FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

SAELP INTERAGENGY COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PROJECT

Creating A Culture That Supports High Performing Teams

by

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Executive Summary

Based on the data that have been collected during this evaluation effort, the following conclusions have been reached:

1. The SAELP training project enjoyed differing degrees of success. Both the Southern and Central Districts enjoyed the most success. The data provide substantial evidence that they are progressing well toward becoming effective and cohesive teams. The Northern District has demonstrated the least amount of success. The data strongly suggest that, their participation in the training notwithstanding, they remain largely dysfunctional, hostile to one another, entrenched in their beliefs as they see them, and resistant to change.

2. The data suggest that there are at least five benefits of the training. These were cited throughout the evaluation effort by those who found the training to be successful as things that the training had helped them to do. These benefits are as follows:

   It helped them to…
   - get to know each other better and understand where others were "coming from,"
   - communicate better and to better give and receive constructive feedback,
   - improve their interpersonal relations,
   - become more collaborative, and
   - begin to increase their trust and respect for each other.

3. Two contributing factors that helped to make the training successful were that (a) the training involved the board as a team, and (b) the training sessions included several different boards.

4. The training itself may have been most effective with boards that were most amenable to change. For those members more resistant to change, the length and scope of the training (i.e., 2 days of training and periodic visits by the project team facilitators) may simply have not been sufficient.

5. By all accounts, the training was well received, even by those board members from the district that evidenced the least success. Special recognition should go to the lead facilitator and the representatives of the NJASA and NJSBA, who worked with the boards between training sessions. The content and processes included within the training format were especially useful in helping boards to make progress and achieve success.

Recommendations for Future Training

1. Follow-up training with the three pilot board of education teams should be offered. With the April 2007 elections now completed, the membership of these boards is likely to have changed. As a result, these boards face new dynamics and, perhaps, new challenges. As a way of helping these boards sustain the progress they have made, however large or small, every attempt should be made to provide for their continued training. To the extent

possible and practical, this follow-up training should be reinforced by periodic site visits by project team facilitators.

2. Future training should continue to provide opportunities for board members as a team to explore ways in which they can get to know each other better. Hands-on activities and case studies that allow the participants to problem solve real life situations they are likely to encounter will be well received and probably will be very effective. To the extent possible and practical, training should include multiple boards. Further, it should be more sustained over a longer period of time. Finally, again, to the extent possible and practical, it should be held in a retreat setting away from the district and should be reinforced by periodic site visits by project team facilitators.

3. In addition to the hands-on approaches and case study content described above, future training sessions should include exposure to the most current research in superintendent and board relations, associated topics (e.g., why individuals become board members), and reflective practice.

4. School districts that experience challenges as a result of their participation in the CAPA and/or QSAC assessment process should be offered training as a way of helping to improve their shared leadership.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. In order to contribute to the expanding knowledge base about board and superintendent relations, there should be a collaborative effort to present the information about this training project and its evaluation at a scholarly conference and to publish a scholarly article heralding its successes and benefits.

2. The sustained effects of this training on the three pilot districts should continue to be studied. Every effort should be made to collect data periodically from these districts to determine the long term impact of the training.

3. The Interagency Governance Project should continue to conduct research on the extent to which board of education teams in the state practice the characteristics of effective and cohesive teams as identified in the scholarly literature.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In mid-2006, representatives of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), and the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA), with funds provided by the Wallace Foundation to the New Jersey task force entitled the State Action for Educational Leadership Project (SAELP), conceived a joint venture aimed at assisting board of education teams, including their superintendents/chief school administrators, to function better as cohesive teams and foster improved academic achievement among the school children in their charge.

To that end, the SAELP Intergaency Collaborative Governance Project was organized. Three school districts were identified, one in each geographical region of the state, and they volunteered to participate in this pilot project. For purposes of this report, the identities of these districts will remain anonymous, and they are identified simply as the "Northern", "Central", and "Southern" public school districts.

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training was engaged to offer two one-day workshops designed to foster greater cohesiveness among these board of education teams. The workshops were offered on September 16, 2006 and January 20, 2007 in Princeton, New Jersey. In addition to these workshops, supplemental training was provided to each participating board of education team by project facilitator teams staffed by representatives of NJSBA and NJASA. Prior to the initial workshop, during the intervening period between the first and second workshop, and in the weeks following the second workshop, these project teams of dedicated facilitators met with the board teams to support and supplement the training.

Evaluation Methodology

Consistent with much of the evaluation literature (e.g., Wiersma & Jurs, 2004; Cresswell, 2005; Gravetter & Forzano, 2005; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007), numerous data sources were employed for this evaluation effort, using multiple data collection methods at multiple times during the project. These are described briefly below.

The primary data sources for this project were the project participants themselves. This included the superintendents and board members from the three pilot districts. First, all project participants in the two workshops in September 2006 and January 2007 were given a post-workshop survey that elicited information about their assessment of (a) the usefulness of the training they had experienced, and (b) the extent to which the workshop objectives had been achieved. These data appear in this report as tables 1-2. Also, during the second workshop, participants assessed the extent to which their teams functioned well according to the stages featured in Tuckman's (1965) model of team development. These data are reported in table 3.

After the two workshops concluded and after additional time had elapsed, a second round of data collection was conducted, which included project participants completing a post-project questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited information about (a) participants' assessments about the sustaining impact of the project, (b) their observations of the extent to which their boards of

education demonstrated characteristics of effective teams[1], and (c) the extent to which they believed that their boards had actually achieved some agreements that each had made during the first training workshop. These data are reported in tables 4-11.

After the post-project questionnaire data had been collected and after still more time had elapsed, a third round of data collection was conducted, this time using a structured telephone interview format. During the interview, participants were asked to (a) assess the frequency with which their boards of education engaged in practices usually associated with effective teams, and (b) report on the extent to which the project had assisted their boards in becoming more effective teams. These data are reported in tables 12-15.

Finally, in an effort to triangulate the data further, a pre/post assessment survey of teamwork was collected from each of the project facilitator teams. In these assessments, project facilitators were asked to judge the extent to which their respective boards exhibited selected characteristics associated with effective teams at the start and completion of the project interventions. These data are reported in Figures 1-3.

The bulk of the data was analyzed quantitatively, using SPSS software. The data from the various surveys and interviews were compiled, analyzed, and reported in the aggregate. The exceptions to this are the data included in table 11 and Figures 1-3, which are, of necessity, organized by pilot district. It is also worth noting that, in both the post-project questionnaires and the telephone interviews, participants were asked structured and unstructured (open-ended) questions, thus providing a rich array of both quantitative and qualitative data responses.

Evaluation Findings

As a prelude to introducing the findings from this evaluation study, as well as to provide some context within which to interpret these data, it is useful to report that the data clearly show that the project was a success; perhaps not a universal success, but a success nevertheless.

In the very beginning, as the project was being structured, representatives from NJDOE, NJASA, and NJSBA sought out and selected three districts that had admitted to some problems and challenges they were experiencing. The project leaders reasoned, quite understandably, that the training that was being prepared was not likely to have much of an effect on school boards that were already functioning well as cohesive teams. Instead, they sought out boards that were struggling.

In the end, this project had measurable impact on all three of these pilot districts; however, this impact varied from large to small, depending on the district. Hence, as the data in the following tables clearly reveal, the training was well received and resulted in substantial progress for two of the districts and less substantial progress in the third district.

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[1] Throughout this evaluation effort, characteristics of effective teams have been adapted from the following sources: New Jersey School Boards Association; The Leadership Center at Washington State University; Stanford University Ventures Program; Parket (1990); National School Boards Association Toolkit; and Mosley, Megginson, & Petri (2001).

In analyzing and interpreting these data, readers are reminded that the percentages reported in the tables that follow are based on relatively small numbers. Thus a difference or change of 4-8% may be attributed to the responses of only one or two individuals.

In table 1, the data from the immediate post-workshop surveys reveal that all of the participants found the workshops to be useful. This is often the case with interactive workshops such as these. Participants feel energized and often anxious to put into practice some of the things that they have just learned.

