



School board members mostly know their districts, but don't always put improving student learning first

Districts that academically “beat the odds” feature board members who focus on achievement, are elected at large and “on-cycle”

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Washington, D.C. (March 26, 2014)—The Thomas B. Fordham Institute today released a pioneering analysis of the capacity of local school-board members to lead their districts effectively, showing that officials who focus on academic improvement are likelier to govern districts that “beat the odds”—i.e., outperform others with similar demographics and funding.

According to *Does School Board Leadership Matter?*, districts with members that give top priority to improving student learning have pupil proficiency rates about 2 percent higher than similar districts without such boards.

Also likelier to “beat the odds” are districts that elect board members at-large (rather than from wards or sub-districts) and during on-cycle elections. Indeed, simply holding board elections on-cycle—at the same time as state or national elections—is associated with proficiency rates about 2.4 points higher than comparable districts with off-cycle elections.

The study also found that board members generally possess accurate knowledge about their districts regarding school finance, teacher pay, collective bargaining, and class size but appear less knowledgeable about academic standards.

But board members with a professional background in public education are *less* knowledgeable about district conditions than those who are not former educators.

Political ideology is also linked to the accuracy of board members’ knowledge of their districts: Moderates tend to be better informed than liberals or conservatives when it comes to school funding and class sizes. Conservatives are less likely than liberals to say that funding is a barrier to academic achievement, regardless of actual spending in the district, while liberals are likelier to say that collective bargaining is no barrier to achievement, regardless of actual collective-bargaining conditions.

“Many educators and reformers contend that all that matters in education is what transpires inside the classroom,” said Michael J. Petrilli, executive vice president of the Thomas B.

Fordham Institute. “Yet this study indicates that seemingly mundane issues of school governance are also related to academic outcomes. School-board leadership matters. But it also matters who is on the board, how they get there, and what they deem important.”

The study, by Arnold Shober and Michael Hartney, used 2009 National School Boards Association survey data, with responses from 900 school-board members across 417 districts, representing every state except Alaska, and matched that data to detailed demographic and pupil-achievement data for the same districts.

The study is part of a multiyear partnership between the Fordham Institute and the Center for American Progress to understand the role that governance plays in education reform. It was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the Institute’s sister organization.

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