teams generate a districtwide focus on improved achievement and engage local administrators and teachers in creating or strengthening key conditions that support continuous improvement, it will result in high and equitable student achievement and elevated beliefs across the system.*

The key variables (generating a districtwide focus on improved achievement, creating or strengthening seven conditions that support continuous improvement, student achievement, and the beliefs of board and staff) defined the sources of data to be collected. Although numerous types of data were collected for study, the three main sources included a districtwide survey related to the seven conditions for productive change, a districtwide survey of beliefs about what is possible to expect in terms of student learning and what it takes to improve learning outcomes, and annual student achievement data.

Results

Extensive analysis of data at the end of year three and again at the end of year five revealed considerable evidence of impact as illustrated by the following examples:

- Significant positive change in the perceived presence of six of the seven conditions being monitored.
- Significant positive change in 75% of the beliefs being monitored.
- Significant positive change in the perceived presence of specific indicators of each condition being monitored.
- Significant positive change in achievement.
- Significant increase in the ability of the staff and the board to consistently describe the district's school improvement goals.
- Significant increase in the amount of time spent in regular board meetings on policy and student achievement issues.
- Significant increase in the time board members dedicated to work sessions to focus exclusively on student achievement issues.
- Significant increase in the time board members spent talking to each other during board meetings and work sessions as opposed to interacting mainly with the staff member presenting information.
- Strong agreement across all role groups that local school boards can positively impact student achievement.

Voices of the Participants:

With the project emphasis on establishing a districtwide focus on improving student learning and shared goals for the improvement of achievement, it was important to gather information about the collective understanding of what the district was trying to improve. Therefore, one of the survey questions asked the participants in the pilot sites to describe the current goal for improvement in their school district. The following quotes from staff and board members' responses to the survey item in one pilot district illustrate the kind of change that was observed across districts.

In the first year of the project, survey responses to the question, "What are the improvement goals for this district?" included:

- *To enable all students to be successful learners both now and in the future.*
- *To better educate the student for their lifetime.*
- *Helping students to do better.*
- *To improve tests scores.*
- *To seek new challenges to continue the tradition of academic excellence and personal satisfaction.*
- *To prepare students for college, work, life.*
- *To allow our students to be the best that they can be.*
- *So all students can experience success.*

One year later, responses to the same question "What are the improvement goals for this district**?"** from participants in the same school district included:

- *Improve reading comprehension districtwide is the current initiative.*
- *Improve reading comprehension through the use of new instructional strategies*
- *To improve the reading comprehension at all grade levels.*
- *Improve reading and reading comprehension of every student.*
- *All students will improve in reading comprehension.*
- *Improve reading comprehension.*
- *To improve comprehension scores in reading in all content areas.*

- *Improve reading comprehension.*
- *Reading comprehension (K-12) is the main improvement goal for our district.*

With approximately 80 staff and board members participating in the survey from this district of approximately 1000 students, over 97% of the responses mentioned the districtwide focus on improvement of reading or reading comprehension as their current focus for improvement. This shift, from a very mission driven district to districtwide clarity about the "most important thing to improve this year" as they carry out the mission, appeared to be critical for generating collective action and ultimately improving outcomes for students. The board played a key role in establishing the focus for improvement, clarifying expectations in relation to the improvement focus, protecting the districts' improvement efforts from fragmentation, and aligning decisions and resources consistent with the needs in the focus area.

Knowing where to focus energy was not enough to ensure student learning improved. Actions consistent with the priority for improvement also became apparent in the data. Board/superintendent teams developed a renewed commitment to improving teaching in the area of greatest student learning need and ensured the professional development experiences of their staff members maintained this focus. The initial responses to questions asking participants to describe their professional development experiences over the past year included none of the characteristics of quality professional development that have been shown to impact teaching practices in ways that benefit student learning. Descriptions of their previous professional development experiences included references to motivational speakers or content that was not directly related to instruction as in the following quotes:

- *One afternoon of attendance with professional speaker.*
- *Just what has been provided for us at the beginning of the school year. . .*
- *Mr. Fitzgerald is about all that I can remember.*
- *Guest speaker on classroom discipline. Technology updates on grading system.*
- *Behavior management in the classroom, physical activity and nutrition, organizational skills.*
- *Teacher workshops at the beginning of the school year and a regional seminar.*
- *Motivational speakers were provided by the district.*
- *A state convention with inspirational speakers, hands-on workshops.*

By the end of year three, 92% of the survey responses from the same district mentioned one or more of the characteristics of quality professional development with evidence of impact on student learning:

