THE LIGHTHOUSE INQUIRY:

School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement

by

The Iowa Association of School Boards

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HIGHLIGHTS

Do some school boards create higher student achievement than others? The results of a groundbreaking research study, the Lighthouse Inquiry, 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 to guide a state-level association in our efforts to help them do so.

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 districts against those criteria. However, a recent study in Georgia, initiated through the Council for School Performance, had established a database from which the districts could be identified. Following contacts with the Georgia School Boards Association, the Council for School Performance 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 also 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. Data available for 1998-99 indicated that the schools maintained their rank, whether high or low. Achievement indicators included the percentage of students meeting the proficiency standard on the statewide curriculum based assessments in four subject areas. In addition to the state curriculum based assessments, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) was administered to third, fifth, and eighth grade students and the Georgia High School Graduation Test was administered to the 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 contain 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 Performance 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 conducted more than 159 individual interviews during site visits in the six districts (three high-achieving and three low-achieving districts). The first two districts were studied in May 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 and themes in the responses.

KEY FINDINGS

SIMILARITIES

Caring about children. While their specific behaviors and 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."

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 and all were providing services in categorical programs.

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.

DIFFERENCES

Elevating vs. Accepting Belief Systems. 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 it 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 seven conditions for productive change that provided one "lens" for the content analysis. 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 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 were 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 productive change were connected to action at the building and classroom levels.

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 discernible. There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level.

DESCRIPTION AND EXAMPLES

SEVEN CONDITIONS FOR PRODUCTIVE CHANGE

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. Overall, the vast majority of people expressed knowledge and beliefs matching the descriptions below.

The Seven conditions for school renewal are:

1. Emphasis on Building a Human Organizational System
2. Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives
3. Supportive Workplace for Staff
4. Staff Development
5. Support for School Sites through Data and Information
6. Community Involvement
7. Integrated Leadership

1. Emphasis on Building a Human Organizational System

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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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. Staff development was part of a collective effort to improve in a particular area of focus which was tied to student learning 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.

5. 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.

6. Community Involvement

A close connection between the school, parents and community.

Moving

Board members identified how they sought 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.

7. 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.

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

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.

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.

Superintendent Perspective

Generally, the superintendents of the moving districts expressed belief systems consistent 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 improvement 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.

Staff Perspective

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 or 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.

DISCUSSION

The IASB study found that the understanding and beliefs of school boards in high-achieving districts and the presence of seven conditions for productive change 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 and their efforts to ensure the presence of specific conditions within the system appeared to be part of a district-wide culture focused on improvement in student learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Some teachers generate higher student achievement than others (Brophy and Good, 1986), in some cases dramatically higher (Sanders, 1996). Some schools generate higher achievement than others (Mortimore, 1988; Brookover et al., 1978), in some cases dramatically higher (Weil, 1984; Harkreader and Weathersby, 1998). Some curriculums and instructional methods generate higher achievement than others (Bloom, 1984; Slavin, 1996; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993), in some cases dramatically higher (Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 1999).

Do some school boards generate higher achievement than others do? And, if so, do they do so through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others?

We have initiated a line of inquiry into these questions. This paper describes the design of the initial study and reports the general findings from case studies of six school districts. Questions from the interpretation of the results are formulated.

BACKGROUND

Why Make Such an Inquiry?

In the United States, we are in a time of unusual concern about the effectiveness of school districts and schools to generate higher levels of student achievement. The public has always wanted its schools to educate the children of the society and, until about 20 years ago, most Americans believed that the nation's schools were probably "state of the world," even though imperfections were always cited and how to conduct education was often debated. Curriculums in reading were hotly debated in the press in the 1930's and the so-called "look say" and "phonics" methods had shares of supporters and detractors. Those familiar arguments persist today in much of the same terms. However, the terms of the arguments in the first 60 years of the 20th century were often an indication of satisfaction with the prevailing state of education. Those

who were out to change the content and process of education, such as the leaders of the Progressive Education Movement, were frequently attacked as undermining what was perceived as essentially sound. On the whole, the public, or at least the voting public, *liked* its schools.

The general satisfaction has eroded significantly over the last 30 years. This erosion is obvious even though a good sized proportion of the population tends to believe that problems are the result of misguided reform efforts or of changes in society that presumably have weakened a traditionally sound system. (An example is the belief that the rising numbers of single parent households weakens the socialization of children in ways that affect their performance as students.) The actual reasons for the dissatisfaction are not hard to locate, although they do not have equal effects on the opinions of all citizens and many members of the body politic are very satisfied with the schools their students attend (Rose and Gallup, 2000)

Until the late 1950's the public generally believed it was inevitable that socioeconomic conditions and racial or ethnic differences would affect educational achievement. That students from economically poor households or whose ethnic heritage was not mainstream would be less likely to achieve was believed to be unalterable. The political debate that led to the "Great Society" programs focused attention on the possibility (backed up by objective information) that the schools that served the economically poor and ethnic minorities were less well funded and staffed and less connected to their communities than were schools that served the more advantaged. Thus, programs such as Title I tried to equalize the funding and staffing of schools that served economically poor students. National Defense Education Act loans to improve opportunity for higher education were made available. In other words, the conditions of schooling were brought to the fore as conditions that could generate equity in educational opportunity. Interestingly, the very umbrella covering those loans was an authorization whose general design was to protect the nation—the poor were an adjunct.

The National Defense Education Act was a response to one of the concerns that affected the public in the late 1950's—the fact that the U.S.S.R. put a satellite in orbit before the United States did was evidence that the U.S. education system was falling behind in a kind of "cold war" in education. While the concern probably did not have a basis in fact (the Soviet scientists who

designed that satellite were educated under the czar), the issue of international competition had been raised and continues today.

Until Sputnik, most U.S. citizens believed that their educational system was the "international best." The results of international comparison studies of achievement in the industrialized nations, largely instigated by U.S. researchers, caused the superiority of the U.S. educational system to come into question. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) translated American standard tests in arithmetic and mathematics into Japanese and compared classes in Minneapolis, which they selected because its metropolitan area had relatively few poor and minority students, to a Japanese city that was otherwise similar to Minneapolis. They concentrated on the average scores of classes in the two cities; the distributions did not overlap. The mean score of the highest-scoring class in Minneapolis was below the mean class score of the lowest-scoring Japanese class! Other less dramatic differences from international studies also indicated that the long-standing view of U.S. educational superiority was not justified.

Information about the effects of the Great Society programs also upset many citizens and policymakers. The Title I initiative did result in the provision of **more** resources to districts with large populations of students from economically poor families. However, measures of learning by those students did not indicate a corresponding rise in achievement. In the late 1980's the federal government became concerned that many districts and states were not generating data about the effects of Title I and began to require testing programs. A few years later it became apparent that the program as a whole was not narrowing the achievement gap between the poor and middle-class students. One reason was the extensive use of norm-referenced tests which, for the most part, measured lower-order outcomes. An effect of the testing program was to induce districts and teachers to narrow the curriculum, presumably to align it more closely with those tests, and significant time was spent rehearsing students for the tests rather than teaching them. Based on the assumption that criterion-referenced tests would reveal real performance standards better than normative comparisons and would contain a healthier mix of curricular objectives, the government agencies then began to promote the development of standards of performance and of tests

designed to assess those standards as a means of promoting accountability (see, for example, Elmore and Rothman, 1999).

Another alarming concern came from studies of the effects of programs for students who were identified as having learning disabilities. Initiated at the same time as were those for the economically poor and ethnically different (particularly for the language different), programs for students who did not respond to the normal curriculum because of their special learning needs were initiated that provided small group instruction and the ministration of teachers whose specialties were tending to learning disabilities. In the last ten years, studies of "special education" for "moderate" learning disabilities have indicated that it may not only have failed to address the problem it was designed to address but also may have exacerbated the problem by teaching those children that they have inborn problems that explain their low achievement.

