STRATEGIC PLANNING
BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

BCSTA

British Columbia
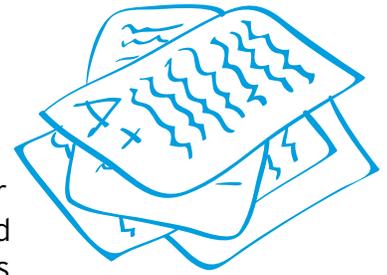School Trustees
Association

DOES STRATEGIC PLANNING IN BOARDS OF EDUCATION AFFECT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

There is considerable evidence to conclude that when boards of education have a clear vision focused on student achievement and align their resources and actions to achieve their goals, they have a positive effect on student achievement. There is also considerable agreement among experts about what constitutes good strategic planning and agreement about the components of a good plan and an effective process. While the studies on the effectiveness of boards of education do not explicitly identify strategic planning as a variable, there is a close correspondence between how experts describe effective strategic planning and the characteristics of effective boards of education.

By examining both the literature on effective boards of education and that of effective strategic planning, this paper will draw the conclusion that when boards of education engage in strategic planning, they put themselves in a position to make a positive difference in student achievement in their school districts.

The BC Ministry of Education is currently consulting with the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) as well as other sector partner groups around how student outcomes might be improved through better strategic planning. It is anticipated that the current Framework for Enhancing Student Learning (FESL) will be completed with the addition of sections referencing responsibilities, feedback loops, alignment and priorities at all levels of the K-12 system (i.e. ministry, school districts, schools, and classrooms). Certainly, all levels of the K-12 system could contribute to improving student results through collaboration and coordination of efforts to establish shared goals as well as strategic plans to achieve them.

EFFECTIVE BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Many researchers have pointed out that there is a large, but not necessarily strong, body of research about boards of education and their effectiveness (Honingh, Ruiter, and van Thiel (2018). They note that much of the research that has been published is more anecdotal than empirical. There are, however, some very robust studies that demonstrate that boards of education can make a difference in student achievement when they are effectively engaged.

Copich (2013) notes that boards of education have only recently, particularly in the era of accountability, seen their roles as having to do with student learning. In the past, they were more focused on overseeing the superintendent and finances. Today, though, the focus has changed immensely, and boards of education now share in the responsibility for student achievement.

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She notes that while boards of education operate at a distance from classrooms, teachers and principals agree that board decisions impact the classroom environment. The superintendent is clearly a leader in the educational realm, but a strong board and superintendent relationship, with board setting policy and the superintendent putting those policies into action, is essential. The accountability era also led to the public asking questions and putting pressure on boards to make a difference in student achievement. Although this effect was more prevalent in the United States where accountability had a stronger hold, there was considerable uptake in Canada as well. In some cases, concluding that boards of education could not meet the challenge, there was a move to replace them with other forms of governance (Lashway, 2002). School board associations in the US began to seek answers to the question about whether in fact, boards of education could make a difference in student achievement.

The Iowa Association of School Boards was one of those board of education associations. In 2001 they published the results of a study they commissioned and called the Lighthouse Study: School Boards and Student Achievement. This study has been pivotal in its influence on future studies into the question of how boards of education can make a positive difference to student learning. The study considered six school districts in Georgia that had either very high or very low achievement levels on standardized achievement tests over a three-year period. The districts studied were comparable in terms of enrollment, percent of children living in poverty, spending per student, household income and other factors. Researchers made site visits and interviewed 159 people: school staff, district staff, and board members.

The overall conclusion was that boards of education that met seven conditions made a difference in student achievement. The seven conditions were:

- Shared Leadership: board members were knowledgeable about learning conditions and had a clear direction and a shared a focus on goals for achievement.
- Continuous Improvement and Shared Decision-Making: board members talked about the importance of improving education for the sake of students and had high expectations for student achievement.
- Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives: board members shared goal setting and learning with the superintendent, communicated their activities, and learned together.
- Supportive Workplace for Staff: board members had high levels of confidence in staff and believed in their ability to improve student achievement.
- Staff Development: board members supported staff development and saw a connection between student learning and staff learning.
- Support for School Sites through Data and Information: board members sought data from a variety of sources and used the data to support decision-making.
- Community Involvement: board members found ways to engage the community and involved them in important processes.

Subsequent studies built on these conditions and concluded similarly that boards of education, engaged in the right activities, did make a difference. Land (2002) concluded that to be effective in terms of student achievement, boards needed to have an appropriate overarching focus on achievement, good relations among the various partners, effective performance in policy-making and budgeting, and adequate evaluation and preparation.

Copich (2013) demonstrated that the importance of having board of education members accomplish the following:

- Set clear goals and have high expectations for staff and students.
- Support a positive school culture.
- Provide for shared accountability.
- Seek to make decisions based upon accurate and reliable school data, and engage and inform stakeholders.

