

School Board and Student Achievement: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review appraised publications on the topic of effective school board's and their link to student achievement. The following question guided this project:

What, if any, is the connection between effective school boards and student achievement?

Much of the foundational literature focused on establishing attributes, actions, skills, and characteristics of effective school boards. Research was primarily conducted in Canada and the United States, with specific emphasis in the United States on examining and demonstrating school board efficacy within the context of federal mandates such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015). Common methodologies tended to be case studies, comparative case studies, and outlier research designs; with frameworks influenced by models proposed by foundational literature, and within narrow geo-political boundaries. A primary rationale for these approaches is to ensure comparability of results across districts. While there is growth in empirical research, there are still few studies within the Canadian context. In general, the studies reviewed suggest a connection between school board characteristics and student success. The connection however is through distal conditions that affect proximal condition, which in turn can affect student achievement.

Methodology

Between June 10, 2019 and June 28, 2019, a literature search was conducted with the following parameters in mind:

- Articles or books from reputable publishers, organizations, associations, or governments.
- Publications within the North American context
- Publications seminal publication since 2000, and a focus on studies within the past ten years.
- Publications through available channels such as: ProQuest Education Collection (includes ERIC index); Google Academic; and Google.

The search strategy was defined as publications which were found and appraised based on the following key words: "school board govern*"; "board govern*"; "school boards"; "student achievement"; "student success"; "impact"; "factors". Search strings excluded: "education sectors"; "post-secondary"; "medical" to obtain greater specificity in results. Whenever possible, filters were used to find publications within the appropriate temporal and geographic parameters. Seminal publications were identified through the literature itself by tracking citations, and consulting internal ASBA subject matter expertise.

Google yielded 48 results, Google Scholar yielded 24 results, and ProQuest Education Collection yielded 518 results. Fifty-one (51) publications were determined to be relevant based on key words, titles, and abstracts. These were reviewed in greater detail throughout the search to determine which publications directly related to the topic, and to identify related publications. Twenty-six (26) publications were determined to attempt to demonstrate, explain, or connect school board activities with student achievement or success outcomes within the established parameters.

Student Success & Achievement

For the purposes of this literature review student achievement, success, and outcomes will be used interchangeably. The following definition is used to acknowledge that student achievement and success can be measured in multiple ways. Student achievement and success is “academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015).

Limitations

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) does not have the same access to published resources as an academic institution. Efforts have been made to consult with a wide range of sources using different search strategies, however this was not intended to be a systematic literature search, but more so a scope of what the literature shows. Additionally, it is acknowledged that there are international perspectives on school boards. The North American context was chosen due to similar cultural contexts, as well as to make this project more manageable.

It should be noted that measures of success for students may differ depending on their unique needs and local context.

Literature Review

The literature review has been presented first to provide context on the topic, and then highlight foundational literature which provides approaches to effective school board governance. The third section provides an overview of literature from the United States and Canada. The literature review concludes with a brief analysis of the literature.

Context

State school boards encountered a number of challenges due to Congressional mandates such as *No Student Left Behind Act* (2001), and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015); as well as movements towards reforms to improve student outcomes such as the elimination of boards, state and mayoral takeovers, and democratic reform to meet school outcome goals (Land, 2002; Feuerstein, 2009; Walser, 2009). These challenges prompted interest in demonstrating the efficacy of school boards and defining their roles in the education system. The NSLB Act in particular drove interest in evaluating school board impact on student achievement, while the ESS Act renewed this interest (McCoach, Goldstein, Behuniak, Reis, Black, Sullivan, & Rambo, 2010; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Lee & Eadens, 2014).

Canadian education is under the purview of the provincial government. Elected school boards have governed education and served as intermediaries between government and the general public on education matters. There have been recent trends in school reform across Canada (Canadian Education Association, 2019), however research within the Canadian context suggests that limitations on school board powers, and amalgamation may be detrimental to the success of school outcomes (Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, Brown, 2013; Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010; Leithwood, 2013; Galway & Sheppard, 2016).