This failure has worried not only persons concerned with general policy but also middle-class parents who have recently recognized that nearly 15 percent of their children have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities and that the programs designed to address the special needs of those children have been largely ineffective. These parents began to worry that the assumed achievement of their children is more fragile than they had believed.

The combination of concerns coalesced in the action by general governance agencies to take steps to try to improve student achievement.

Whereas in previous generations the governance of school districts was largely placed in the hands of local school board/superintendent teams, now governors and legislators became involved, developing statewide testing programs and attempting to hold school districts, and particularly schools, accountable for student learning in what have come to be called "high-stakes" testing programs. State policymakers and, eventually, local school boards actually threatened that schools would be closed or their staffs replaced if they did not bring their students to acceptable standards of achievement. This involvement of the general governance agencies and the mimicking by local boards of the high-stakes policies radically changed the traditional relationships between general governance agencies, school board/superintendent teams, and the schools.

The judicial branch had already been involved in a variety of school practices ranging from ordering "busing" to reduce *de facto* segregation to requiring changes in special education grouping practices. In a few cases, judges actually ordered school districts to take steps to improve curriculums.

In the presidential campaign of 2000 the candidates made centerpieces of their concern with the quality of education, and one candidate proclaimed that policies from the governor's office in his state have made significant improvements in student learning as measured by the state testing program. Most interesting, perhaps, is his view (a typical one today) that the executive branch of a large state can actually make policies that affect student achievement throughout the districts. Generally, the issue that policymaking at the state level changes the role of the local school boards is not discussed.

A recent policy paper commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and several large foundations took the stance that asking states to develop standards of achievement and measures of them puts appropriate pressure on both the states and on the school districts within them. The report recommended extensive staff development as a necessary avenue to school improvement, but within the framework of standards and accountability (Elmore and Rathman, 1999).

A few decades ago local school board/superintendent teams operated with very little oversight. Currently city and town governments and all three branches of state governments are active in the surveillance of the condition of learning and are reporting the results of testing programs on a comparative basis. School personnel can "see where they stand" in relation to comparable schools and districts. Also, relatively few school districts have the resources to develop detailed standards and tests and are thus dependent on their states, the larger school districts, test-making companies, and national organizations for those services.

At first subtly and later more explicitly, many states made initiatives that virtually bypass the school district or use it only as a "flow through" fiscal agent, clouding the relationship between the district policy team and their employees. At roughly the same time, many district policymakers adopted the "site-based" philosophy, decentralizing much of the discretionary

budget and many personnel functions and further muddying the waters of the board/superintendent teams and the schools. At times, when trying to make an initiative, central office personnel have to ask the schools to "chip in," because the budget directly under the control of the district supervisors is so small. At an extreme, there are districts where the principals or the faculty can decide *whether* to purchase books for the library, not just what books to buy!

The new activity by the executive and legislative branches apparently has another effect. In a study of staff development in Georgia (Harkreader and Weathersby, 1998), it appeared that the school improvement plans generated by schools (and sent to the state department rather than to the local board/superintendent teams—although they have access to the plans) contained intentions to improve the schools by following state and federal initiatives with no mention of local needs or initiatives being made by their districts. In other words, the schools apparently looked at the combination of the tests by which their performance would be judged and the initiatives being made by the larger agencies when generating their school improvement plans. Thus, school boards now operate in circumstances where:

> student achievement is heavily emphasized,
> the demography of the student body is less acceptable as an excuse than it once was,
> the massive categorical programs designed to counter the effects of demography and special needs are seriously questioned and efforts to improve them are focused on requiring standards and new tests,
> the general governing agencies of the community and states are more likely to interfere,
> the coupling between the board/superintendent team and the schools, ironically, is loosening at a time when the team is being asked to become far more responsible for student learning than was the case before. (Thirty years ago specialists in organization development described education organizations as "loosely coupled" and that judgment was made *before* the site-based movement became popular.)

Essentially, the new efforts to increase student learning and level the playing field for all students has resulted in a situation where, from the school district perspective, the field has been tilted toward student achievement with pressure and accountability such as we have not seen before in the history of the nation.

Do the guidelines under which school board/superintendent teams have been operating need to change under the new rules and conditions? Can we learn something about this by studying the behavior of teams where exceptionally high student achievement has occurred and comparing those teams with ones where student learning has been poor? These two questions form the thesis behind this inquiry into board/superintendent team behaviors in school districts with extreme differences in student achievement.

DESIGN AND RATIONALE

The design of the Lighthouse Inquiry depended on locating school districts where schools had extremely high and low levels of student achievement.

SELECTION OF DISTRICTS

The Concept of "Moving" and "Stuck"

We begin with the concept of "moving" and "stuck" districts. In the course of a study of school culture, Susan Rosenholtz (1989) developed a way of thinking about school renewal capability along a continuum whose poles she named "moving" and "stuck." On one end were schools whose faculties were characterized by a synergistic search to develop a vigorous and humane education and by the creation of initiatives small and large. On the other end were schools whose faculty members worked in relative isolation and did not have the dynamic as a community to make productive changes. Most schools lay between the poles.

In the design of our study, an aspect of the Rosenholtz characterization was borrowed and applied to the identification of the schools that defined the districts to be studied. The search was for schools where there is convincing evidence that students are on the move - where student

achievement was far above the norm - and also for schools where the students are relatively stuck - where their achievement was far below the norm. We characterized the districts in our study as moving or stuck, meaning that in one or more of their schools the students are in relatively high or low states of growth.

Our strategy was to study school board/superintendent teams in districts where schools have generated unusually high achievement over a period of several years and compare those teams with ones in districts where schools have consistently generated unusually low levels of achievement. It was important that the differences in achievement be both quite large and consistent over time. We were fortunate to be able to obtain a sample in Georgia, where the Council for School Performance maintained a database from which the "moving" and "stuck" school districts could be identified and where districts agreed to be studied under provisions that guaranteed anonymity to district, school, and participants. A team of interviewers, without knowing the achievement levels of the schools, visited the six districts that were selected (three containing unusually high-achieving and three containing unusually low-achieving schools) and interviewed 159 people. Still "blind," the research team analyzed the protocols from the interviews. Then, a second analysis was conducted in which the districts again were compared systematically.

Finding a Sample

For the study, we needed to locate schools where very high and very low levels of achievement were occurring, controlling for the socioeconomic status of their neighborhoods and communities. Such a database was available in Georgia, where Harkreader and Weathersby (1998), while designing a study of staff development, had analyzed the results of the state testing program and identified a set of 30 schools from the state pool of 1800 schools. Fifteen of these schools (five high, five middle, and five elementary schools) had the highest student achievement for three consecutive years when compared with all schools in the state serving similar populations. The other 15 had the lowest achievement for all three years.

The differences between the highest- and lowest-achieving schools was very large. At the top of the highest-achieving high socioeconomic status (SES) bracket, 95 percent of the students reached the level that Georgia considers "proficient" compared with about 60 percent of the students in the lowest-achieving high SES schools. The highest-achieving low SES schools out-achieved many of the schools in the state that serve high SES populations.

The Harkreader/Weathersby analysis ensured that the differences between the selected schools were not a product of the demographic characteristics of their student populations; the schools accomplished more in comparison with schools serving similar populations. Selection of schools for the present study relied on the same database and followed a similar procedure.

Defining Schools

We wanted to find relatively low-enrollment school districts—ones similar to the most common districts in Iowa (small, rural)—and to pair those containing high-achieving and low-achieving schools in terms of socioeconomic cluster.

Socioeconomic Clusters

The Council for School Performance in Georgia used a combination of measures (including parents' education, occupation, and approximate income, and eligibility for free or reduced lunch) and placed the schools in clusters or categories ranging from "high to middle SES schools" to "low SES schools."

All four of the Georgia high schools studied in our Lighthouse Inquiry were in Cluster 7, the lowest socioeconomic category for high schools. In 1998-99, 65 of the state's 314 high schools met the criteria for Cluster 7. These schools had fewer than 1450 students. About 50 percent of the students came from low SES households, 35 percent from middle SES households, and an average of 62 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch. About 88 percent of Cluster 7 schools were located in rural counties. About half of the median cluster 7 students were black.