Table 1
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Post-Workshop Evaluation Results
Respondent Ratings of Usefulness of Training at Workshops
September 16, 2006 (N=26) and January 20, 2007 (N=25)

Excellent		Very Good		Good		Fair		Poor	
9/16/06	**1/20/07**	**9/16/06**	**1/20/07**	**9/16/06**	**1/20/07**	**9/16/06**	**1/20/07**	**9/16/06**	**1/20/07**
68%	60%	24%	36%	8%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Note: Data collected by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training

In table 2, however, the differences among the three pilot districts begin to become evident. The data also reveal that, between the two workshops, some of the good feelings had apparently begun to dissipate. As the data show, a substantial majority (>70%) of the participants in both the September and January workshops reported that the training had been either *very successful* or *successful* in helping them to experience greater trust and rapport, understand better their roles and how to work together, give and receive constructive feedback, identify strengths and challenges, and achieve clearer direction on their missions. However, the remaining participants (many of whom come from the same district)[2] seemed to feel less certain about their successes in these areas. By the time the January workshop occurred, the percentage of respondents who reported that they were only *somewhat successful* or *not too successful* in achieving all but one of these outcomes increased slightly. Two things about the data in tables 1 and 2 are, however, clear. Most participants thought that the workshops were useful and valuable, but some of the participants were less inclined to give the workshops superlative ratings.

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[2] While aggregate data only are displayed in most tables of this report, the evaluator has noted differences in the data among participants in the three pilot districts. In fact, throughout this report, much (but not all) of the data that reflects a lack of success in achieving cohesiveness among board of education team members emanates from a single district. This point is made clearer in table 11 and figures 1-3. Disaggregated data demonstrating these differences are reported separately from this report.

Table 2
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Post-Workshop Evaluation Results
Extent to which Respondents Believed Workshop Outcomes were Achieved
September 16, 2006 (N=26) and January 20, 2007 (N=25)

Workshop Outcomes	Very Successful		Successful		Somewhat Successful		Not Too Successful	
	9/16/06	1/20/07	9/16/06	1/20/07	9/16/06	1/20/07	9/16/06	1/20/07
Greater trust and rapport among members	42%	56%	42%	16%	15%	12%	0%	16%
Clarification of our roles and how we can work together more effectively	31%	48%	54%	32%	15%	20%	0%	0%
Increased skill in how to give and receive constructive feedback	27%	36%	54%	40%	19%	24%	0%	0%
Identification of our board's strengths and greatest challenges	58%	60%	31%	36%	8%	4%	4%	0%
Greater clarity about our direction and what we'll need from each other to get there	54%	44%	31%	40%	15%	16%	0%	0%

Note: Data collected by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training

The data in table 3 are consistent with that which are reported above, that is, some participants looked less favorably upon the impact of the training on their board teams than others. This is evidenced by the relatively large percentage of respondents who reported that they believed that they were *not very* or *not at all* successful in achieving the four stages of Tuckman's (1965) model on team development. It may be especially noteworthy to point out the relatively higher percentages reported in the *not very* column for the "Forming"outcomes. Similarly, it is worth pointing out that the percentage of *not very* or *not at all* responses for all of the following outcomes is higher than those for other outcomes: clarity of a shared team direction (24%), mutual respect among members (28%), team cohesiveness (36%), and effective communication and conflict among members (28%). These data suggest that a substantial minority of board members experienced challenges in even organizing themselves – a necessary first step in creating cohesive teams. These data portend a trend that will be seen in other data that follow.

Table 3
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Workshop 2 – January 20, 2007
Assessment of Team Functioning
(N=25)

	Very	Somewhat	Not Very	Not at All
Forming				
How clear and shared is our team's direction?	32%	44%	24%	0%
How respectful are members of each other?	44%	28%	28%	0%
How cohesive is this team?	36%	28%	36%	0%
Norming				
*How clear are the norms of this group?	48%	28%	16%	4%
How useful are the current norms of this group?	44%	40%	16%	0%
* How effective are members at keeping each other informed?	24%	48%	20%	4%
Storming				
How effective are members at dealing with communication breakdowns and conflict?	16%	48%	28%	8%
How effective is this team at addressing members' concerns regarding team functioning?	32%	44%	20%	4%
* How effective is this group at dealing with interruptions or unexpected disturbances to plans?	24%	52%	20%	0%
Performing				
How effective are members at making decisions?	48%	44%	8%	0%
* How effective are members at following through on decisions?	36%	44%	8%	8%
How effective is this team at running productive meetings?	44%	48%	8%	0%
* How effective is this team in getting things done?	36%	40%	20%	0%
How effective are members at fulfilling roles and assignments?	32%	52%	16%	0%
How effective are members and the group at acknowledging contributions and accomplishments?	36%	48%	12%	4%

* N=24

In tables 4 and 5, the findings of a post-project questionnaire distributed to all board members in the pilot districts are presented. In this questionnaire, for which there was a response rate of 93%, respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements that represent outcomes that could reasonably be expected as a result of participation in this team building project. In this table, the frequency of responses to each of the response options is provided in addition to an overall mean rating, arranged from the lowest (*strongly agree*) to the highest (*strongly disagree*). In table 4, outcomes are reported that impacted participants as individuals, and in table 5, outcomes are reported that impacted their teams.

Table 4
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Structured Questions
Outcomes that Impacted Respondents as Individuals
Summary Results (N=26)

Outcomes that could reasonably be expected as a result of participation in this team building project	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Rating
This project has helped me to better understand my colleagues on the board of education	42%	38%	21%	0%	0%	1.79
This project has helped me to better understand my role as a member of a team	21%	50%	25%	4%	0%	2.13
This project has helped me to increase my knowledge and skill in communicating with other team members	25%	46%	17%	13%	0%	2.17
This project has helped me to better appreciate how to work together in a team environment	17%	46%	38%	0%	0%	2.21
This project has helped me to improve my ability to give and receive constructive feedback	21%	46%	25%	8%	0%	2.21
This project has helped me to improve my interpersonal relations with my colleagues on the board of education	29%	29%	25%	17%	0%	2.29
This project has helped me to become more collaborative in my dealings with colleagues on the board	25%	25%	29%	21%	0%	2.46
This project has helped me to improve my trust and respect for my colleagues on the board of education	29%	21%	25%	21%	4%	2.5

Strongly Agree =1 through Strongly Disagree = 5

While the percentage of respondents who reported that they either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statements both tables 4 and 5 are good indicators of the success of the training, perhaps the easier way to interpret the data is by looking at the mean ratings for each of the items. Since the rating scale ranges from a low of "1" (*strongly agree*) to a high of "5" (*strongly disagree)*, areas in which the most success was reported were those with mean ratings of 2.5 and below. Accordingly, the following areas are those which were reported to be successful outcomes of the training in the order of their priority.

The project helped participants, as individuals, to…
- better understand their colleagues on the board
- better understand their own roles as members of a team
- increase their knowledge and skill in communicating with each other

- better appreciate how to work in a team environment
- improve their ability to give and receive constructive feedback
- improve their interpersonal relations
- become more collaborative
- improve trust and respect for colleagues.

Table 5
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Structured Questions
Outcomes that Impacted Board of Education Teams
Summary Results (N=26)

Outcomes that could reasonably be expected as a result of participation in this team building project	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Rating
This project has enabled our team to gain greater clarity about what we need to do and what we'll need from each other to get there	13%	67%	13%	4%	4%	2.21
This project has helped our team to better understand and appreciate our roles and responsibilities as board members	17%	54%	17%	8%	4%	2.29
This project has enabled our team to move ahead in our strategic planning for the success of all children	24%	36%	20%	20%	0%	2.36
This project has helped our team to function better as a cohesive board of education	21%	42%	21%	8%	8%	2.42
This project has helped our team to better understand and engage in periodic self-evaluation	13%	38%	33%	13%	4%	2.58
This project has helped our team to better resolve conflicts when they arise	13%	39%	22%	17%	9%	2.7
This project has helped our team to avoid conflict	13%	30%	26%	22%	9%	2.83
This project has helped our team to develop a better sense of collective trust in each other	8%	32%	32%	16%	12%	2.92

Strongly Agree =1 through Strongly Disagree = 5

The project helped board teams to…
- gain greater clarity about they need to do and what they'll need get there
- better understand their roles and responsibilities as board members
- to move ahead with strategic planning
- to function better as a team

It is worth noting that, even though there was broad agreement on the achievement of these outcomes, both as individuals and as a team, there were dissenters who reported that they did not agree that the training produced positive outcomes. Moreover, the four areas for which there was notable disagreement about outcomes were the following:

The project helped board teams to…
- better understand and engage in periodic self-evaluation
- better resolve conflicts when they arise
- avoid conflict
- develop a better sense of collective trust in each other.

