



“School Boards Matter”

An Executive Summary prepared by the
Canadian School Boards Association

with thanks to:

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“Marginalizing or attempting to eliminate school boards is poor public policy”.

From *School Boards Matter: A Pan-Canadian study on school district governance* by Bruce Sheppard, Gerald Galway, Jean Brown and John Wiens.

This important and timely study on school district governance, counters recent literature that has called school boards “wasteful hierarchies” and deals head on with political trends affecting public education across Canada. At the heart of the study, the authors provide convincing evidence that in fact, effective and successful school boards do matter to the education of our children.

The authors draw a strong correlation between effective school boards and successful public school systems and state that **“strong and effective boards are essential to maintaining a meaningful and sustainable public school system”**. They provide clear answers to the question “What are the attributes of effective school boards in Canada?”.

This study will be of particular interest to local school board trustees/commissioners across Canada, Provincial School Boards Associations and members of the CSBA Board of Directors.

For Trustees: the study is in many ways an excellent *primer*, providing historical and statistical data to illuminate such issues as:

- the link between effective school board governance and student achievement.
- the use of social media in school board communications (Email, Facebook, Twitter, video and teleconferencing) and their effectiveness.
- factors that influence school board decision making
- community engagement in Public schools and student learning issues.
- Pan-Canadian political trends and the decline in school board autonomy.

For School Board Associations: the study examines the relationship between school boards and provincial governments and answers the question, “When does this relationship succeed?”

For the CSBA: the study offers up strong encouragement for the CSBA to continue to forge relationships with national educational partners (CTF, CEA, CMEC) and initiate a positive dialogue with these partners towards maintaining robust and effective boards while advocating for support of the public education system.

The following are examples of complementary reading; research linking School Board-Governed School Districts to Student Learning, which may provide additional context for this study and prove useful for presentations or simply for additional reading.

“There is a growing evidence base that supports the position that board-governed school districts contribute to successful public education systems” (Sheppard, Galway, Brown & Wiens, 2012, p,1).

“A culture that stresses organizational learning is more conducive to educational improvement than one that stresses accountability.... Whether [the contributions of data assessment] contribute to the facilitation of organizational learning or simply provide grist for the accountability mill, ultimately... depends substantially on the parameters set by district leadership” (Firestone and González, 2007, pp. 152-153).

“School districts have moved from being perceived as a bureaucratic backcourt of educational policy to being seen as potent sites and sources of educational reform (p. 1) ... [and] an emerging body of research is providing evidence that districts can make a substantial difference in teaching and learning" (p.4). (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh & McLaughlin, 2002).

“Taking the district system as the “unit of change” is essential to advancing equitable and sustainable reform (McLaughlin & Talbert, p. 3).

School board social capital--“shared vision, open/honest exchange of information..., trust..., [and] ties to key external parties”-- plays an important role in improving [schools’] financial and academic outcomes” (Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut & Bajaj, 2010, p. 29).

Schools’ use of data “to inform school-level decisions related to improvement in student learning is highly dependent upon leadership and support at the district level” (Anderson, Leithwood & Strauss, 2010, p. 323).

“While there are many examples of successful schools...that are professional learning communities, these are isolated cases that appear to have had minimal impact on public education overall. If collaborative leadership and organizational learning are to become the norm for schools, rather than something that occurs randomly in isolated cases as appears to be the current circumstance, the school district has the most potential for fostering that change” (Sheppard, Brown & Dibbon, 2009, p.34).

“While the evidence is convincing that large scale meaningful school reform that is focused on the improvement of student learning is more likely to occur with the support of strong school districts, I concur with Fullan (2005a) that “it is not possible for districts to move forward over time if the larger system [government] is not a partner in fostering the sustainability agenda” (p. 80)” (Sheppard, 2012).

Leithwood (2010) identified the following school district characteristics or practices linked to student achievement:

- District-wide focus on student achievement (i.e. focus on developing a shared set of beliefs and a vision about student achievement)
- Approaches to curriculum and instruction
- Use of evidence for planning, organizational learning and accountability
- District-wide sense of efficacy
- Building and maintaining good communications and relations, learning communities, district culture
- Investing in instructional leadership
- Targeted and phased orientation to school improvement (targeting interventions on low performing schools/students)
- District-wide, job-embedded PD for leaders and teachers
- Strategic engagement with the government's agenda for change and associated resources
- Infrastructure alignment

Sheppard, Galway, Brown & Wiens (2012, p. 26). Among the top priorities of school board meetings in order of importance across the three regions represented in this study are:

- Improving student achievement across the school district (91%)
- Financial management and budget related issues (88%)
- Programs and initiatives relating to teaching and learning (83%)
- Programs for safe and caring schools (e.g. anti-bullying programs) (75%)
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Within this context, it is not at all surprising that Canadian students continue to perform exceptionally well on international tests (Bussière, Knighton, & Pennock, 2006; OECD, 2010). Clearly, setting priorities that are focused on improving conditions that will facilitate meaningful, authentic students learning and making them the focus of school board meetings are essential to school board effectiveness.

“School Boards Matter” is available in its entirety on the CSBA website at www.cdnsba.org.