The middle schools were classified into eight clusters by the Council for School Performance. Three of the four middle schools in the Lighthouse study were categorized as Cluster 5 and one as Cluster 6. The differences between the clusters are relatively small. For example, in Cluster 5 an average of 45 percent of the students come from middle SES households compared with 40 percent in Cluster 6.

The state's elementary schools were classified into 13 clusters. One of the schools in the sample was opened in the fall of 1999 and was not classified by the Council, but available data indicate that it probably would fall in Cluster 8 (the lowest middle SES cluster) or Cluster 9 (the highest low SES cluster). Of the other four schools in the sample, one was in Cluster 7, one in Cluster 8, one in Cluster 9, and one in Cluster 13.

Indicators of Achievement

The districts were selected because they contained one or more schools that ranked very high or very low in its cluster during all three of the academic years 1995-96, 1996-97, and 1997-98 on standardized achievement test data. Data were also available for the academic year 1998-99 and indicated that the schools maintained their rank, whether high or low. Importantly, a school that ranked high in a low SES cluster also ranked high when compared with all the schools in the state. Achievement indicators included the percentage of students meeting the proficiency standard on the statewide curriculum based assessments in four subject areas. In addition to the state curriculum based assessments, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) was administered to third, fifth, and eighth grade students and the Georgia High School Graduation Test was administered to the high school students.

For the purposes of our study the most important achievement results were those generated by the defining schools—those that were used to identify the highest- and lowest-achieving school districts. Secondary were those results related to the additional schools in which interviews were conducted to determine whether the social climate that characterized the

board/superintendent team in the defining schools were also reflected in the postures of the teachers and school administrators in another school in the district.

Elementary schools in the state were rated on 21 comparisons of test data collected in the third and fifth grades. The comparisons included reading, mathematics, social studies, and science and the schools were compared by cluster, by the state as a whole, and by sub-group to determine whether there was a racial gap and, if so, of what magnitude.

The differences in achievement between the defining schools—exceptionally high- and low-achieving schools—are illustrated below:

In **Moving District 1,** the elementary school third graders were in the top 20 percent of their cluster on all comparisons and also in the top 20 percent of all schools in the state. More than 90 percent of those third grade students were judged to have met the state goal in reading and mathematics. That district's middle school was in the upper 20 percent of its cluster on seven of the 13 measures and in the top 40 percent of the state on seven of those measures—not as high as the defining school, but much higher than average.

In the elementary school in **Stuck District 1,** 26 percent of the third grade students were judged to be at or above the state goal in reading and 40 percent were so judged in mathematics. On all comparisons, the school was in the bottom 20 percent of its cluster and of the state as a whole. In the defining high school, only 2.8 percent of the students took advanced placement courses.

In **Moving District 2,** the high school was the defining school and ranked in the top quintile of its cluster on seven of 13 measures. In **Stuck District 2,** the middle school was the defining school and in nine of the 13 comparisons the school was in the bottom 20 percent of its cluster.

In **Moving District 3,** the defining high school was uneven, but in six of the 13 comparisons that school was in the top quintile in its cluster and, in four of them it was in the highest 20 percent of the schools in the state. In **Stuck District 3,** the defining middle school was mixed, but on two measures reached the top 20 percent of the cluster.

Essentially, looking at the three pairs of districts, the difference between the first pair of defining schools was very wide. The second and third pair differences were a little less, but still quite substantial. Thus, we can ask: *(1) Are there are any board/superintendent team differences between the members of the three pairs? (2) Are there fewer differences as the achievement gap narrows?*

Most of the rural districts in Georgia are in the lower end of the socioeconomic distribution, and these pairs were fairly well matched in terms of demography. Two of the three pairs are almost identical both in terms of the SES clusters used by the state of Georgia and information from the U.S. census. In the third pair, one member is slightly higher than the other. For all practical purposes, any of the Moving Districts could have been matched with any of the Stuck Districts.

None of these districts are large in comparison to the districts in the Atlanta metropolitan area nor are any of the schools as large as some of those to be found in the sprawling suburban areas. Most of the districts in the study contain 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.

Throughout Georgia in these rural counties the achievement of the defining schools is reflected in the other schools in the district. If a district contained one of the consistently high-achieving schools, the other schools tended to have relatively high achievement also, although not to the same extent as the defining school. Similarly, in those districts that contained an exceptionally low-achieving school, the other schools were also low achieving, although somewhat less so when compared with the defining school. In some cases the defining school in a district was a high school, in others a middle school, and in others an elementary school.

The former executive director of the Council for School Performance selected the schools, made the initial approach to the districts and schools and ensured that the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) Team, including their consultants, did not have access to the data on student achievement until after the first data analysis was concluded. The research project coordinator for IASB then contacted the districts and schools and arranged the details of the visits.

SUBSTANCE OF THE STUDY

THE POLICY CHAIN: LINKING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE AND TO THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS

Importantly, the difference between the achievements in the pairs of schools was regarded as a caused situation rather than a statistical abnormality. The **Harkreader and Weathersby** study tracked the schools for three years and data from a fourth year confirmed their findings. As in their case, the present study rests on the assumption that the differences in student learning are real. *If real, then what might have brought those differences about?* We look to the learning environments of the schools, the organizational conditions that might have influenced their development, and the nature of the governance that might have precipitated them.

Learning Environments

We begin with the proposition that the extreme differences in student learning between the stuck and moving districts are products of differences in learning environments. A good-sized body of research warrants this proposition. Studies of more and less effective schools (see, for example, Mortimore *et al,*. 1988) demonstrated that there were systematic differences between the environments to which their students were exposed. These differences can be described within Downey's (1969) framework for thinking about how schools affect learning: that schools educate by *what* they teach, *how* they teach, and *the kinds of places they are.* Essentially, the more effective schools differed from the less effective schools in terms of the content of the curriculum, the learning strategies taught to the students, and, importantly, in the social climate of the school—the way students were treated and the development of a culture that impelled more or less learning to take place.

The results of studies of teachers identified as more effective or less effective paralleled those of the studies of effective schools (see summaries by Brophy and Good, 1986). The teachers differed in what and how they taught and in the development of learning communities whose norms encouraged or depressed learning.

Finally, research on curriculum and instruction has developed curriculums and models of teaching that have considerable effects on the amount and quality of learning that takes place (see Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun, 2000; Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 1999). Those curriculums and teaching strategies represent tools for creating learning environments that again affect what is taught, how it is taught, and the kind of social system that is created in the classroom and school.

The present study is not designed to add to knowledge about curriculum and teaching, but rests in an important way on the assumption that the differences in learning within the moving and stuck districts is not accidental, but is the result in differences in learning environments.

Conditions for Change

The level of achievement in the moving districts was considerably higher than the normal level in the state just as the level in the stuck districts was considerably lower. *What brought this about?* If abnormally high achievement occurred, and if it is a product of better educational environments, *were those environments created because school improvement was implicitly or explicitly encouraged? Did the board/superintendent teams enable productive change to happen?* To help answer these questions, general organizational/change research and theory were combined with educational organizational/change research and theory to create the framework that guided the development of the interview guides and the subsequent analysis of the content that resulted from the interviews.

The process of education can be viewed as an endless and dense sequence of problem-solving operations, large and small. Larger decisions result in the curriculum, instructional materials, and arrangements of personnel that shape the overall educational environment. The collaboration of large numbers of people solves the problems whereby the shape of that

environment is designed and brought into existence. Within that overall environment, instructional groups or classes are formed and the teaching/learning transactions are carried out as groups are organized, presented with learning tasks, instruction is adjusted, and behavior is managed. An illustration of the density of problem solving is that, in the average classroom there are nearly 300 verbal interchanges between teacher and learners *every hour*. Teachers are continuously selecting what to say, how to say it, what to do and how to do it.