In tables 6-8, responses to three open-ended questions have been compiled and are quantitatively presented. In addition, verbatim comments are also presented.

In table 6, the one comment that was most frequently reported, and one which supports the questionnaire findings reported in table 4, was that the training helped individuals to better understand their colleagues. Specific comments are offered immediately below.

- "Project has helped me to have a better understanding of the personalities of the other board members, including the superintendent. Also, [the project] has helped me to better understand my own personality and its impact on other board members."

- "I think that we were already a pretty effective team. I think that my getting to 'know' them on a different level may have helped me realize where they come from and perhaps why some issues are more dear or close to them."

- "I have a better understanding of my fellow board members' values and beliefs."

Table 6
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Unstructured Open-ended Question Summary Results (N= 22)

"Describe the progress you have made in becoming a more effective team member"

Response/Comment	Percentage
I understand my fellow board members better	39%
I'm not sure that I've made any progress	12%
I understand myself better	8%
I have become a better listener	8%
I have learned how to better communicate with my fellow board members	8%
I already consider myself to be part of an effective team	8%
I'm still not sure what my role is	8%
I feel that I can be more open and honest about how I feel	4%
I understand better the value of shared duties and decision making	4%
I have more trust in my fellow board members	4%
I have learned not to interrupt others when they're speaking	4%
I respect my fellow board members more	4%
I can mediate to solve group problems	4%
I feel more free to ask questions	4%

The data in table 6 also illustrate some of the frustrations that individuals felt about not making a lot of progress. Specific comments are offered immediately below.

- "I went into this hoping that we all wanted the same thing and would be willing to try. It was only a matter of days after the September session that it became obvious that it wouldn't work. I was willing to step down from the board if it became apparent that I was the problem (as 2 members have told me), but that didn't seem to be the case. Four of us

on this board have now become closer, and I have gained more respect for them and what they can offer."
- "I don't feel I have done anything to move toward improving at this point. I am only a few months into my role as board member, and I don't feel I am doing my part because I am not clear on my specific duties on various committees."
- "I think I better understand what motivates my colleagues on the board, but I don't seem to be very effective in bringing them together. I'm not sure that anyone can bring this group to work together for the common good."

Respondents were asked to describe the progress their boards had made in becoming effective teams. Their responses have been compiled and aggregated in table 7 with specific verbatim comments following.

The data in table 7 show that a sizeable percentage of respondents (Note: many from the same district) didn't feel that their board had made much progress. However, other respondents spoke more favorably about the benefits that have accrued to their boards as a result of participation.

Table 7
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Unstructured Open-ended Question
Summary Results (N=22)

"Describe the progress your board of education has made in becoming a more effective team"

Response/Comment	Percentage
I'm not sure about how much progress we've made, if any	38%
We work better together as a board	15%
We are more aware of process	8%
We have gotten to know each other better on a personal level	8%
We're more open with each other	4%
We're better able to work out our differences	4%
We ask more questions before the open meetings	4%
We trust each other more	4%
We respect each other more	4%
We seem to understand each other better	4%
We listen more to each other	4%

The qualitative data below highlight some of the negative outcomes that various members have reported.

- "I feel that there has been no progress."
- "They still dislike one another and do not trust one another. They travel in 'packs' depending upon the issue."
- "Our two most vituperative members have stated, about this training, to NJSB and to our new lawyer, that it is only someone's opinion, and they don't have to follow any of it. This leaves me and others with a 'this is hopeless' feeling."
- "Board is still fractured. The President will not let issues go when voted against."

- "This is difficult because of a past situation; some board members are not trusting the president and have begun a campaign to oust him."

However, the data also continue to clearly demonstrate the positive outcomes reported by many of the participants in the training. Specific comments follow immediately.

- "The fact that we now understand each other may have had some slight impact on reducing tension in the board – maybe even a big impact – as we now may be able to disagree without being disagreeable."
- "We are more open with one another and more responsible in fulfilling our responsibilities as board members."
- "We were able to work out differences and put everything out on the table to understand where we were coming from."
- "We, as a whole, have the same ideas, goals, and concerns that pertain to our school and students. I feel that we can trust, learn, and understand one another to become a stronger and united group."
- "Our board started as a group of individuals with set of individual goals. By the end, we were more able to blend our goals for the benefit of the school district."
- "I see a calmer more trusting board. Members are listening more."
- "We seem to be more consistent."

In tables 8 and 9, participants were asked to identify things that they and their boards continued to need to help them to function better as cohesive teams. The responses below and the comments that follow clearly indicate that, among other things, they need to learn to trust more, communicate better, understand better their roles and responsibilities as board members, and to help to keep themselves focused. As the verbatim comments clearly show, many of these recommendations are offered within the context of a sense of frustration and, perhaps, despair.

Table 8
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Unstructured Open-ended Question
Summary Results (N=20)

"In what area(s) do you feel that improvement(s) are still needed in helping your board of education to become and remain a more effective team?

Response/Comment	Percentage
Don't know that anything can be done to help us.	15%
We need to learn how to trust each other better	15%
We need continuing support from our School Board representatives; perhaps more training and workshops	12%
We need help in keeping ourselves focused	12%
We need to communicate better with each other	12%
We need to have a better understanding of the rules and regulations that govern boards of education	8%
We need help in goal setting	8%
We need to get better information to the public about board member roles and responsibilities	8%
We need a better understanding of our roles and responsibilities as board members	8%
We need to learn how to be better decision makers	8%
We need new members and a new board	8%
I'm not sure that anything will help us to be a more effective team	8%
We need to get beyond our own personal agendas	4%
Some of us need to have less of a presence in the schools	4%
New board members need a better induction process	4%
We need to get consistent information that is shared with all members	4%
We need more cohesiveness as a team	4%
We need a better committee structure	4%
We need to be more patient with each other	4%
We need to improve our committee and board meetings	4%

- "I'm afraid that I feel I've given this my best shot and that I'm letting a lot of students down, but there is nothing I can do. I'm not getting paid to take this verbal abuse. So I plan on resigning this summer at the same time the principal and, I hope, the superintendent resign. (Name redacted) has publicly stated that she HATES the superintendent and will do everything she can to get rid of him. Sixteen years is enough; it's time for someone else to fight for ALL the students, not 'just their own child'."
- "Trust. I don't trust the board president or the superintendent!"
- "I thought that I was a pretty darn good board member for 6 years, but then a new group showed up in town, and I feel that all that was done before is coming crashing down. I have tried my best to not be judgmental, to be conciliatory, to try to get beyond our differences, but to no avail. I really believe that we could argue about whether the sun was shining or not. I really don't know what more I as an individual can do. I can't wait 'til my term is over next year."

Table 9
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Unstructured Open-ended Question
Summary Results (N= 22)

"What future steps do you think are needed in order to help you and your board to
sustain the progress that you have made as a result of participation in this project?"

Response/Comment	Percentage
We need to continually review our board goals	19%
We need more training and workshops	19%
There has to be more faith and trust in each other	15%
We need to have individual commitments of our board members to work as a team	12%
We need to improve our committee work	4%
Nothing will help	4%
We need to improve the way that we communicate with each other	4%

- "At the regular board meeting in February, our Board President, without consulting other board members (at least not any board members that I know of) invoked her power as President to appoint (actually to direct the superintendent to appoint) an ad hoc committee to re-evaluate the grading system, which the Board changed over her objection, last summer, on a 5-4 and later a 7-2 vote. When (name redacted) directed the superintendent to appoint the committee, she knew that 5 members of the board opposed the appointment of the committee. She knew this because 5 members spoke in opposition to her action. She has refused to accept the fact that her position on the grading system was defeated last summer, and she continues to re-fight this issue."
- "There is a coterie of longer term board members, I believe, who have circled the wagons, especially on issues that are more a priority for them. There is not enough open communication between committees. They amount to smaller group closed sessions, and neither the other members nor the public gets much of a report. I do not feel that I am yet a full team member."
- "There is nothing that the NJSBA can do to make the President follow NJSBA guidelines in regard to accepting the results of a majority vote of the board**.** She understands the guidelines. (Name redacted) read them to her at the February board meeting. After the April election, we will elect a new Board president, which may improve the situation somewhat."
- "People need to have more trust and faith in each other."

