

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

As noted earlier, at least three macro trends are evident when one reads through the survey results. Fittingly, all of them, in various ways, relate to the question of student achievement. That alone is telling. It wasn't much more than a decade ago that district leaders routinely found themselves consumed with managing what Paul Houston, former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, referred to as the "killer B's"—buses, buildings, books, budgets, bonds, and the like. Today, we have seen a sea change in district culture, with boards and superintendents instead much more attuned to questions of student achievement.

In the 2002 study *School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, which reported board member attitudes at the start of the No Child Left Behind era, board members were less focused on student achievement than they are today. This shift is especially notable when it comes to evaluating the performance of superintendents, arguably the most important role that boards play. In 2002, board members reported that the three most critical factors in evaluating superintendent performance were the board-superintendent relationship, the morale of school system employees, and the safety of district students. The emphasis on board relationships, morale, and safety was straight from the old "killer B's" school of management. In the current survey, on the other hand, board members reported that the two dominant factors in evaluating superintendents were financial management (with 94.6 percent deeming it extremely or very important) and student achievement (with a comparable figure of 91.2 percent).

On a related note, board members express a growing thirst for information on what drives student achievement gains. In the current survey, one-half of board members said they wanted more training in student achievement—making it the area in which additional training was most desired. While different methodologies mean that one should be cautious about making direct comparisons to the 2002 results, that's a huge jump from the 22 percent who wanted more training in student achievement in 2002. And nearly two-thirds of board members now report it is "extremely important" for them to understand the factors that impact student achievement. It seems evident that the past decade has fueled increasing board interest in understanding how to govern with a closer eye on student learning and achievement.

A second key finding reflects a tension that has played out more broadly. Board members report that achievement has gained a heightened salience, but they also say that they want to see student success defined by more than reading and math achievement. This question of how to focus on achievement while also emphasizing non-tested subjects and other worthwhile skills is one that policymakers and educators have wrestled with across the land. How board members ultimately decide to resolve that tension, and whether they opt to err on the side of measurable achievement or of promoting softer skills, will do much to shape instruction and accountability in a given community.

For instance, consistent with a heightened focus on student achievement, just one-third of board members are concerned about the risks of "unreasonable expectations for student achievement." Two-thirds report that the current state of student achievement is unacceptable. Those sound like firm admonishments of the status quo and a demand that districts focus on core academic instruction. But nearly nine in 10 board members also think it's important to broaden notions of success to include more than student achievement. The two stances are both sensible and potentially complementary, but they also create possible tensions—especially if board members see the inevitable budgetary or programmatic trade-offs between reading and math instruction and other instructional opportunities.

These competing demands explain why it is a mistake to too vociferously proclaim that board members have become laser-like in their focus on achievement. While members seem to accord more importance to achievement today than they did a decade ago, they still wrestle with competing pressures. Note, for example, that 73 percent of members report that their boards had increased the amount of time devoted to student achievement issues during their tenure, while just 20 percent said the amount of time devoted to achievement had declined. These figures are impressive and suggest an achievement-centric trend. But, back in 2002, 73 percent of board members reported increased board time spent on student achievement during their tenure and just 3 percent said that time devoted to achievement had decreased. So, it appears that emphasis on achievement has continued to grow, but just how dramatic or universal that growth has been is an open question.

Finally, it's instructive to note that the strategies that boards think are most important are not the same choices that have been most evident in the popular media. Rather than class size reduction or charter schooling, board members express a preference for the same measures that superintendents are most likely to embrace. The three most popular strategies are professional development, frequent use of assessment data, and improving the quality of school leadership. These strategies represent a bet that the application of quality training, good data, and smart leadership can help today's familiar schools perform much better. Ensuring that these approaches deliver is the task for boards and their superintendents.