Scholars of organizational development have long stressed that the quality of problem solving and productivity in commercial and industrial organizations and other institutions are heavily influenced by the quality of the organizational development and maintenance process (Simon, Argyris, Lewin, Drucker, Deming). Their position is echoed by their counterparts who have studied educational institutions (Elmore, Cuban, Fullan, Runkel, Schmuck, Arends, Deal, Peterson, Baldridge, Miles, Huberman). Both the general scholars and the educationists have emphasized that the units within the organization (in this case, schools and classrooms) are influenced in quality of problem solving by the overall organizational climate generated by the leaders of the organization. (Note that this is a difference in frame of reference from a position taken by some that the school is the major organizational unit and that the leadership of the principal is, therefore, the primary key to organizational productivity. From the organizational development perspective, the principal is not seen as unimportant but as working within an organizational ethos that influences the behavior of all school personnel.)

The interviews were constructed to explore the extent to which conditions for school renewal existed in the districts. These conditions were derived from summaries of research on productive educational change. For school board members and district administrators, the interviews probed the extent to which those conditions existed and were understood by the interviewees. For school personnel, the guides were organized to attempt to determine the degrees to which the conditions were present in the workplace of teaching. These seven conditions for school renewal are described below:

The emphasis on building a human organizational system—a self-renewing professional community with appropriately shared decision making. Nearly all specialists on school

improvement support this idea, but Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1993) in particular stress that shared ideas by policymakers, executives, teachers, and community carry the common efforts that generate the energy to create and maintain outstanding schools.

A perspective on how education gets better, of how to make initiatives and support them. Research has generated procedures that virtually ensure that initiatives will be implemented. Essentially, strong staff development is indicated (Joyce and Showers, 1995) as well as shared understanding about the objectives of the initiatives and the means for carrying them out (Wallace, 1996).

A sense of how to create support around personnel as they carry out their roles. The development of a supportive workplace where educators and citizens can work together to create a warm and supportive environment is the focus (Glickman, 1993). From his extensive experience in leading Pittsburgh from nearly last in student achievement among the 40 largest cities to first (and sustaining that rank during his tenure as superintendent), Wallace (1996) stresses the importance of how to develop a human resources component.

An understanding of how to build a human resources development component (staff development) for the improvement of the knowledge and skills of personnel. Extensive reviews of research (Joyce and Showers, 1995) indicate that the creation of a worker-friendly and worker-stimulating environment is an essential component of an educational system that strives for excellence. Sparks (2000) points out that both the cost of effective staff development and the organizational arrangements needed to generate it require that the board/superintendent team create policies and administrative structures based on an understanding of what makes a difference and the conditions needed to activate successful practice.

A sense of how to support school sites in the renewal process. Site-based school renewal has struggled and yet it is agreed that it is at the school level that improved education occurs. (David and Peterson, 1984). The tricky process of supporting site-based school improvement is detailed in Calhoun (1995) and Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins (1999). Huberman and Miles (1984, 1986) as well as Wallace (1996) point out that simply providing responsibility and resources to school units without a strong support system is generally not productive. Calhoun's (1996) study of schools attempting school-wide action research revealed that only sites that received extensive technical support were able to make initiatives that resulted in improved student learning. Her findings were confirmed by the extensive study of school improvement plans in Florida (Joyce and Belitzky, 1998) which indicated that most site-generated school-improvement plans were *pro forma* only and were not followed up with action.

A sense of how to generate lay community involvement. Again, all specialists in school improvement recommend substantial efforts to involve the community in decision making and

to keep the community informed about initiatives. Particularly, it is important that policymakers and the superintendent see the community as partners and avoid the stance that schools are limited by the characteristics and interests of the community (Comer, 1988). Few districts generate unusually high student achievement without extensive community involvement—far more extensive than in the average setting.

A sense of integrative leadership—how to develop direction and focus from a realistic perspective—and the nature of strong but sensitive leadership. From Lewin (1947) through Deming (1982) and Drucker (1994), all leaders in the field have stressed creating participatory structures and processes, particularly vertical and horizontal integration, which are essential components of vigorous organizations.

All these conditions represent a stance that the school district is responsible for the education of the children and optimism that such responsibility can be translated into productive action. Thus, when the framework of active responsibility is present, there is less concern that the characteristics of the community are barriers to student learning. For example, to the degree that the conditions are present, there is less complaining that parenting, community organization and cohesiveness, and the richness of the home environment are lacking.

The literature on change has demonstrated that when these views are acted on, the chances for productive school renewal are greatly enhanced (Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 1999). Thus, we can ask: *Were these conditions more present in the moving districts than in the stuck districts. Did the board/superintendent teams, perhaps implicitly, develop the conditions associated with productive change and consequently improvements in learning?*

Governance

Over the years, the associations of school boards and the national associations of educational administrators have developed guidelines for school boards and board members. These guidelines are reflected in studies such as those conducted by the Institute for Educational Leadership (see, Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992; Tuttle, 1963).

The current study uses a framework that is compatible with these processes, but it draws on the literature on school renewal that specifies conditions that generate initiatives for school improvement at the district and school levels. Thus it focuses on the last guideline—the creation of a facilitative environment for problem solving and school improvement. Boards may not have studied that literature and thus may not have developed policies that derive directly from that knowledge base, but we believe it is important to learn whether the reality of organizational behavior is compatible with the current state of knowledge about school renewal.

Unpacking the actual organizational behavior within school districts requires that we deal with several anomalies. For example, the involvement of the community is not assured simply because boards were elected by the populace. In most communities very few citizens actually vote in school board elections, which are largely conducted as nonpartisan affairs, so board members do not automatically, by virtue of election, bring constituencies of community members or organizations into the process of supporting schooling and advocating better education for children. The board is faced with the problem of engaging the community *after* the election rather than during the electoral process.

Also, as Deal and his colleagues have pointed out, school districts are loosely coupled; that is, the relationship between administration and workers is ambiguous in the extreme. Administrators do not tell teachers explicitly what and how to teach. Visions, curriculums, and other policies are more advisory than controlling in nature. School improvement is nurtured more by the nature of the elusive and somewhat intangible dimensions termed "organizational climate" and "culture of the school" than by corporate-style authoritative and directive processes (Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992; Carver and Carver, 1997.)

A recent study needs to be discussed because of its strategy of studying districts that are reputed to have a positive process and relatively high achievement and comparing advice from their governors and community agencies with the advice from board/superintendent team members and community agencies reputed to have greater conflict and lower effectiveness with respect to student learning.

In 1996 the New England School Development Council developed a study oriented to try to learn why some school district board/superintendent teams work smoothly together to improve their schools while others are mired in conflict (Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman, 1997). The study was conducted in two districts in each of 10 states. Altogether 132 persons were interviewed. The principal investigator selected the schools after extensive discussions with state officials and the superintendents of school districts nominated by those state officials.

The findings were a composite of information about why the district governors worked as they did and the advice they would give to others responsible for school district organizations. With their emphasis on teamwork, the New England Council summarized their recommendations in six categories that generally confirm the yield from other studies and the general literature over the last two decades. Interestingly, the recommendations from the reputational high and low districts were very similar.

> Build a foundation for teamwork.
> Get the best and most capable team players.
> Ensure that team players know their roles and responsibilities.
> Get into team training.
> Adopt good team strategies.
> Convince others to support the team.

Few would disagree with these recommendations with respect to any type of organization. However, the unique processes and technologies of different types of organizations generate the content over which governance teams operate.

Two other recent reports (Speer, 1998; Bracey and Resnick, 1998) stem from a study instigated by the National School Boards Association. The focus was on student achievement with the purpose of drawing more focused attention to the topic. A questionnaire survey was sent to 2000 superintendents and board members; there was a 48 percent return. The opinions that were generated generally supported the literature, but a number of purported obstacles were mentioned, including a lack of funds, parental involvement, and teacher resistance to change. The investigators developed a “primer” for school boards that focused largely on assessment and tracking of initiatives and sources for resources.