In table 10, participants report their praise for the training and the facilitators. The data, including the verbatim responses that follow, clearly indicate the desire and need for additional similar training.

Table 10
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Unstructured Open-ended Question
Summary Results (N=15)

"Provide any other comments that you might have about the training that you have received in this project."

Response/Comment	Percentage
The training was wonderful, helpful, and effective; more is needed	42%
The SBA representatives/workshop facilitators were outstanding	12%
In the future, provide more inter-board meetings; more engagement with members of other boards	4%
I wouldn't participate again; what we got wasn't what we signed on for	4%
Other	8%

- "I believe that the training was amazing. I also believe that ALL Boards should go through this type of training. I am very pleased that I did this, and I am very frustrated that my Board did not appreciate the value of what the trainers and the program had to offer."

- "PLEASE don't give up on this project! Our current board is a rare exception. I have been on a school board for 16 years, and we have always been able to work something out in the past. This board seems to be hopeless or as (name redacted) said - crippled. Most likely, we will soon have a 6-3 board made up of 5 members with personal agendas (to make their low 80's GPA children look as good as possible including: changing the grading system, changing our school's requirements for National Honor Society, punishing any teacher who disagrees with them, changing the Board policy to agree with their aims, etc.) and one member who can be led around by the nose because he seems to have some memory loss. The amount of voter apathy in our area is frightening, although I have had some people tell me that our board was so good for so long that they felt that they didn't need to pay attention. It was heartening to hear the other 2 boards say that they had made progress and could see great improvement. It is a good and worthwhile program and I feel that for the vast majority of boards, this will be of great benefit. Keep this going!"

- "I thought that your program was wonderful! (Name redacted) was a great facilitator! Believe me, she tried so hard with our board. Not her fault that we remain dysfunctional. (Names redacted) were great too. They have the patience of saints. Sorry that we gave them so many problems. If I could say one more thing, please don't give up on this great program because of us. It was wonderful! And as I said before, any other board would have had a most profitable experience. As a matter of fact, I think all boards should go through this process. It was that good!"

- "The training has helped us drop the walls of difference/indifference and helped us focus on the goal of togetherness and working toward a common good for the children of our school."

- "The training was extremely professional. I feel that, personally, I will continue to practice the important concepts of an effective BOE member. Hopefully, it will rub off on the others."

- "Although I attended only one session, I believe it was very beneficial as we were at a very difficult spot in our growth or lack of growth."
- "We need more/continuing support."
- "The interaction with the two facilitators for our group was invaluable. Because our field rep now knows our individual and collective strengths and weaknesses, we will be able to put together a customized board professional development plan."
- "Every board should go through this exercise, especially if no one wants to do it. You won't regret it."
- "The SAELP training was wonderful. It helps to clarify and develop an understanding of what the board and superintendent can and cannot do."
- "I think we got a lot more out of talking with and sharing experiences with members of other boards; understanding and learning from each other. That would be a great project for you for the future. Have boards from areas close to each other get together and discuss and share problems and experiences. This may also help with the shared services push from the state."
- "The training was done so professionally. The information was excellent, and those communicating the information did an excellent job in providing a very comfortable environment. Well done!"

In table 11, the stark difference between the three board teams is clearly evident. During the first workshop in September 2006, each board of education team was asked to agree on three outcomes that they would seek to achieve. Six months later, after the second workshop had concluded and an additional two months had elapsed, these agreements were revisited when the post-project questionnaires were distributed in March 2007.

As the data in table 11 show, the agreements that had been made by the Southern District were generally achieved. The majority of respondents reported that they had been either *very successful* or *successful* in honoring the agreements that they had previously made. The percentage of respondents who reported that they were either *somewhat successful* or *not too successful* or that it was *too soon to tell* was small.

Similarly, for the Central District, the majority of respondents reported that the agreements were generally achieved. However, the percentage of respondents who reported that they had been only *somewhat successful* was slightly higher than that which had been offered by participants from the Southern District.

The greatest difference lay with the Northern district, for which the training appears to have had the least positive impact. None of the respondents reported that the agreements had been either *very successfully* or *successfully* achieved. Moreover, a substantial majority reported that they had been *not too successful* in achieving two of the agreements, and a near majority reported a similar response for the third objective.

Table 11
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Questionnaire – Structured Questions
Extent to which District-Specific Agreements were Achieved
(N=22)

District-Specific Agreements	Very Successful	Successful	Somewhat Successful	Not Too Success-ful	Don't Know; Can't Judge; Too Soon to Tell	Mean Rating
Southern District (N=8)						
We agree to distinguish board roles and responsibilities, including our appropriate interactions with staff	25%	63%	13%	0%	0%	1.88
We agree to practice good communication through clear procedures, from setting the board agenda to fully communicating positions and rationales to establishing a contact list for questions	38%	25%	13%	13%	13%	2.38
We agree to openly communicate our feelings and concerns with all board members to build a trusting relationship	13%	50%	25%	0%	13%	2.50
Central District (N=7)						
We agree to establish yearly goals	43%	43%	14%	0%	0%	1.71
We agree to better understand our procedures and roles, and update as needed	29%	29%	43%	0%	0%	2.14
We agree to become better, more positive, communicators with the public	14%	29%	43%	14%	0%	2.57
Northern (N=7)						
We agree to work more as a team	0%	0%	29%	71%	0%	3.71
We agree to adopt and follow procedures to achieve goals in a timely fashion	0%	0%	43%	43%	14%	3.71
We agree not to engage in personal attacks	0%	0%	14%	86%	0%	3.86

Very Successful =1 through Don't Know, Can't Judge, Too Soon to Tell=5

Approximately three months after the second workshop had concluded, telephone interviews were conducted with 20 workshop participants (about a 71% response rate). Once again, respondents were asked to answer structured questions about the frequency with which they engaged in practices usually associated with effective and cohesive teams. The results of this effort are shown in table 12. Thereafter, respondents were asked to respond to three open-ended questions. Those data were compiled, analyzed quantitatively, and are reported in tables 13-15. Selected verbatim qualitative responses are also offered in the support of the quantitative data in tables 13-15.

Table 12
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Telephone Interview – Structured Questions
Summary Results (N=20)

	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean Rating
In our deliberations, its acceptable to openly disagree with others' ideas and positions	56%	28%	6%	11%	0%	1.72
Board members are conscious of the positive and negative ways in which we function	26%	53%	5%	11%	5%	2.16
Our board uses consensus as its customary method of decision making	26%	37%	16%	16%	5%	2.37
Board deliberations are frank and candid, yet constructive	16%	53%	11%	16%	5%	2.42
Our board generally defers district operational issues and decisions to the district and school administrators	11%	56%	17%	11%	6%	2.44
We use non-threatening conflict resolution strategies in our deliberations	35%	18%	18%	24%	6%	2.47
Members try hard to avoid surprising one another	11%	53%	16%	16%	5%	2.53
Board members understand and accept the limitations of their roles and responsibilities as board members	17%	33%	33%	6%	11%	2.61
Communication among our members is characterized by careful listening as well as speaking	5%	47%	32%	11%	5%	2.63
Our board effectively manages our deliberations, ensuring against one or two dominant voices and "turf control"	11%	39%	22%	17%	11%	2.78
Our board focuses primarily on policy issues	11%	26%	37%	21%	5%	2.84
Board business is generally conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, free from personal tensions	11%	47%	11%	11%	21%	2.84
Members trust the motivations of each other	11%	26%	21%	26%	16%	3.11

Always =1 through Never = 5

The data in table 12 show that only the following practices were generally engaged in with any degree of consistency. These practices are those that have a mean rating of 2.5 or less.

- it's acceptable to openly disagree with others' ideas and positions
- members are conscious of the positive and negative ways in which we function
- board uses consensus as its customary method of decision making
- board deliberations are frank and candid, yet constructive
- board defers operational issues and decisions to the district and school administrators
- we use non-threatening conflict resolution strategies in our deliberations.