- *The review of student data and the research and development of strategies to meet the needs of students.*
- *I have received further training in instructional reading strategies.*
- *Frequent teacher in-service times to learn about, practice, and discuss research based reading comprehension strategies.*
- *They were all related to the strategies we are to use to improve student reading comprehension.*
- *I meet weekly, sometimes daily, with my study team to improve on my teaching and student learning.*
- *Researched how to improve reading comprehension in my subject area.*
- *Shared and discussed experience in implementing reading strategies.*
- *Learning support strategies for the main comprehension strategies of inductive thinking and concept attainment.*
- *Most of them focused on teaching reading using inductive methods.*

The results and quotes provided here represent only a few of the changes observed during the data analysis but provide a glimpse into the changing conditions within the participant school districts. The next step was to sort-out the behaviors of the board members that may have contributed to the changes being observed within the culture of the school district.

What Did The Board Members Do?

The board/superintendent team assumed leadership responsibilities with a focus on systemic improvement. The board members in the pilot school districts were not passive "rubber stamps" of the superintendent's recommendations but they were also not acting as if they were the professional educators. At the same time, superintendents did not view their boards as a necessary evil that must be tolerated or merely "managed" in order to keep them from causing harm. Together, the board members and superintendents gained a sense of the leadership role the board could play and made substantial efforts to engage with each other as leadership partners without discounting the diverse perspectives and unique responsibilities each position brings to the team. The board members found a balance of active engagement in extensive dialogue about the district's focus and direction for improvement and a deep regard for the role of the teachers and administrators charged with moving the district in that direction. Finding and maintaining this balance enhanced the relationship between the board and the superintendent and the confidence they had in each other's ability to make a difference.

The board and the superintendent built a different type of relationship than is typical in many school districts. Positive, trusting relationships existed between the boards and their superintendents in all pilot districts; which, as in the original Lighthouse Study, appeared to be a necessary but not sufficient condition of the board/superintendent team. Boards and superintendents relied upon the positive trusting relationships to enable them to play strong, interdependent leadership roles, to examine and challenge each others' views, to study data and confront existing realities, to ask probing questions, and to scrutinize each others' performance in ways that strengthened and mobilized the entire team.

Roles of the Board

Five main functions or roles of the board surfaced as critical roles for boards to play as they interacted with district staff around their efforts to improve student learning. First, the boards set clear expectations for the outcomes of the improvement work. Regardless of the specific area being discussed, the improvement of student performance or the improvement of professional development, the boards worked to clarify expectations in terms of the desired outcomes or results rather than the strategies the district staff would employ to meet the expectations.

With clear expectations for results, another role the board members played was to hold themselves and the district staff accountable for meeting the expectations. The board members had to be willing to constantly monitor progress and ensure corrective actions could be taken when the progress was not adequate. However, their approach to monitoring was not one of mandate and hands off. Rather, it was a collective effort of shared (albeit different) responsibilities for watching the progress and ensuring success.

Another key role the board members played was to ensure the conditions for success were present within the system. In other words, board members had to be willing to support whatever it would take to meet the expectations that had been set. This type of reciprocal responsibility for the success of the school district created a new dimension of "pressure and support" than had been present in the districts previously.

The board members also found it important to build the collective "will" of the staff and the community to improve student learning. In other words, they needed to build a shared sense of urgency and a shared commitment to ensuring all students learn well. And, finally, the board members found it necessary to create time to learn together as a board team and engage in extensive dialogue with each other in order to establish consensus about what was most important to accomplish, to understand what it would take to succeed, and to determine at what "cost" they were willing to pursue it. Board members are not professional educators but they did need to have shared understandings about what was reasonable to expect and what it would take to meet the expectations – and that required learning together as a board team. These five roles - setting clear expectations, holding the system accountable to the expectations, creating conditions for success, building the collective will to succeed, and learning together as a board

team – became the defining elements of the board's role from which seven key areas of performance emerged as the board members engaged in fulfilling these roles.

Seven Areas of Performance Related to the Roles of the Board

As board members played their role, they found it extremely important to take responsibility for increasing public awareness of the current status of student learning, point out critical needs, and build a "case-for-change" to increase the sense of urgency for addressing the learning needs. This was often a difficult shift for board members who were more accustomed to building public confidence by pointing out district strengths than attempting to build public confidence by pointing out areas of need and communicating what the district was going to do to address the needs. In order to perform this leadership function, they first had to challenge their own beliefs about what was possible to expect in terms of their student learning gains then consistently and confidently mobilize the public, including district staff, to expect more.