The dimensions of governance behavior that appear most frequently in the literature on general board theory (Iowa Association of School Boards and Iowa State Board of Education, 1994) formed the "lens" for another analysis of the interviews:

Focus on students. Promotion of shared vision. Development of high expectations. Shared decision making.
Promotion of new ideas, initiatives, and assessment.
Provision of resources for innovation.
Flexible use of resources.
Enlistment of community support.
Interagency cooperation.

THE POLICY CHAIN PUZZLE

From this perspective, we can ask: *To what extent does a healthy system of governance tend to create the conditions that foster productive change which in turn becomes focused on the development of productive educational environments that result in healthy student learning?*

PROCESS

MULTIPLE-INFORMANT CASE STUDIES

The present study concentrated on three pairs of school districts. Each member of each pair contained one or more of the high- or low-achieving schools and had a similar demography. A research team of six people visited the districts and interviewed board members, superintendents, central office personnel and the school staffs, including teachers, principals, and assistant principals. The accumulated body of the interviews were submitted to a content analysis and were assembled into the case descriptions of the districts. The interviews with the superintendents, board members, and central office personnel were designed to elicit descriptions of the district, its schools, and how the district was governed. The interviews with the school

personnel were designed to elicit information about the school programs, faculty relations, and site-generated governance and initiatives, and the connection to initiatives made by the board/superintendent team. The purpose was to learn whether there were differences between the districts in the way the board/superintendent team tended the organization, with particular reference to the creation of the conditions for productive change and whether those conditions were reflected in the behavior of the school personnel.

Working from the framework described, interview guides were designed to elicit descriptions of the school district, the community, initiatives, governance, and community involvement from the various role groups. For school personnel, descriptions of teaching practices, school governance, and the community were elicited. The interviews did not ask the participants to comment on the elements of the framework described above, only to describe what was happening in their setting.

Conducting the Case Studies

In pairs of school districts, both with relatively low socioeconomic populations, but one containing one or more of the exceptionally high-achieving schools and the other containing one or more of the exceptionally low-achieving schools, the six-member team conducted interviews and recorded the responses. The team members did not have information about which district contained either the high- or low-achieving schools. In May 1999 the team conducted the interviews in Pair 1, and in February 2000 they completed the interviews in Pairs 2 and 3.

Altogether 159 people were interviewed. Demographic data collected during the interviews included some aspects of personal history, particularly where the interviewees grew up and went to college. This information is presented below for each role group in the first pair of districts in terms of the extent to which individuals were "very local" (VL: grew up in the district or nearby, went to college nearby, and have always lived and worked there), "local" (L; grew up and went to school in the region and have worked in the district or nearby for nearly their entire career), and

"other" (grew up and spent a portion of their lives in other regions and worked in other school districts different from their current employment situation).

	Stuck 1	Moving 1
Superintendent	Local	Local
Board Members	4 (All VL)	6 (2 VL, 3 L, 1 Other)
Central Office	2 (Both Other)	4 (1 VL, 2 L, 1 Other)
Principals	3 (All VL)	2 (1 VL, 1 Other)
Assist. Principals	4 (2 VL, 1 L, 1 Other)	None
Teachers	19 (8 VL, 9 L, 2 Other)	12 (5 VL, 3 L, 4 Other)
Total	33 (28 VL or L)	25 (18 VL or L)

Both school districts were staffed largely with people who grew up and went to college in their region. Neither district was characterized by a leadership or instructional team markedly made up of personnel brought in "from the outside" to generate activity.

The same pattern continued in the other two pairs of districts. About 75 percent of the interviewees were very local, local, or regional.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW RECORDS

Using the framework developed from the literature on organizational change, a content analysis guide was developed to determine the extent to which the board/superintendent team and central office personnel were operating within the framework and the type of organizational climate the school personnel experienced. Essentially, the analysis sought to determine whether the policymaking teams of the two districts differed in their attempts to develop the conditions for productive change and, if so, whether the school personnel experienced different conditions.

Seven people analyzed the records of the interviews. Six were on the interview team and one was a consultant who had not been to the sites and who did not have information about which

district contained the high- and low-achieving schools. Throughout the data collection and first analysis phases, no member of the team had information about which districts contained the extremely high- and extremely low-achieving schools.

RESULTS

Similarities between the districts are presented first; then differences are introduced.

SIMILARITIES

The moving and stuck districts were similar in a number of ways. Among these similarities are:

Peaceable relationships. In all cases in these rural districts, the board/superintendent teams had fairly amicable relationships. Some board members reported that in conferences with other school boards they had come to realize how fortunate their relationships were. The differences in achievement were not accompanied by general differences in accord. Typically, board members said, "We disagree without making it personal." One has the strong impression of good-hearted people who wish good things for their children.

Board opinion of superintendent. All the boards were fairly well satisfied with their superintendents. The stuck district boards were as satisfied as were the others. The heavy state pressure to improve had not resulted in discord.

All manifested some confusion between the "site-based" policy and the role of district policymakers and officials. Because the policy has been popular for 20 years or more, the confusion is somewhat puzzling, but it is probably normal for the country and probably bears attention.

Neither moving nor stuck districts addressed the major categorical programs as concerns. This may be a normal condition also—throughout the nation concerns about the general

failure of special education, Title I, and bilingual programs to close the learning gap for students with special needs has not generated local activity in many cases. This is of particular interest in the stuck districts, but of interest in the moving districts as well.

Seventy-five to 80 percent of the board members and professional staff grew up in the district, an adjacent county, or a similar county within their region. As many as 60 percent of the teachers in some schools attended that school as a student. Everyone appears to be very knowledgeable about their community.

Altogether these similarities appear to indicate that the differences between the moving and stuck districts were not products of the gross demographic features of the communities and the people who operated the schools.

DIFFERENCES

The moving and stuck districts differed widely and consistently in the behavior of the policymaking team and central office personnel. Those differences were echoed in the environments reported by the school personnel. In these apparently similar settings, aspects of the culture have become significantly different in important ways.

Summaries of the analyses compare the moving and stuck districts with respect to:

1. the literature on school renewal,
2. the literature on general board theory, and
3. the belief systems that emerged during the analysis.

The following pages are a set of narratives and summaries derived from:

Analysis one, where the districts were paired as Moving and Stuck 1, 2, and 3.

Analysis two, where the districts were again compared, but this time with a different district (Moving 1 might be paired with Stuck 3, and so on).

The comparisons between the districts in Pair 1 illustrate the differences that were found in all of the pairs:

Analysis Through The Lens Of The School Renewal Literature

Findings for Pair 1

Moving District 1 and Stuck District 1 were consistently different in relation to the seven conditions for change necessary for school renewal.

1. The emphasis on building a human organizational system—a self-renewing professional community with appropriately shared decision making.

In **Stuck 1,** decisions were in the hands of the superintendent—board members did not mention a single initiative for educational improvement. Both superintendent and board members repeatedly mentioned the demography of the district and the hopelessness of working with the entire population. The interviews from **Moving 1** reflected knowledgeability about the condition of the schools, alternatives for improving education, and the need to serve the population. Moving 1 board members were in close contact with the schools and the community and confidently radiated trust in their process and community.

The school personnel in **Stuck 1** had very little information about direction, whereas the **Moving 1** school personnel were aware of what initiatives were being made and how to respond to them.

2. A perspective on how education gets better, of how to make initiatives and support them.

In **Stuck 1**, few and only minor initiatives were underway. Multiple initiatives were generated in **Moving 1**, but with an acute awareness of the need to support initiatives with training and resources and how to provide general support for them. In **Stuck 1**, data on student

achievement was received from a "blaming" perspective with respect to parents, students, and staff. In **Moving 1,** the same type of data was viewed as diagnostic.

School personnel reflected these differences: In **Stuck 1**, they tended to blame the superintendent and board for any problems. In **Moving 1**, they felt that they were members of a large team trying to make education better. In **Stuck 1**, the teachers made 67 negative comments about the students and their parents in the course of the interviews. Most of these were in the course of justifying the low achievement of the students. In **Moving 1**, there were just four such comments.