It is interesting to note that among the practices whose scores would place them in the *sometimes, rarely,* or *never* category are those related to role confusion, effective communication, understanding member roles and responsibilities, dominant minorities and "turf control", a focus on policy issues, relaxed atmosphere, and trust.

These findings are generally consistent with findings that were observed from earlier data collection efforts.

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question that sought information about whether they believed that the training had been helpful. The resulting findings are presented both quantitatively in table 13 and qualitatively in the verbatim comments that follow.

Table 13
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Telephone Interview – Unstructured Questions
Summary Results (N=19)
"Do you think the training in which you participated has helped your board of education to function better as a more effective team?"

Response/Comment	Percentage
Training Didn't Help	
Training was outstanding, but…(several different reasons cited)	32%
Board is dysfunctional; too polarized; members too entrenched	26%
Members too resistant to change	19%
Members don't understand or trust other members' motivations	5%
Members don't really listen to each other	5%
Didn't get what we expected	5%
Training Helped	
Helped us to get to know each other better	53%
Helped us to communicate better	32%
Helped us to put issues on the table	26%
Helped people to see and understand their lack of trust	5%
We continually remind each other of what we learned	5%
Helped us to keep our focus	5%
Complemented ongoing training from SBA representatives	5%
Helped us to refresh our roles and responsibilities	5%

The data in table 13 show the findings of those respondents who reported that the training helped their board teams and why, as well those respondents who reported that the training did not help their board teams and why. Verbatim comments supporting these quantitative data follow table 13.

As the data in table 13 show, many of those who felt that it really wasn't very helpful reported that they thought the facilitators had done an outstanding job in conducting the training, but other factors not associated with the training had neutralized it. For the most part, they identified the dysfunctionality of their boards, the polarization of the membership, the resistance to change, a lack of understanding and trust of others' motivations, and a lack of communication among members as the chief contributors to the training not being effective. Some of their comments are as follows:

- "No, the training was ineffective because, as a board, we are too polarized. The personalities of some individuals are such that they have become entrenched in their beliefs. They are unwilling to be swayed from the directions in which they want to move. After the first retreat in September, we thought that we could go back and make progress. We were kind of gung ho; however, it didn't work. School Boards would come in to help us, but some individuals said that, 'well that's just your opinion, it's not the law.' "
- "No, the training really didn't help all that much. It did to a certain extent, except that board members didn't or couldn't apply what they learned in the training. They're not practicing what they learned. They're not listening to each other."
- "No, the training was essentially ineffective because the board is so evenly divided. Some of the newer members are trying to make positive changes and we're being told by the older members that 'That's not the way we do things around here.' Pretty much they see any changes that we offer as a direct attack on the superintendent and that's just not true. Trying to be a cohesive team is very difficult. There are too many personality clashes. Lots of things get blown out of proportion, and the real stuff that we need to do is left waiting in the wings."
- "No, we're not a cohesive team. The training was valuable, but there's only so much that training can achieve. Given our circumstances, I'm not sure what can be done. Some board members don't even try to understand where other board members are coming from. Sometimes, people ask questions that they don't see as threatening, but they're perceived that way. Also, sometimes, people get very defensive about questions that were posed innocently. I think things have not gotten any better. In fact, I think they've gotten worse since our last meeting when two members almost punched each other out."
- "No, but I think it's because of the board itself. The training was terrific, but this board did a complete flop in one short year. We're still in shock. The program could have been more effective if other personalities were on the board."
- "No, I'd like to be able to say that the training helped us as a group, but it didn't. The training was excellent and the facilitator was outstanding, but it didn't help us. Some people have no desire to change. There are a lot of personality differences. It did, perhaps, help one board member who had the superintendent running in a lot of different directions. That person learned that board members shouldn't be getting involved in a lot of stuff. He learned better what his role and responsibility was as a board member. But that was only one person. If anything, it might have created even more hostility among other board members."

On the other hand, several respondents felt that the training was beneficial and helpful. At least some of the benefits that they reported were almost exactly the opposite of those that were cited as reasons why the training had been ineffective:

- helped them to know each other better
- helped them to communicate better
- helped them to put [challenging] issues on the table
- helped them to keep focused
- helped hem to better understand their roles and responsibilities as board members.

Some of their comments were:

- "Yes, it was good because it helped people to get to know each other better and to better understand where they were coming from. A lot of the board members are very analytical and keep asking more and more questions. The board training helped others to understand why they were doing that. I was extremely pleased that our board members would make the commitment to travel to Princeton. That told me a lot. While the Governance Project training was good, its real value was the fact that it served as a catalyst for the subsequent training that we got from the School Board representatives. I think that the training we got after January was equally as valuable as that which we got in Princeton."
- "Yes, the training was very good and it helped us to learn about each other's personalities and how to work together as a team. It opened our eyes to other ways of doing things and different points of view. It made us more aware of how different people operate."
- "Yes, the training was very helpful in that it made us realize the reasons for differences in people – like how people listen differently; why people do different things; why some people need more information than others – things like that. It helped us to learn why and how people act like they do."
- "Definitely yes, it has had a tremendous positive effect. We now have much more respect for each others' viewpoints; we've become better listeners; our defenses are down; and people are putting aside personal agendas for the good of the board and the kids. The training was very humanizing. The puzzle activity in which we had to share parts without speaking was very eye-opening. [Name redacted] was exceptional in guiding us, so professional. Just watching how people reacted to others and how they were able to see themselves was very, very humanizing. As a result of the training, there were some major personality shifts, and we keep reminding ourselves of the progress we've made."
- "Yes, the training that you guys did was spectacular. It helped people to understand each other. It also helped us to get over some personal issues that had been lingering. Some board members were involved in some activities that other board members didn't like. This training helped us to get over that situation. I can't say enough about the training; it was fantastic, and if you make some presentations on the training and you'd like someone to talk it up beforehand, I'll be happy to do that."
- "Yes, our board was a pretty well functioning board before the training, but it helped us anyway. It helped us get to know each other on a personal level and that helped everyone to relax a little. We began to understand where people were coming from and what was

motivating them to act or say the things they did. For me, it helped people understand who I was as a person and why I was motivated in the way that I am."

In table 14, respondents were asked about what was needed to sustain the progress, if any, that their boards had made in becoming and remaining effective and cohesive teams. The most frequently occurring responses were that (a) additional, periodic refresher training was desirable, (b) members need constant reminders about why they became board members in the first place and what individuals and board teams can and can't do, and (c) members need to approach board business without personal agendas.

Table 14
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Telephone Interview – Unstructured Questions
Summary Results (N= 19)

"What do you think could or needs to be done to help your board of education to sustain the progress that it has made in becoming a more effective team?"

Response/Comment	Percentage
Members need to have periodic retraining to help to retain/regain focus	42%
Remind ourselves of our roles & responsibilities; the can do's & can't do's	21%
Members need to understand why they became members	16%
Board members with open minds and without personal agendas	16%
No progress; no solution in sight	11%
Strong leadership from board president	11%
SBA representatives to help boards de-brief after meetings	5%
More sessions where members can openly discuss why they do things	5%
Authoritative direction from counsel on what the board can and cannot do	5%
Need to understand people's motivations and why they do things	5%
Continued work with facilitators	5%
Other	5%

Some of their verbatim comments were as follows.
- "There should be mandatory refresher courses for all board members, as well as mandatory training for all new members. It would be good if training could be more local. I mean not in our district, but not as far away. And, if we could do it with other boards, that would be helpful."
- "The board should go through training as a whole board at least three times a year. At least one of those times should be in a retreat formation, for an extended period of time."
- "The training that we got in Princeton was more effective than the new member training that I went to at School Boards. The School Boards training was OK; that is, it was informational. But, as far as stuff you could really get your teeth into, that you could really get into, was only offered at your training. For boards to be more effective, training has to be usable. There ought to be re-training for all members."
- "We did make a little progress, but only a little, and that's probably because we were a pretty tight-knit group before the training anyway. What we need in the future is some type of training in communicating and conflict resolution. What seems to be the biggest problem is that people come to board meetings and want to say something, but it doesn't

come out right or it's taken the wrong way, and then people become defensive, and we can't seem to get over things."