Johnson (2010) outlined twelve board leadership processes associated with higher levels of student achievement:

- Creating a vision,
- Using data,
- Setting goals,
- Monitoring progress and taking corrective action,
- Creating awareness and urgency,
- Engaging the community,
- Connecting with district leadership,
- Creating climate,
- Providing staff development,
- Developing policy with a focus on student learning,
- Demonstrating commitment, and
- Practising unified governance.

In Canada, similar studies were undertaken with similar conclusions. For example, Campbell and Fullan (2006) studied eight school districts in Ontario and were able to isolate four main variables in effective school districts: Purpose and focused direction, coherent strategy for implementation and review of outcomes, shared responsibility in leadership, and developing knowledge, skills and practices for improving learning. The Ontario government commissioned a study on the governance of school districts in 2009 (School Board Governance: A Focus on Student Achievement). The research team interviewed and surveyed over one hundred individuals in the school system and received almost as

many written responses. They also sought the advice of individuals with expertise and experience in different jurisdictions. As a result, they identified five principles or indicators of effective governance as follows:

- The board of trustees has a clearly stated mission that includes high expectations for student achievement.
- The board of trustees allocates its resources in support of the goals it has set.
- The board of trustees holds its system accountable for student achievement through its director of education by regular monitoring of evidence of student achievement.
- The board of trustees engages with its constituents in the creation of policies that affect them and communicates its progress in raising student achievement.
- The board of trustees monitors its own performance and takes action to continually improve its governance processes.
- They also recommended, among other changes, an amendment to the Ontario School Act that added the mandate of boards of education is to promote student achievement and well-being.

Leithwood (2013) was commissioned by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and The Institute for Educational Leadership to write a paper summarizing evidence about effective boards of education. Reviewing dozens of research studies, he outlined nine characteristics of strong boards:

- A broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person,
- A coherent instructional guidance system,
- Deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions,
- Learning-oriented organizational improvement processes,
- Job-embedded professional development for all members,
- Budgets, structures, personnel policies and procedures, and uses of time aligned with the district's mission, vision and goals,
- A comprehensive approach to leadership development,
- A policy-oriented board of trustees,
- Productive working relationships with staff and other stakeholders.

A Pan Canadian study of board of education governance (Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Weins, 2013) was conducted using overarching questions, including one about the attributes of effective boards of education in Canada. Board of education members and superintendents from school districts across the country provided data through interviews and focus groups. The research concluded that boards of education matter a great deal for the delivery of effective public education and that exemplary boards of education focus on student achievement, direct responsible management of finances towards programs and initiatives that are related to the improvement of teaching and learning, and base policy decisions on reliable data.

An international review of the literature on boards of education and educational quality (Honingh, Ruiter, and van Thiel, 2018) gathered hundreds of studies about the effect of boards of education on educational quality. Using rigid criteria, they selected several that met the standards of robust research and concluded that although it is difficult to show a cause and effect relationship, there is an indirect effect of boards of education on student achievement and educational quality. The studies confirmed that, while the school leader is key for an effective school, when the board is focused on and aligned with the goals for student learning and achievement, there is a positive effect. The Centre for Public Education in the US (2011) asserts there is now a consistent body of research examining behaviours and characteristics of boards of education in districts where students are achieving at high levels drawing similar conclusions. In some of the studies the researchers compared districts with similarly high levels of poverty to see if boards of education were a factor in those with higher performing students. Even in these more extreme circumstances, they concluded the differences could be attributed to approaches taken by boards of education.

By reviewing many studies including meta-analyses, case studies, and studies that compared school districts, the Centre for Public Education identified eight characteristics of effective boards of education as follows. Effective boards of education:

- Have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
- Have strong shared belief and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
- Are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
- Have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
- Are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
- Align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
- Lead as a team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
- Take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

After two decades of research, then it safe to say that when boards of education are effectively carrying out their role with a focus on student achievement, they make a positive difference. And, it is also safe to say there are some consistently identified behaviours that are critical to making that difference. The eight outlined by the Centre for Public Education can

effectively be taken to be those. Interestingly, none of these on its own refers to strategic planning, yet it is clear that the elements of a strategic plan are named.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

Strategic planning has long been used in the business world to positive effect. According to Blackerby (1994) in a historical outline of the process, strategic planning has military roots and moved to business in the early to mid-twentieth century. It remained mostly in the private sector until the 1980s. In the last two decades more and more public sector organizations became engaged in strategic planning. Blackerby points out that what has resulted from this kind of planning is a focus on outputs instead of inputs and he argues this is a more effective way to plan.

Wilkinson (2011) says in spite of the time and resources it takes, strategic planning is essential for setting priorities, getting everyone on the same page, simplifying decision-making, driving alignment and communicating a clear message. Gartenstein (2018) says strategic planning is important because it provides a sense of direction and outlines measurable goals.

It is useful for guiding day-to-day decisions and for evaluating progress. Piva (2017) argues that without strategic planning, an organization spends most of its time on reacting and responding to issues and mired in the day-to-day operations.