3. A sense of how to create support around personnel as they carry out their roles.

4. An understanding of how to build a human resources development component (staff development) for the improvement of the knowledge and skills of personnel.

In **Stuck 1**, policymakers viewed schools and school personnel as "on their own." In **Moving 1**, policymakers saw themselves and their staffs as co-equals in the struggle to educate students. Perhaps most telling is that the **Stuck 1** policymakers were concerned about and wanted to avoid being identified as ineffective, whereas the **Moving 1** policymakers wanted their students to achieve and felt that it was district responsibility to bring about high achievement. Similarly, with regard to personnel, the **Stuck 1** policymakers wanted to drive their teachers to avoid disaster, whereas the **Moving 1** policymakers wanted to help their personnel flourish in the interest of the students.

Faculties responded in kind. **Stuck 1** teachers and principals actually had little concept about staff development and what it could mean for school renewal. Their teachers attended staff development as individuals rather than as members of a faculty. In **Moving 1**, staff development was more focussed and communal. (After their original analysis, Harkreader and Weathersby proceeded to study the amounts and types of staff development experienced by the faculties of the

30 schools and how staff development was governed in those schools. The differences were substantial in both focus and communality).

5. A sense of how to support school sites in the renewal process.

The **Stuck 1** policy team radiated suspicion of their personnel. The **Moving 1** team radiated confidence and, although realistic, wanted the schools to face their problems squarely and ask for the help they needed.

The school personnel reflected those differences. The **Stuck 1** school personnel felt very much on their own, while the **Moving 1** personnel felt supported and able to seek support.

6. A sense of how to generate lay community involvement.

The **Stuck 1** policymakers believed that many of their community were unsupportive of education and even unable to prepare their students for school or support them in the schooling process. The **Moving 1** policymakers involved the community in decision making but, more important, believed in them as part of the larger team.

The schools reflected those differences. **Stuck 1** personnel blamed their patrons for their problems and the **Moving 1** personnel invited their community in to share in the process of education.

7. A sense of integrative leadership—how to develop direction and focus from a realistic perspective—and the nature of strong but sensitive leadership.

This dimension is in some senses a composite of the ones described above. **Stuck 1** board members had a sense of being in the hands of forces out of their control and, by blaming school personnel and community members, were unable to create an integrative system. **Moving 1**

policymakers saw themselves as active participants in problem solving and their personnel and community members were responding in kind.

Perhaps most important is the consistency of the differences. As we will see, the continuing analysis revealed beliefs about children and the organization that probably underlie the types of differences here.

All Pairs: Multiple Perspectives

As the analysis of the moving and stuck districts for Pairs 2 and 3 were completed, the reviewers studied the responses from the perspective of the board/superintendent team as well as the perspective of the school personnel. It was important to study the responses from both of these perspectives to determine whether the differences between the policymaking teams of the moving and stuck districts reflected consistent differences in the environments of the schools as reported by the principals and teachers. The results for all three pairs are summarized in the following tables.

Board/Superintendent Team Perspective

Conditions for School Renewal	Moving Districts	Stuck Districts
1. A sense of building a human organizational system—a self-renewing professional community with appropriately shared decision making.	The moving districts were moderately coupled systems; that is, there was evidence of growing connections and relationships between the board, the administration, and the building staff. Governance was extended to the schools through open sharing of information in all directions and increasing levels of involvement in decision making. There was a sense of growing as a learning community focused on a continuous effort to improve.	The stuck districts were very loosely coupled systems; that is, the relationship between the board, central office administration and the building staff was very ambiguous. The governance units and the schools were widely separated and there was little evidence of a learning community.
2. A perspective on how education gets better—how to make initiatives and support them.	In the moving districts, the board members and superintendents shared a level of understanding about how to stimulate and maintain an improvement effort. However, moderate tension continued to exist in the moving districts, as it does in many districts, around the conflict between the hands-off site management mode and a desire to create equity.	In the stuck districts, there was little evidence of an understanding about how to get organized to start or support improvement initiatives. The board members and superintendents appeared to swing between a mandate-oriented mode and a hands-off site management mode.
3. A sense of how to create support around personnel as they carry out their roles.	The board members and superintendents in the moving districts were focused on helping their staff succeed. They were very positive toward personnel and confident that, with their support, they would be able to meet their goals. They were less sure, however, about how to create the technical support needed.	The board members and superintendents in the stuck districts had little conception of how to support their personnel. A strong accountability mode was in evidence and an accepting mode (a belief that circumstances beyond their control contribute to their current situation, therefore it must be "managed" rather than changed) existed toward personnel as well as toward students.
4. A sense of the role of staff development in productive change.	The board members and superintendents had a shared understanding that staff development was necessary in order to produce change. Staff development was valued and viewed as a critical component of their improvement efforts. They were less certain about how to engineer it to ensure change in practice at the classroom level.	The governance teams in the stuck districts made frequent disparaging remarks about staff development, both as an expense of time and as an effective strategy for changing/improving practice.

Conditions for School Renewal	Moving Districts	Stuck Districts
5. A sense of how to support school sites in the renewal process.	The board members and superintendents in the moving districts were very positive toward site initiatives and had considerable knowledge of the specific efforts being employed to improve student achievement. The development of site councils was mentioned frequently as a means to support these initiatives. They were less sure about how to provide the substantive kind of support that would help their staff learn to continuously study the learning environment and ways of helping students learn..	This was almost non-existent in the remarks made by the board members and superintendents of the stuck districts. A loosely coupled mode was generally accepted.
6. A sense of how to generate lay community involvement.	The board/superintendent teams in the moving districts were very positive toward creating structures and opportunities for increased involvement. They expressed strong support for lay community involvement but again were unsure about how to generate optimal involvement.	There were only superficial conceptions of how to involve parents and community in the stuck districts. There was also a shared belief that they would not be able to increase the level of involvement either because it was the responsibility of the building staff or because factors specific to the community and the community members limited their desire to be involved.
7. A sense of integrative leadership—direction and focus from a realistic perspective and the nature of strong but sensitive leadership.	There was a fair grasp of need for vertical/horizontal integration among the board members and superintendents in the moving districts. They discussed their role in setting a direction for the district and maintaining this focus. They were positive toward personnel and focused on creating structures and processes that increased their connections across the system.	The governance teams in the stuck districts were much more likely to describe mechanical conceptions of leadership. Leadership was expected to "mechanically" make/mandate change to happen.

School Personnel Perspective

Conditions for School Renewal	Moving Districts	Stuck Districts
1. A sense of being part of a system.	The building staff in the moving districts spoke from a district perspective as well as a school and classroom perspective. They seemed to have a sense of the bigger picture.	In the stuck districts, principals and teachers spoke from the perspective of the school and with little reference to the district as a whole. Teacher comments were more often specific to their classroom with little reference to the building as a whole.
2. A sense of belonging or sharing in initiatives for school renewal—of being part of a vertical/ horizontal team.	The building staff in the moving districts appeared to have some awareness of what the board/superintendent team was doing and the focus and direction for the entire district.	In the stuck districts, the building staff appeared to have little awareness of what the board/superintendent team was doing.
3. A sense of being in a supportive context.	For the most part, the building staff in the moving districts felt that the district leadership behind them. They expressed a sense of being encouraged and trusted.	The building staff in the stuck districts felt as if they were under considerable pressure. They also appeared to think this pressure was unfair because of the characteristics of the students they were working with and the nature of the communities within which the schools were located.
4. A sense of purpose and process of staff development—of growing in professionalism.	The building staff in the moving districts tended to be self-reliant but felt buttressed by collective staff development.	The staff in the stuck districts tended to be very self-reliant. They were not aware of the possibility or the potential of collective staff development focused on student learning needs. Much of the staff development reported was generated by teacher needs (credits for re-certification, specific areas of interest) or mandates rather than student needs.