- "Having periodic training as a refresher would be helpful. Also, having an objective, third party facilitator is also helpful."
- "We need specialized training for the president and vice president to keep us focused. If not, there could be some backsliding.
- "Going to the training is like taking 3 steps forward and 2 steps back. Old members seem resistant to change. What probably needs to happen is to get board members who have been around for a while to go back for some retraining. They seem to have forgotten what the focus is. The School Boards orientation was very informative, but sometimes, it looks like people just forget why they're on the board."
- "It would be good if there were workshops every six months or so that the whole board could attend in a kind of retreat-like environment, without having to be in front of the public. That way, we could talk about a lot of things and open up to each other."

Finally, during the telephone interviews, respondents were asked about how the content of future training sessions could be enhanced. These data are quantitatively reported in Table 15 and qualitatively reported in the verbatim narrative comments that follow. The majority of the recommendations were for a type of case study approach to problem solving. The training should provide for real board of education situations in which the board members could problem solve. Many respondents felt that that was an excellent way in which board members could learn about how others think and what motivates them. They also believed that, through this process, individuals could come to better understand their roles and responsibilities and what they were permitted and not permitted to do. Another recommendation that was offered was to establish training in such a way that board members could interact with members of other boards. They reported that this was a significant learning experience for them.

Table 15
SAELP Interagency Collaborative Governance Project
Participant Post-Project Telephone Interview – Unstructured Questions
Summary Results (N= 19)

"What recommendations do you have for the content of future training sessions to help boards of education to function more effectively as cohesive teams?"

| Response/Comment	Percentage
Training with real life situations that board members can problem solve	56%
Training that helps members to get to know others and their motivations	21%
Mandatory board training for all immediately after election or appointment	21%
Interactions with boards from other districts	21%
Training was outstanding and very helpful; more is needed	10%
Training in helping boards to retain focus	10%
Training has to be practical and usable	5%
Training that reinforces board member roles and responsibilities with limited individual power	5%
Training that includes models of good board behavior	5%
Retreats and refresher training for all board members	5%
Training in listening and communication skills	5%

Some of their comments were as follows:

- "Future training should include interactions with other boards. That way, our members get to see the whole picture – the good, the bad, and the ugly. There should be mandatory training for all members and it would be great if it could be in the form like we experienced in Princeton – with members of other boards. The training in Princeton was perhaps too general; at least that's what my board members reported to me. What was valuable was the sharing that went on. That should be a part of any training. That way, people get to know each other better and know what they're thinking and why."
- "Activities that are more introspective would be very helpful. Things that help people to examine their own motives, their own interpersonal skills, the things that they need to function effectively. The training helped all of us to understand what individuals need to function. Some people need things that other people don't. In future training, if there were activities that helped people to do more personal self-examination, that would be good."
- "The topic is really less important than the process. It's the process that helps people to learn how to work together. So, different boards may have different topics, but what's really important is the process. That's the catalyst for learning how to work together."
- "I don't know if it's possible but if there was a way to require that whole boards get together in a sort of retreat setting – like Princeton – that would be good. What also would be good is if there were real life situations, like real cases, that board members could read and then talk about how the problem might be dealt with. Then, an expert would come in and tell us how we did. Maybe, like, 'Well, there's where you started to go wrong,' or 'This is the way you should have dealt with this to steer clear of trouble. That sort of thing.'"
- "What would be good is if the training could have, like a big problem or a couple of smaller ones that the people could work through. That way, we could learn not only what to do in response to certain types of problems but also how to work it out. That's what we need – the 'how to' work it out."
- "It's important to get people on the board who don't have personal agendas. New board member training should be mandatory, and people should not be permitted to put it off. They should have to go to training. It would be very helpful if the training had real life case studies of real situations that people could work through. That would probably help them to see themselves a little more clearly. Board members have to understand that they have no real individual power. New members who go around telling people in the community that they can do this and that only create false expectations and that's not good."
- "Begin board training with the whole board immediately after the election; don't wait until the members become polarized. The activities that were conducted in Princeton were wonderful, and if we were a normal board, we may have blossomed as a result. However, we're not a normal board. Training needs to begin immediately so that the members can begin to learn about each other and determine why, specifically, a particular member chose to be on the board. SBA training doesn't get at those issues."
- "Any training that could help people to understand other people's motivations would be helpful. Some people appear threatening when they don't intend to be and others get defensive when they don't need to be."

- "Some role playing and case studies in which we get to talk about real life situations would be good."

The differences that were observed among the three pilot districts are perhaps best illustrated in the following three figures. In the beginning of the project, each of the project facilitator teams collaborated on a pre-training survey of where they observed their pilot districts to be with regard to 15 different characteristics of effective teams. Within a few weeks of completion of the training, the project facilitator teams again collaborated on a post-project survey identical to the one they had completed earlier. Thus, in addition to the self-reports from each of the board member teams in the pilot districts, comparative data were available from the perspectives of the project team facilitators who had continually worked with the board teams throughout the life of the project. These comparative data are graphically illustrated in figures 1-3, which follow immediately.

The pre/post-project data for the Southern District reveals significant growth as a cohesive team. Rating the Southern board team on the 15 characteristics of effective teams, the project facilitator teams provided ratings of *strongly disagree* on six characteristics and *disagree* on another six characteristics prior to the beginning of the training. In only one instance did the project team members *strongly agree* that the Southern board team demonstrated an effective team characteristic. These data clearly show a board team in distress. In a stunning reversal, however, by the time the training had been completed, the project team facilitators provided ratings of *strongly agree* on six characteristics and *agree* on the remaining nine characteristics. Clearly, the training had a significant positive effect on the Southern board in helping them move from a position of board-in-distress to one of a clearly cohesive and effective team. (see figure 1)

Figure 1
Pre/Post Assessment of Southern District
by Project Team Facilitators
**(1=Strongly Disagree; 5 =Strongly Agree)**
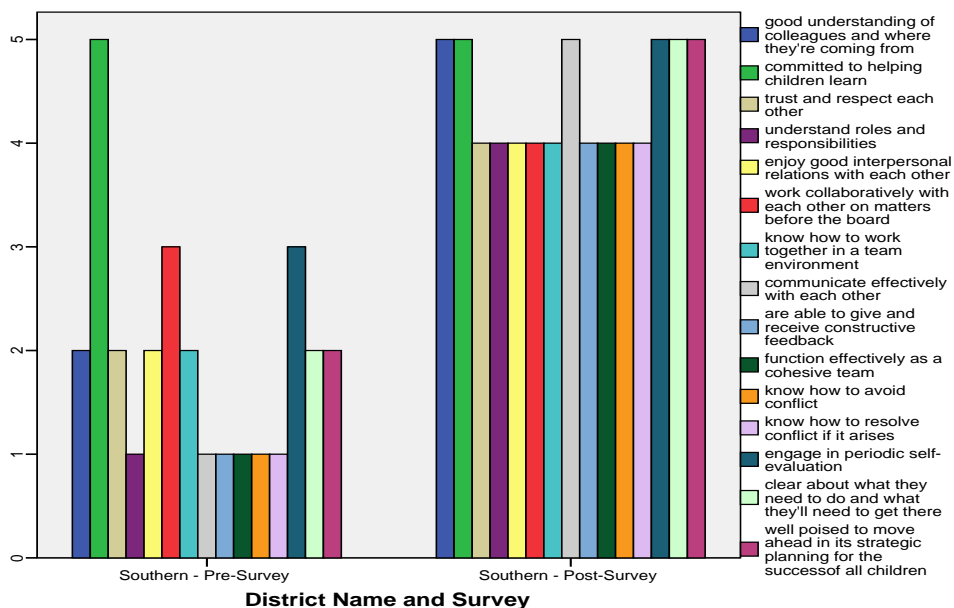
The pre/post data for the Central District reveals a similar positive effect. On the pre-project survey, the project team facilitators provided ratings for the Central board team of *strongly agree* for one of the effective team characteristics, *agree* for seven of the characteristics, *neutral* for four of the characteristics, and *disagree* for three of the characteristics. While not quite a board in distress, the pre-project data portray a board team that seemed to be struggling with some issues. However, in another example of reversal, by the time of the post-project survey, the project team facilitators rated the Central board team as *strongly agree* on 11 of the 15 effective team characteristics and *agree* on two other characteristics. These data similarly point to the positive benefits of the training and move to cohesive and effective team work (see figure 2).