Within the Alberta context, student success is measured through the Accountability Pillar, one of the three pillars to the education funding framework in Alberta. This pillar provides a number of measures on student performance including: academic results, dropout rates, high school completion rates, post-

secondary transition rates, and teacher and parent survey results regarding citizenship and learning environments. These measures are tied to established outcomes (Alberta Education, 2019).

Foundational Literature

Publications examining the topic of school board's link to student achievement include professional articles, association publications, and academic articles. An earlier criticism within the literature was that many of the publications examining this topic were based on best practices, self-reporting, and consensus (Land, 2002; Ford, 2013). To date, there are few studies that have been conducted using rigorous quantitative or qualitative data and methods; those that exist are within the American context, rather than Canadian. It is important to note that this area of research has slowly grown since mid-2010.

A much cited publication, regarding school boards and the outcome variable of student achievement, was a literature review conducted by Land (2002). This literature review found very few empirical studies. The low number of results caused Land to shift focus to include professional publications and literature regarding the role of school boards and effective characteristics. One of the findings of the literature review identified a lack of data-driven measures to validate effective school board characteristics, and in turn assess the effect of these characteristics on student achievement. Land also developed a model illustrating the complexity of the literature regarding school board research (pg. 269).

A series of foundational studies, called the Lighthouse Inquiries, were conducted in the United States over the span of thirteen years. These studies focused on the relationships between board characteristics and actions, and student achievement. Seven areas of effective leadership were identified (as cited in Delagardelle, 2015, pg. 20-26):

- “Developing awareness of the student learning needs, and building commitment to systematically address the needs.”
- “Applying pressure for accountability”
- “Demonstrate commitment”
- “Providing support for ongoing professional learning”
- “Supporting and connecting with district leadership”
- “Participating in a deliberative policy development process”
- “Connecting with the community and building the public will to improve achievement”

A model that emerged from the Lighthouse Inquiries was the proximal-distal concept. It is acknowledged that while school boards may not directly connect to student outcomes, conditions for success exist on a continuum, and the distal conditions do affect the proximal condition which directly impact students.

Since the publication of Land's literature review and the Lighthouse Inquiry studies there have been a number of studies and professional work on the effectiveness of school boards, as well as, what it means to be a strong school boards.

Eadie's (2005) book *Five Habits of High-Impact School Boards* is based on professional experience and expertise of Eadie. Effective school boards must: focus on governance; develop capacity; be active with innovation and change; develop board-superintendent relationship; and reach out externally and internally. Eadie notes that an effective school board “is, very simply, one that carries out its governing role... in a full and timely fashion.” Similar characteristics can be found in more recent publications. Fullan & Quinn's (2016) publication, *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*,

provides a framework for understanding activities and actions that school board should focus on to remain effective. Fullan and Quinn refer to these as the “right drivers” and the Coherence Framework which focuses on “focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability” (pg. ix). It aligns with the practices of informed insight, collaborative inquiry and education team collaboration. Alsbury and Gore (ed. 2015) explore a similar approach within their collection of articles in *Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach*. This publication encourages school boards to monitor student progress through informed oversight, goal setting with high expectations, and improved community interactions.

Additional work from school boards associations have highlighted comparable characteristics for effective school boards. *The Key Work of School Boards* (2013) provides a framework for the critical work of school boards. The five areas of action within this document are: vision, accountability, policy, community leadership and relationships. Similarly, *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards: At a glance* (2014) highlights the characteristics that make a school board effective. Effective school boards: have high expectations for student achievement; strong beliefs and values in student learning; policy focused; develop collaborative relationships; embrace data-driven decision-making; lead as a united team with the superintendent; participate in development and training; appropriately allocate resources to meet district goals.

In reference to the proximal-distal concept, Hattie’s (2019) meta-study, *Visible Learning*, highlights the proximal conditions which affect student learning, and positions factors to student learning on a spectrum. School board practices are not featured within the list of 252 influences on student learning, however school boards do have the ability to effect proximal conditions such as the learning environment, resources, and policies. The concept of proximal-distal conditions is also reflected in Walser’s (2009) book, *The Essential School Board Book*.