Called crisis management, the result is having little time left to plan ahead and be proactive. Piva quotes statistics that show that businesses that use strategic planning have 12% higher profits. While there is considerable agreement that strategic planning is essential for both private and public organizations to be effective, experts differ in their descriptions of the components of a plan. They identify seven attributes, five elements, six vital elements, or five key components, for example. It is instructive to look at these details.

Knutson (2015) says there are seven attributes to an effective strategic plan: vision, principles, goals, objectives, key performance indicators, targets, strategies and tactics. Wright (2018) includes five elements: a vision, core values, clearly defined outcomes, accountability, key performance indicators. Krach (2016) outlines five key components: mission, vision, and aspirations; core values; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; objectives, strategies, and operational tactics; and measurements and funding streams. Overgaag (2019) says there are six vital elements: define your vision, create your mission, set your objectives, develop your strategy, outline your approach, get down to tactics. McCarthy (2018) includes six elements: vision statement, mission statement, core values, SWOT analysis, long-term goals, yearly objectives, and action plans. Collapsing these various lists into general components would result in a description of a process involving:

- Vision, goals, and values.
- Actions to achieve those goals.
- Targets of measures to determine if goals are being reached.
- Resources to implement the strategies
- Plans to monitor progress and revise direction as needed according to the data collected.

Whether they are called elements, attributes, or components, alignment among the various parts underlies each list.

Some of the lists above mix components with process variables, but a separate area of interest in strategic planning is the actual process. Key elements of an effective process include steps such as:

- Work collaboratively on all aspects of the planning process.
- Scan the internal environment for strengths and weaknesses.
- Scan the external environment for trends, opportunities, and issues.
- Engage the community to identify needs and expectations and to create an inspiring vision and goals.
- Communicate regularly and widely.

Strategic planning has long been recommended as an important process for boards of education to undertake. A scan across the country shows examples of strategic plans from boards of education in every province in the country. Billingham (2012) notes that school districts in the United States began adopting the practice of strategic planning in the 1980s and the term appeared in educational publications for the first time around 1984. He says that by 1987 an estimated five hundred US school districts were using some type of strategic planning. Billingham points out that the education sector model was adapted from the private sector and that the sector changed strategic planning to include a broader stakeholder group in the process.

BOARDS OF EDUCATION, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

As noted earlier, it is interesting that the studies on the effectiveness of boards of education do not explicitly refer to the strategic planning process as a critical engagement for improving student achievement. Yet, it is clear that the eight characteristics of effective boards are closely related to the essential elements and the processes of effective strategic planning. In fact, there is almost a one-to-one correspondence, as illustrated in the following table.

The last characteristic of effective boards of education identified by the Centre on Policy for Public Education does not fit nicely into the elements outlined in the literature on strategic planning:

- Take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

It is nonetheless undeniably an important characteristic in any effective organization. We could also point out that the eight characteristics of effective boards of education do not include all of the processes involved in strategic planning.

| CORRESPONDENCE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING ELEMENTS AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD CHARACTERISTICS	
ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PROCESS	**CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE BOARDS**
• Establish a vision, goals, and values	• Commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision • Hold strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
• Determining actions to achieve those goals	• Are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement
• Establishing targets of measures to determine if goals are being reached	• Embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
• Assigning resources to implement the strategies	• Align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals
• Monitoring progress and revising the plan as needed according to the data collected	• Embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
• Work collaboratively on the process	• Lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
• Scan internal and external environments • Engage the community • Communicate widely and regularly	• Ensure a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

However, it would be difficult not to agree that the match is close enough to conclude that effective boards of education engage in strategic planning, and therefore, we can claim that strategic planning has a positive effect on student achievement.

CONCLUSION

After two decades of research into the effect of boards of education on student achievement, it is clear that, in fact, boards of education can make a difference. They make that difference when they engage in activities that focus on student achievement. Those activities match what experts outline as the elements of effective strategic planning. We can therefore reasonably conclude that sound strategic planning supports student achievement. Given the close match between the characteristics of effective boards of education and the elements of strategic planning, we could even say with confidence that strategic planning is at the heart of what boards of education need to do to positively affect student achievement.

As the sector moves forward with both local planning as well as the sector-based Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, shared responsibility, collaboration and coordination will be important to our overall success. Well-meaning intentions without focus, alignment and structured planning will not allow us to achieve the system improvements that we all seek.
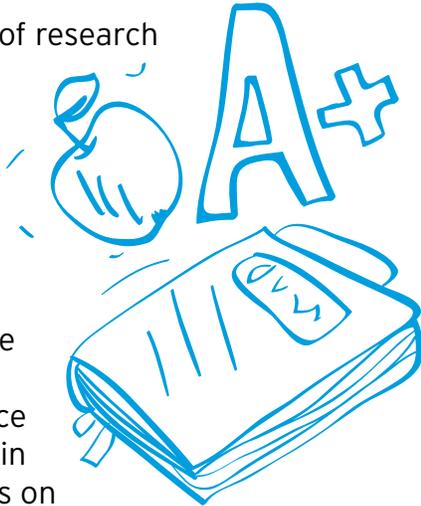
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