Conditions for School Renewal	Moving Districts	Stuck Districts
5. A sense of being part of site-generated school improvement.	The staff in the moving districts felt membership in the faculty and experienced mutual support for their efforts to improve. They had a somewhat limited awareness of the possibilities of this collective effort for continuously studying the learning environment and ways of helping students learn.	Teachers in the stuck districts generally worked autonomously except for occasional grade-level teams or departments. These structures often served a management or communication purpose as opposed to functioning as an ongoing support for improvement efforts.
6. A sense of connectedness to the larger lay community.	The building administrators and teachers in the moving districts felt moderately connected to the community at large but all expressed a need for more involvement.	The building staff in the stuck districts were quite critical of the degree of parent interest and involvement. They were less likely to mention efforts to increase parent involvement and seemed to share a belief that parent/community apathy was not a problem that could be solved by school personnel.
7. A sense of integrative leadership context—of direction and influence from dynamic leadership.	There was a feeling of connectedness to school leadership and support from district governance expressed by the staff in the moving districts.	For the most part, the stuck districts appeared to be leaderless. Building staff did not refer to a unified focus to guide their work unless it was in reference to a mandate to "get better." They also did not seem to view district leaders as problem solvers that could help them identify needs and create solutions.

Second Analysis With New Pairings: Board/Superintendent Team Perspective Only

In the second analysis, members of the IASB team examined the protocols from the interviews with board members and superintendents from a rearrangement of pairs. For example, one member of the team reanalyzed the protocols from Stuck District 1 and Moving District 4. Another reanalyzed the data relative to Stuck District 2 and Moving District 1. The purpose of these re-analyses was to cause the research team to make fresh comparisons that crossed the original pairings to see whether new insights would emerge.

The first analyses had been completed by this time and the findings reported above had been obtained. Essentially, in the second analysis, there appeared to be consistent differences between the pairs of Stuck and Moving districts. The greater the student achievement differences between the defining schools in the pairs, the greater the differences in board/superintendent behavior with respect to the conditions for school renewal derived from the literature on change.

Stuck 1 and Moving 2: Side by Side

STUCK DISTRICT #1	*MOVING DISTRICT #2*
1. Emphasis on Building a Human Organization	
No defined structures for decision making. The superintendent wants the buck to stop with him. He feeds the board what he wants them to know to support his recommendations. The superintendent controls the reaction of the board to his recommendations by limiting the information he gives to them. Goal setting and improvement plans appear to be "ends" rather than a means to the end of improving student achievement. The superintendent described himself as the initiator of any change efforts. There is lots of blaming and making excuses. Change was needed to "fix something" that was wrong with the system. There is a low level of inclusion in decisions. Information is shared selectively in order to influence action and support for the superintendent's ideas. Superintendent tells principals to improve test scores. He doesn't want his name to be on the list of the lowest-achieving schools. Efforts to improve stem from trying to avoid negative publicity due to low test scores.	Superintendent funnels information to board and community. He believes sharing information will get them to react and encourage engagement. More of an indication that change efforts grow out of student needs and involve lots of people in the process. The process of improvement is becoming more the norm. No blaming. Change was needed to get even better. Information is shared broadly to build understanding of the needs and spark involvement. There is a focus on inclusion in decisions. The board and superintendent assume the parents and teachers are a part of the solution and changes should reflect their perceptions of the needs. Superintendent has retreats with the board to educate them about various issues. He wants them to make informed decisions. Beginnings of an improvement process that is bigger than any single problem.
2. Understanding of How Education Gets Better	
Initiatives start at the desk of the superintendent. Initiatives based on individual interest and originate from the superintendent. There is talk about the presence of school improvement plans but no evidence that they are living documents that drive any of the actions.	School is beginning to inquire into teaching and learning. Clear vision defined for vocational initiative. Initiatives are based on needs There is a sense of building a climate of support. All levels are aware of the rationale and support the improvement effort. They focus on gaining agreement and support for the change. Superintendent and board established district goals. School goals are linked directly to district goals. Focused on reducing the isolation of buildings.

STUCK DISTRICT #1	*MOVING DISTRICT #2*
3. Understanding of How to Create Support Around Personnel As They Carry Out Their Roles	
Superintendent and board members discuss a need to keep a hammer over the heads of principals and teachers until they see the need to improve. (Fear as the motivator for change.) There is an apparent lack of confidence in the school personnel to improve without a heavy hand. The superintendent seems to believe the school personnel or the community can't be trusted to make decisions or take action because he views them as part of the problem. There appear to be no structures to support risk-taking. The superintendent will hold principals accountable for compliance and improvement. The board seems invested in making excuses and pointing fingers to blame. Information is shared to influence the board in support of the superintendent recommendations. No defined structures for meeting with administrative staff other than monthly meetings.	Utilize central office staff to support building improvement efforts. External resources and external expertise (information) are used to focus and inform some improvement efforts. Teachers participate in improvement efforts in groups/teams. Superintendent and board members view their principals as leaders. Speak very highly of principals and teachers. Superintendent meets regularly with principals and the administrative team—both formally and informally. Superintendent makes frequent reference to the roles of other central office administrators in building change and supporting building efforts.
4. Understanding the Role of Staff Development in Productive Change	
Staff development focused on individual teacher needs. Providers were external to the district. Courses taken at a regional education agency for re-certification credits was the most frequently mentioned option for staff development. No evidence that goals drive staff development.	Little or no evidence that goals drive staff development except that it was implied in the description of the vocational initiative. An inquiry into best practice and implementation was described.

STUCK DISTRICT #1	*MOVING DISTRICT #2*
5. An Understanding of How to Support School Sites in the Renewal Process	
The superintendent issues mandates (improving test scores, implementing reading program, focus on phonics, etc.) and then holds principals accountable for compliance.	Described a process for making an initiative that contained elements of action research when describing their vocational initiative. School-wide goals linked to district goals. Follow-up with principals regarding progress on their goals. Resources allocated to support goal attainment. Board members were able to describe many elements of the reading program and what they had tried and what worked.
6. Understanding of How to Generate Community Support	
The superintendent wants the board to support his recommendations. He expects their support even though he has not asked for input into decisions. He brags frequently that the board has not been split since he was hired.	The superintendent shares information with the board and the community. Involving the public in the decision making was important. Superintendent and the board members indicated that district initiatives should reflect community needs.
7. Integrated Leadership	
No evidence of focused direction from the leadership. The superintendent wants his legacy to be the improved facilities. The superintendent bragged about being able to influence the board into supporting a change effort he wanted to make but couldn't get staff to support it. It appears to be a very "controlled" use of information to get what he wants from the board.	Close contact with central office and principals. Appear to be building a team for system change.

Analysis through the Lens of General Board Theory: Moving and Stuck Districts

The districts also were compared in terms of the dimensions of governance behavior from the general board theory literature.

Dimension of Governance Behavior:	***Moving Districts***	***Stuck Districts***
Focus on students:	*Preparation for changing world. Response to state initiatives and pressure.*	*Very general. A response to state initiatives and pressure.*
Promotion of shared vision:	*An ongoing search for better education.*	*A maintenance orientation. Satisfaction with status quo.*
Development of high expectations:	*Affirmative view. Belief that all students need greater challenge.*	*Very modest expectations. SES and parenting cited as reasons why student achievement wasn't expected to change.*
Shared decision making:	*Involvement structures operating. Search for how to provide support under site-based philosophy.*	*Laissez faire. Unsure who had been involved or how. Focus on specifics rather than policy.*
Promotion of new ideas, initiatives, and assessment of effects:	*Thoughtful search. Support for initiatives by personnel.*	*Rare. External conditions paramount.*
Provision of resources for innovation:	*Innovation encouraged. Some support structures developed.*	*Discipline and management was emphasized rather than student learning.*
Flexible use of resources:	*Flexibility offered to schools. Some quandary about support.*	*Low priority. Agenda specific.*
Enlist community support:	*Generally open stance. Search for structures.*	*Modest efforts.*
Interagency cooperation:	*Modest efforts.*	*Modest efforts.*

Belief systems: Views of Human Beings and How they Learn

Educational environments emanate as much from beliefs about human beings and how they learn as they do from technical knowledge. What is sometimes called the “tacit” dimension operates, often below the surface, as human beings develop and manage organizations and institutions. In the course of being socialized into a culture, emerging adults develop beliefs about how children learn and the kinds of environments that nurture them best, and those beliefs affect their parenting, teaching, and behavior as school administrators and board members. The development of beliefs is not a linear, mechanistic process, but a subtle one. A new parent or teacher is sometimes surprised to find out that they have ideas on which to base their actions. Nor are beliefs fixed and unchangeable. Humans can learn and profound learning often requires the revision of beliefs, even some deeply held ones.