The foundational literature established the characteristics, skills, and knowledge required for school boards to have an impact on student and school outcomes. The model developed by Land, Hattie’s Visible Learning analysis, and the concept of proximal-distal conditions serve to highlight the complexity of the connections between school boards and student achievement. The use of school board characteristics, behaviours, and skills in academic studies are intertwined with student outcomes.

United States Studies

Duvall (2005) conducted a study on the relative effects of factors such as evaluation, conflict, political climate, superintendent influence, teaching and learning style, board training, and overall strength of relationship that influence the board and superintendent relationship. Using survey data from 1047 individual board presidents and superintendents in the State of Michigan, the findings suggested that equal influence, in addition to data-driven evaluation of the superintendent, strengthen relationships, lowers conflict, and increases student achievement; equated to lower levels of disagreement between the board members and superintendent, and higher evidence of student achievement.

Feuerstein (2009) focused their study to determine if an ethics policy implemented in Pennsylvania had the intended effect on improving board effectiveness. The rationale behind this was that the ethical conduct of school boards can divert attention, monies and other resources from students. The study was a survey-based study involving a sample of 501 superintendents from the state of Pennsylvania, and based on measures of effective school boards: contextual knowledge, education, interpersonal competencies,

analytical skills, political knowledge, and strategic thinking (see Jackson and Holland, 1998, BSAQ). The findings of this study support the idea that “board effectiveness is best achieved through efforts that enhance board members’ sense of membership in the community through discussion and internalization of community values rather than through efforts that focus on the adoption of rules and compliance” (pg. 16).

Rice (2010) conducted a qualitative study to determine the impact of school board training and evaluation from the perspective of trustees and superintendents. This study was based on focus groups and interviews with trustees and superintendents from various school districts in Illinois. The findings from this study suggests that training and evaluation are important for the success of school boards, in particular the defining and understanding of roles.

Ford (2013) conducted a comparative case study to determine whether governance practices impact academic achievement. Ford used survey results from trustees in six States and data from the National Center for Education Statistic’s Common Core Data Set. While Ford acknowledges that there are poorly governed school districts, the findings in this study suggest that “Districts that show a commitment to board development and strategic planning, exercise close relations with the superintendent, minimize conflict and maximize cooperation, and minimize relationship conflict in particular oversee districts with higher graduation rate and lower dropout rates” (pg. 168).

Plough (2014) examined whether there were differences in perceptions of school boards trustee’s behaviour and beliefs when related to low performing districts. Plough used a mixed methods approach to first identify low and high performing school districts, and then a survey with four-point scale and three open questions administered to school board trustees throughout California. The second phase of the project used interview questions based from the first phase of the research, literature review, and a panel of scholars. Finding indicate that governance training would be of more benefit for trustees, high performing districts reported that they a lot of time focused on student achievement, and a great amount of time connecting with government and community organizations. The researcher noted that a limitation on this study was the self-reported surveys – more qualitative research such as document analysis or systematic observation is required to verify findings.

Korelich (2015) conducted a case study on the dynamics of a single school district using thematic coding in order to understand the perceptions of trustees, superintendent, and school board secretary on professional development and its impact on student achievement. The findings imply that trustees must understand their roles, that there is a positive effect of professional development, and that there must be mediation of personal agendas.

Shober and Hartney (2014) used data from the National School Boards Association from individual board members across the United States, and compared the stratified results with actual student achievement data for each district. The purpose of this study was to examine whether school board members have the capacity to govern effectively, whether districts with high capacity board excel, and what characteristics are attributed to high capacity boards. The findings of this study highlight that board member knowledge about their districts, those with politically moderate views, and those that prioritize student learning have better student outcomes as compared to districts with board that do not exemplify these characteristics.

Lee and Eadens (2014) developed and implemented a School Board Video (SBVP) Survey which provided observable data of 117 school board meetings across the United States. The researchers used a number

of statistical tests on the data results, along with comparisons of descriptive statistics and crosstabs. The analysis revealed that there were significantly different practices between low and high performing school boards.