Figure 2
Pre/Post Assessment of Central District
by Project Team Facilitators
(1=Strongly Disagree; 5 =Strongly Agree)
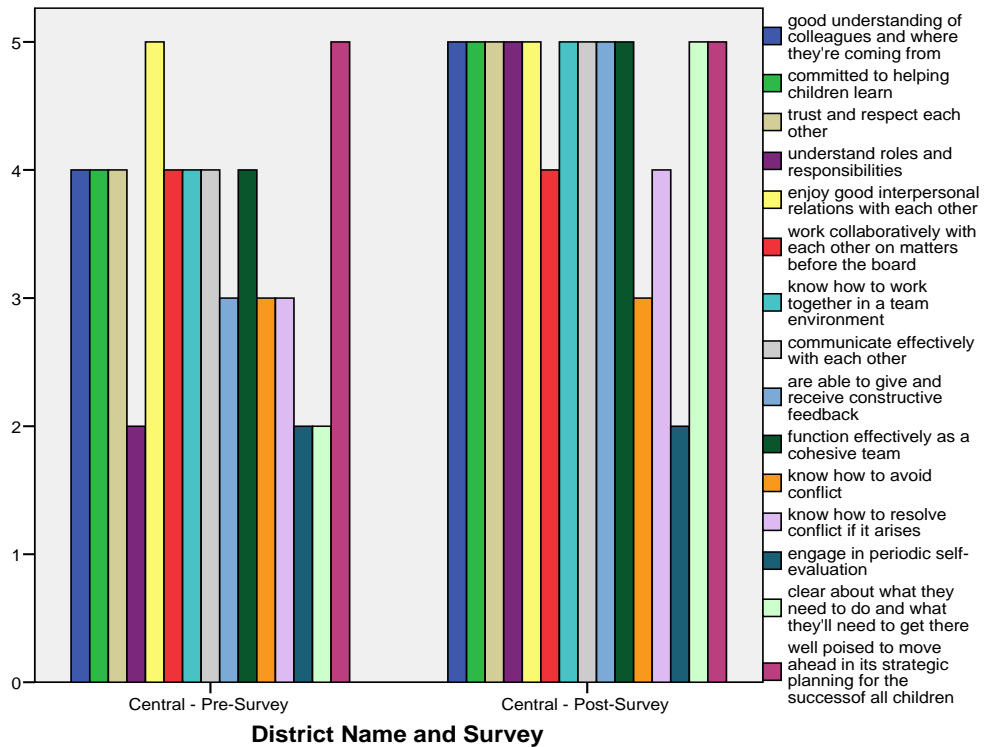
Finally, the district for which the project training seemed to have the least positive effect was the Northern District. For the pre-project survey, the project team facilitators provided ratings for the Northern board team of *strongly disagree* on 11 of the 15 effective team characteristics and *disagree* on three other characteristics. These data clearly suggest a board in great distress. The post-project data further seem to suggest that, while some progress had been noted, the Northern board team remained in distress. For the post project survey, the project team facilitators provided ratings for the Northern board team of *disagree* on 10 effective team characteristics and *agree* for four other characteristics. These data suggest that, even in the face of slight movement toward becoming a cohesive team, the Northern board continued to experience substantial and severe difficulties and challenges. (see figure 3)

Figure 3
Pre/Post Assessment of Northern District
by Project Team Facilitators
(1=Strongly Disagree; 5 =Strongly Agree)
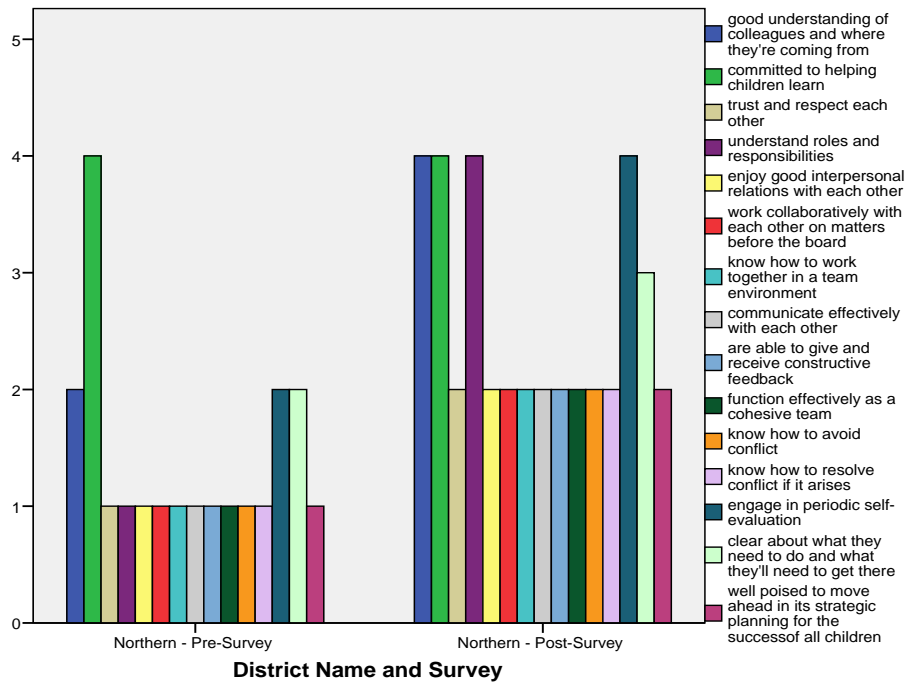
Discussion

In the beginning, three pilot districts were identified and selected based on their admission of needing help. Each of the board of education teams was experiencing some type of distress, either in unsatisfactory board member to board member relationships or in the board – superintendent relationships. In the Southern District, it appears that the problems stemmed from a "stuck" organization (Fullan, 2005). A crisis had occurred in the district, and the members could not seem to agree on a solution. The crisis seemed to polarize members of the board, until a compromise could be reached. Thereafter, a sense of ill feeling seemed to prevail. In the Central District, there seemed to be a combination of member to member problems and a board – superintendent problem. However, shortly before the start of the training, a new superintendent was hired, and some of the problems seemed to diminish. Nevertheless, tensions among some of the board members remained. In the Northern District, there was the greatest tension and problem. There were serious member to member problems, especially among new and more veteran members, which gave way to serious board – superintendent problems. The Northern District board team was clearly dysfunctional and the climate in which the board – superintendent team functioned could reasonably be characterized as "toxic" (Schein, 1992).

The data in the above tables and illustrations strongly suggest that the project enjoyed differing degrees of success. Perhaps the greatest success was found among the board members of the Southern District, at least among the members who participated in the training (one board member indicated that a colleague who perhaps needed the training the most chose not to attend either session). The board team in the Central District also enjoyed substantial success; however, some of the data seem to suggest that hard feelings among at least some of the members remain. In the Northern District, while some of the board members spoke very highly of the benefits of the training, and while at least some slight movement toward becoming a cohesive team was noted, it appears that the training had the least sustaining impact. Many of the respondents from Northern cited the dysfunctional nature of the board, the intransigence and strong resistance to change among of some of its members, and the open hostility that exists between selected members of the board and the superintendent as reasons for the lack of success. What is perhaps most interesting among all the data collected from the Northern District came during an interview with the superintendent, who stood alone among all the participants from that district in reporting that the training had been successful. The superintendent indicated that the training had been successful because it caused the members to confront their lack of collective trust in each other. The members would confirm this, but most felt that they were too entrenched in their own beliefs to do anything about it. Some even suggested that, with the coming board election, the problems they faced would only be further exacerbated.

For those who believed that the training had been successful, their sentiments were pretty uniform. When aggregated, the data provide five specific benefits of the training. First, participants believed that the project was successful because it provided an opportunity for individuals to begin to better understand each other, to get a better idea of "where people were coming from", and to better understand what motivated people to act in the ways that they did. The response of one participant provides a good example of this. She indicated that, "We were able to work out differences and put everything out on the table to understand where we were coming from." Another participant reported, "I think that my getting to 'know' them on a different level may have helped me realize where they come from and perhaps why some issues are more dear or close to them." Even a participant from the Northern District offered this

comment, "[The] project has helped me to have a better understanding of the personalities of the other board members, including the superintendent. Also, [it] has helped me to better understand my own personality and its impact on other board members."