The interviews were not designed to elicit belief structures, but, inevitably, as the interviewees talked about education in their communities, recurring beliefs surfaced and they became an important part of the findings of the present study. For, it turned out, there were differences in expressed beliefs between the stuck and moving districts. These differences need to be viewed on a continuum rather than a rigid category system and the beliefs referred to below were not expressed by all the interviewees or with the same strength. However, as each of the analysts compared the protocols, beliefs were expressed regularly and consistently across role groups and across districts. We labeled these patterns of beliefs "**accepting**" and "**elevating**" to describe the view of the human condition that seemed to permeate the various settings.

“Accepting” and "Elevating" Views of the Human Condition

In an **accepting** view, the students are accepted as they are and their progress is viewed as a product of their characteristics, including those characteristics that are attributed to the economic and social conditions of the home. The educational system is not viewed critically; it is

accepted as the normative way of educating students. Thus, it is to be managed rather than changed. Accepted also is that not all students will respond strongly to educational opportunities. The limitations of the educational environment are accepted: not all students will thrive in it.

In an **elevating** view, the students are viewed as emerging and flexible and the task of schooling is to enable their potential to be enhanced. The educational system is viewed critically and opportunities to improve it are sought. Social and economic limitations of the home are challenges in the quest to enable all students to succeed.

Interviewees from each role group in all of the moving districts consistently exemplified an *elevating* view of students, teachers, and the capacity of the district to improve learning for all students. In contrast, interviewees from each role group in the stuck districts consistently expressed *accepting* views of students, educators, and parents, and made frequent excuses to explain why the district was helpless to significantly impact student learning.

The following actual interview quotes from board members in moving and stuck districts demonstrate these different belief systems.

A Sample of Board Member Quotes From Moving Districts

We can see a board member struggling to have his/her beliefs heard:

> *"SES is used as an excuse. We can't do that. 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, including the poor children."*

On affirmation:

> *"This is a place for all kids to excel. No one feels left out."*

On SES:

> *"Some schools are primarily minority. We place the best teachers in those schools."*

Another board member on SES:

> *"Some schools draw primarily from low-rent housing. It's our job to ... enrich those schools that need help. We don't want anyone to fall through the cracks."*

"We need to develop quality support for learning and students."

"I ran for the school board because I have a vested interest. This is my community. As a group we can help our schools so that our children can compete in the world."

A belief in inclusion at all levels in the decision making process and a belief that sharing information will get the community to react and will actually encourage agreement:

"We (the community) are a big family here."

"We need to use our resources well for every child. Until we get that embedded deeply we can't do the job."

"I am in the children business—down to the last $."

A Sample of Board Member Quotes From Stuck Districts

An expression of frustration by a board member:

"It's the thing to say your kids go to a private school—a status symbol. ... We do have some teachers sending their kids to a private school, too."

Another communication from a board member that expresses that the system is O.K. and the students are the problem:

"Education stopped going down hill when they stopped grouping students by ability."

And, from another board member:

"How can you hold teachers accountable for student improvement in academics? When dealing with human beings, there's not much you can do about accountability. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. This applies to both students and staff."

On tradition:

"We've always done it this way."

And, with respect to homes:

"You always have some parents you can't reach."

Other quotes:

" ... have gone overboard to help the below average child."

" ... all children might not be able to learn, but all children can behave."

"There is too damn much staff development."

This comment was linked to a belief that it costs too much instructional time and that it doesn't work:

"Teachers will do what they want to do. It makes no real difference in how they teach."

Some of the reflections connected the origins of the educators to the problem of expectations, expressing the view that

"folks grew up here and came back to a system they liked—they didn't come here to change it but to live their lives in it."

DISCUSSION: THE PROXIMAL CONCEPT

Do some school boards generate higher achievement through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others? Do the guidelines under which school board/superintendent teams have been operating need to change under the new rules and conditions? In an effort to consider the initial questions that formed the thesis for this study and to better understand the implications of our findings, we return to a discussion of the concept of proximity.

Researchers in psychology and social psychology have for many years made use of a framework designed to predict the aspects of the environment that are most likely to make a difference in the development and learning behavior of humans. Essentially, environmental conditions are placed on a continuum ranging from those closest to the person (called *proximal* conditions) and those that are farther away (called *distal* conditions). For example, army recruits interact most closely with their drill sergeant and other instructors, who bear a proximal relationship to them and, although they will eventually be affected by the economic system, it is distal to them. The proximal will usually have a bigger effect on one's development, although the distal can have considerable effect in some circumstances, as when policymakers decide to send the new soldier to another country and perhaps into combat.

As we think about the educational system of a school district and its likely effect on students, we can consider the elements of the system in terms of their proximity to the student. In the case of the framework of this study, the educational environment created in the classroom and school is most proximal and is likely to have the most influence. The conditions for change are more distal from the student and are unlikely to have significant effect unless they affect the learning environment in the classrooms and schools as when staff development mediates a curriculum change or enlarges the instructional repertoire of teachers. The governance processes are yet more distal and are likely to have significant effect only when they affect the conditions for change and those in turn affect the educational environment.

Essentially, the board/superintendent team operate "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. Also, the findings from the present study suggest that the conditions for change and an elevating view of people characterize the thinking of the board/superintendent team in the districts with the higher-achieving teams.

That the board/superintendent team is inherently more distal should not lead to pessimism; the importance of the proximal/distal distinction is that it leads to a realistic consideration of how that team can be effective. (One needs only to consider how computer technologists, apparently distal to most of us, are affecting our lives because they are connected so powerfully to us. As the chairman of Microsoft put it so pungently, "Learn to love the nerds. You will end up working for one.")

The general theory of board/superintendent process has emphasized teamwork, amity, and involvement of community under a positive vision of education. However, how to create these processes and how to shape them to affect the proximal—the conditions for productive change and, in turn, the environment is much less clear in general board theory than is the description of the desired state itself.

Interestingly, one way of looking at the site-based management policy is that it is an effort to move aspects of governance toward the proximal. Essentially, the argument goes, if more decisions are made by people closer to the classroom, governance of curriculum and instruction

will be more likely to be effective in the sense of bringing about productive change. However, throughout the nation, site-based management has neither resulted in greater innovation nor, as a general practice, improved student learning.

Could it be that, unless the policymakers create the conditions necessary for a professional learning community to thrive, the principals and faculties will not be able to generate productive change? Also, as school districts moved toward the site-based philosophy, they may have reduced the very central office curriculum and instructional specialists who were to offer service to school personnel. *Did those districts unwittingly reduce their ability to support the school faculties and thus reduce the likelihood that the site-based philosophy would succeed?*

Could it be that commonly held assumptions about the role of the school board—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? Do we need a reconciliation regarding the perceptions of the role of the board?

School board members are not professional educators, but it would appear they have important responsibilities related to teaching and learning, curriculum and instruction, and the learning environment. This does not suggest that board members need to become educational experts. It does suggest that they need to develop sufficient understanding, knowledge, and beliefs in order to create the conditions within the system which will ensure that the professional educators can grow in their educational expertise and generate productive change. There is a need to impact the governance doctrine and assumptions that are driving deliberations of school boards. School board members can be dynamic leaders in the school renewal processes without "micro-managing" the system.

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