Holmen (2016) replicated a qualitative study conducted by Alsbury and Miller-Jones (2015). Holmen examined whether board characteristics identified in previous studies link to student achievement. Using Pearson's chi-square test, Holmen attempted to establish which characteristics were statistically significant. Their findings were that: role boundaries, advocacy focus, role orientation, solution focus, exercise of influence, and decision-making style were statistically significant. It is important to note that within this study that statistical significance does not mean that there is a direct correlation, in fact there are a number of factors which could contribute to student outcomes, as noted in the foundational literature.

Ford & Ihrke (2016) developed a survey to capture whether a school board identified with traditional, operational, policy or management models of governance, and to gauge the board's performance. Using test and demographic data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Ford and Ihrke found that the best performing boards were traditional and policy boards.

Canadian Studies

Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Wiens (2013) in partnership with the Canadian School Boards Association conducted a large scale project which sought to address a number of questions: the nature of educational governance in Canada; the factors and influences which drive policy decision-making in school boards; and the effective attributes of school boards in Canada, and whether these vary by region. Among the many data-based findings, this research suggests that effective school board members function as mediators between the government and their constituencies, understand their local issues and strengths, and connect with their communities. They focus on improving student achievement, are concerned with financial management, and providing services to support students.

Bedard and Mombourquette (2015) conducted a study within the Alberta context to contribute to the growing empirical research in Canada on the link between district leadership and student achievement. A secondary purpose of this research was to provide a framework in which to analyze the practices of boards. The researchers used a collective case study methodology which focused on three high performing boards, one urban and two rural school boards. The practices of the boards were analyzed using a framework developed by Leithwood's (2013) work in Ontario. There were four practices that were found to be effective: "collaboration between school and district-level leadership in setting the direction in leadership for learning; development of a shared expertise in the uses of evidence about student learning; provision of professional development that is job-embedded and based on school needs; and alignment of an array of practices and structures to support student learning" (pg. 1).

Sheppard and Galway (2016) conducted a case study based on "the relevance of school boards and their perceived impact on public education and the work of schools; and the nature of their connection with their constituencies" (pg. 5). Sheppard and Galway used interviews and focus groups with school board trustees, superintendents, and executive directors of school board associations across Canada. The findings of this study highlight that "school board-governed school districts are an important system link between government and school communities and are essential to system-wide learning" (pg. 7).

Community connections are needed to ensure relevancy of school board work, and to increase visibility of work that the school board does.

Leithwood (2013) was commissioned to conduct an extensive, five-year study for the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and The Institute for Education Leadership, to identify characteristics of school systems and leadership that contribute to the growth in student achievement and well-being. This study used both qualitative and quantitative data gathered through focus groups, interviews, and surveys from 49 of the 72 school districts in Ontario. The finding of this study highlighted the significant effect size of: mission, vision and goals for students; coherent instructional guidance; evidence use; alignment; professional development; organizational improvement processes; internal district and school relationships; local community relationships; and relationships between parents and the school (pg. 32).

Conclusion

There are notable commonalities amongst findings regarding characteristics and behaviour of high-performing school boards. As such, many of the frameworks used within studies were informed by similar foundational literature.

The literature suggests that there is a connection between school board characteristics and student achievement, and that school boards have a key role in creating the conditions for success. School board characteristics are distal conditions to student achievement; the actions and behaviour of school boards have the opportunity to affect proximal conditions which in turn directly affect student achievement. While empirical research and supporting evidence is growing there are few within a Canadian context, as compared to the United States. This may be due to the national mandates enacted in the United States, which drove the interest of assessing and evaluating the impact of school boards on student outcomes. Canadian motivation for empirical research is often reactive to reform trends within provinces.

In regards to methodology, many studies use narrow geographic areas or case studies, so the findings are not necessarily generalizable. As noted by Ford (2013), each State has its own political and economic context which could affect results. The same assumption could be applied to provinces in Canada. Empirical studies tend to utilize student achievement testing data to determine “high-performing” school districts. As noted previously, there are other measures of student success. Ford (2013) was the only study reviewed that used other measures to determine student success. A practical rationale for the use of standardized testing scores is that researchers require a comparable measure across all districts in a given political region. A criticism of the use of high-performing districts is that the approach often relies on outlier research design, or a concentration on a specific subset of school boards (Leithwood & McCollough, 2016). This may unintentionally exclude cases or participants which may provide alternative findings.

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