A second performance area involved board members increasing their use of data to set expectations, determine and monitor indicators of progress, and apply pressure for accountability. This performance area was the most difficult for boards because they did not want to set the district up to fail and, therefore, were very reluctant to set measurable goals and targets that might expose any lack of success. Closely related to the need to apply pressure for accountability was the corresponding need to demonstrate unwavering commitment to the improvement efforts and ensure board actions and decisions reflected that commitment. This type of dedication required extensive learning, dialogue, and a willingness to "stay-the-course."

The boards also realized that improving student achievement would be directly related to their support for quality professional development focused on the improvement of instruction. For most boards, this required significant changes in the allocation of resources (people, time, and money) and would not have happened without a clear understanding of the characteristics of quality professional development and a belief in the importance of improving the knowledge and skills of educators in order to improve student outcomes.

As board members increased their leadership role, they also had to support and connect with other district-level leaders to ensure a strong continuum of leadership was distributed across the school district. The relationship between the board and the superintendent, discussed previously, was extended to the district leadership team (usually consisting of central office administrators, principals, and teacher leaders from each building) to guide and protect the improvement efforts, monitor progress, and make mid-course corrections to accelerate progress. Whenever there was a breakdown in this leadership continuum or a breakdown in the leaders' capacity to function effectively in their leadership role, the improvement work ceased to move forward.

Policies for guiding the decisions and actions of district staff have not been very effective in areas that most directly impact student learning (curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, etc.). Board members in the pilot districts believed that sustaining the processes and structures of the improvement work playing out in their districts would depend upon written policies to provide continued guidance when key leaders or board members were no longer serving the district. However, they quickly realized that policies to guide and sustain the district work to improve achievement required a more deliberative process than the policy development process they used for existing policies. Board members collectively studied background information about the policy area, identified and prioritized expectations, determined measures of progress they would accept as evidence of success, identified support needs, and regularly monitored the implementation of their policy.

Finally, board members connected with the community to increase the community's involvement in and commitment to the school district's focus for improvement. The board members had to value the role of the parents and community in the education of students and be willing to engage the community in a more significant role than the compliance requirements for involvement established by the State

Department of Education. Even though the community connection changed less than any other condition being monitored by the research team, several districts made impressive connections with the community that need to be developed, supported, and studied to determine impact over time.

While each of these seven areas of performance may have transpired differently in each district, there were many commonalities across districts that can guide board development across the state and the nation. More information about the seven key areas of performance and the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that board members identified as necessary for effective performance in these areas is available from the Iowa School Boards Foundation and are the basis of the implementation and scale-up study of the current third phase of the research.

Summary

Do some school boards generate higher achievement through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others? Clearly, the initial findings in this line of inquiry would indicate they do. However, this is difficult for many to grasp. When we think about the educational system of a school district and its likely effect on students, we consider the elements of the system in terms of their proximity to the student. In the case of this study, the educational environment created in the classroom and the school is closest to the student and is likely to have the most influence. The conditions for change are more distal from the student and are unlikely to have a significant effect unless they affect the learning environment in the classrooms and schools. The governance processes are more distal yet and are likely to have a significant effect only when they affect the conditions for change and those in turn affect the educational environment (see Figure 2).

Essentially, the board/superintendent team operates "at a distance" from the learner. As they try to support student learning they must operate through the organization since the actual work of educating is done by others. How to create these processes and how to shape them to affect the conditions for productive change and, in turn, the learning environment is just starting to become clear through the continuing Lighthouse Research.

School boards matter. Solving the problems of public education will depend upon the leadership of public schools. Issues affecting the conditions of schools that enable productive change are issues of policy. School boards are critical players in the school change process and must be active leaders on behalf of the students in their schools. Without effective school board leadership, systemic change becomes impossible and improvement of student achievement will remain episodic, with only "pockets of excellence" sprinkled throughout public schools and school districts. How board/superintendent teams understand and carry out their roles can make the difference between dysfunctional leadership teams incapable of leading change and highly effective leadership teams that build districtwide capacity to ensure every student succeeds.

A great deal is already known about what it takes to improve the achievement of all students in classrooms and schools. Numerous studies and books have been written describing the characteristics of more effective learning environments. Numerous examples of schools that beat the odds and produce high levels of learning for all students exist. However, less is known about what it takes to lead an entire district to high levels of learning and sustain a culture focused on excellence and equity. Until recently, school boards have been excluded from the school reform literature and excluded from consideration as a unit of change or a key lever in the change process. This study and those that follow will open the door to understanding the critical leadership role of school governance. This understanding can then help establish the processes for creating conditions for productive change which impact the teaching and learning environment throughout the school district, and, in turn impact the learning of students in schools.