Second, the data also show that the participants really appreciated the training because it helped them to better understand their own roles and responsibilities as members of team. One participant responded that, "I never considered the impact that my attitude/reactions had on the other members. It was all about my reactions to them. I realize that I also leave a footprint." Another participant noted, "the training was good in that it helped us to establish ground rules on how to work with one another. It gave us the opportunity to re-fresh regarding our roles and responsibilities as board members; who has what hot buttons, and understanding that people act differently." A third participant offered, "the training was definitely effective. In fact, on our board, we refer to it frequently. Whenever we reach a place where we're not really functioning well, we're at a deadlock, we stop and say, 'wait a minute, what did we learn at the training?' That always brings us back to reality, and we listen better. The training was definitely helpful in getting us to work better as a team. We still have our moments, but the training is something that we all remember, and we often call ourselves on things that we shouldn't be doing."

Third, the training helped individuals to improve their communication skills, especially their ability to give and receive constructive feedback. One participant noted, "I believe that we allow each other to fully air views, and we respect each other's views. This leads to compromise, if not consensus." Another participant commented, "the training was helpful because it taught us strategies on how to hold discussions and communicate with each other. We learned how to listen before we spoke. I mean that we still have our own ideas about things, but now we can listen before we present. We also learned about others and the way they think. The training caused us to put a lot of things on the table that otherwise may not have been placed there. And, once they're on the table, it makes talking about them easier. Actually, we found that there were more common denominators than obstacles."

Fourth, the training helped individuals to improve their interpersonal relations and to become more collaborative. One respondent commented on an unanticipated consequence, "The training helped me in way that I really didn't expect. There's a particular person on our board who's been on the board for a few years, but I didn't really know him. During the training, I sat next to him and we started to talk. I found out that we really have a lot in common and, as a result, I think I've found a new friend. In fact, on board business, I think I've experienced a new way of collaborating. It was really a very pleasant experience – one that I didn't expect." Another participant reported, "The training helped in that it allowed us the opportunity to know each other better. We became better listeners as a result of the training. We're more on board with what each other wants for the children of the district. The training was valuable because it helped people to open and talk about things that were important to them. We became better listeners. Even though we may not always agree with each other, at least we listen."

Finally, several participants spoke to the issues of trust and respect. One participant offered, "I think we have made great progress. We have learned to trust and respect each other as individuals. Trust amongst members and continued communications will only help make a stronger and better functioning board." Another participant commented, "[We have finally gained] trust. We have made progress but [we] have to have that progress continue." One other

participant has put it perhaps most succinctly, "I see a calmer more trusting board. Members are listening more."

Among those participants who have reported that they didn't see much success in the training, they seemed to cite the very things that others have reported as the primary benefits of the training. For example, one participant seemed to sum it up when she reported in the interview, "We can't seem to do anything, we're so entrenched. We don't like each other; we can't get along as adults. We don't communicate well. Everything is a challenge for us because we have no sense of trust. For some reason, we seem to be suspicious of everyone's intentions and motivations. It's really too bad, it's almost like we enjoy the constant conflict. We set a horrible example for kids!"

The training seems also to have been successful because of two reasons. First, it was made available to the board team as a whole. The only formal training that board members experience is individually received. New board members are required to undergo NJSBA training within one year of being elected or appointed to the board. However, it is rare, if ever, that boards are able to retreat, as they did with this training, and engage in the kinds of exercises and activities that allow them to get to know each other, collaborate, and build trust. Tuckman's (1965) stages of are very real for these teams; however, oftentimes they seem to find themselves not being able to move beyond the forming and storming stages. This training was successful because it provided an opportunity for them to more seriously engage in team-building activities.

Another factor that contributed to the success of the training was the ability to interact with members of other board of education teams. In offering a recommendation for future training sessions, one participant remarked, "future training should include interactions with other boards. That way, our members get to see the whole picture – the good, the bad, and the ugly." Having the ability to interact with other boards and the members of these boards allowed them to hold a kind of mirror to their organizational faces. In some cases, members saw that they weren't as bad off as perhaps they had thought. In other cases, the reverse may unfortunately been the case. In all cases, members were able to see that they all had some common challenges and problems. For many of them, this was an eye-opening experience.

In summary, the training seemed to be a good experience for all involved – albeit for different reasons. For those who saw it as beneficial, it helped them to get to know each other better, to communicate better, to improve their interpersonal relations, to become collaborative, and to begin to increase their trust and respect for each other. For those for whom the training was less successful, at least it provided them with an opportunity to identify the factors that influence their dysfunctional nature and toxic climate.

Implications for Future Board of Education Training Projects

There is both an extensive and emerging knowledge base regarding boards of education and superintendent – board relations. Within only the last decade or so, several researchers (e.g., Kowalski, 1995; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Bjork, 2001; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; Peterson & Fusarelli, 2002; Mountford, 2006; Mountford, 2007) have written about historical problems that plague superintendent and board relations, motivations for board membership, and a variety of other topics that relate to the functioning of school district leadership. In the following paragraphs, three topics are discussed briefly because of their implications for future efforts at providing team training for boards of educations and superintendents. They are: (a) reasons for the lack of coherence among board of education teams, (b) aggravating factors in board and superintendent relationships, and (c) recognizing one's personal capacity for trust. In addition, the concept of reflective practice is also introduced and briefly discussed.

Reasons for the Lack of Cohesion among Board of Education Teams

In the scholarly literature, several reasons have been cited for the lack of cohesion among superintendent – board of education teams. In no particular order of importance, a few of these reasons are as follows:

- *Increasing Federal and State Control of Schools.* Increasingly, the historical role of board of education as policy developer has been usurped by state and federal governments. In New Jersey alone, the requirements of NCLB, the core curriculum content standards, Abbott district legislation, and state-required standardized testing have essentially stripped the local board of education of much of its responsibility to develop and monitor local district policy. As a result, board members have a sense of disenfranchisement and loss of authority.
- *Role Ambiguity and Confusion.* For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is described immediately above, members of local boards of education face a sense of ambiguity and confusion as to what their proper roles and responsibilities are. No longer consumed with the need to develop policy, board members have begun to question what it is they're supposed to do. As a result, at least some have turned their attention to the more operational aspects of the district and to more closely managing the superintendent.
- *Differing Motivations for Board Membership.* Some board members seek positions on the board of education out of a sense of civic pride and duty; others seek membership to gain political experience or to gain personal or political prestige; some gain board membership as representatives of partisan political affiliations; and still others seek board membership because of a need to address one or more personal issues. Because of these differing motivations and the disparate beliefs and attitudes of members serving on the same board, seeking and retaining a shared vision for the district and a shared mission for the board is extremely challenging.
- *Changes in the Orientations and Decision-Making Processes of Board Members.* Many of the contemporary board members are part of the baby boomer generation. The scholarly literature (e.g., McCurdy, 1992; Mountford, 2007) reports that baby boomers are less patient than their forbears, are more apt to look for "quick fixes", have a tendency to vigorously pursue change, are less likely to accept the status quo, and often will resist changes in which they do not feel a sense of ownership.

- *Power Struggles Among Board Members and Between Superintendents and their Boards.* Because of several of the reasons cited immediately above, power struggles often emerge both within the board membership and between the superintendent and board. As is discussed in paragraphs below, board members' and superintendents' personal conceptualizations of power are often serious obstacles to healthy relationships.

Selected Aggravating Factors in Board and Superintendent Relationships

Mountford and Brunner (2001) and Mountford (2006, 2007) have also identified several aggravating factors in board and superintendent relationships. They cite the personal conceptualizations of power as an especially important aggravating factor. Some individuals conceptualize power in terms of hierarchical authority, assertive control, and super-ordinate and subordinate relationships. Even those individuals who enjoy good relationships with staff and community exemplify this conceptualization. They see themselves as the persons in charge, with a kind of "the buck stops here" orientation, which is often characterized as *power-over*. On the other hand, there are others who conceptualize power in a more collaborative or distributed fashion. These individuals are less likely to engage in a monolithic style of leadership, and they are more likely to engage in shared leadership and shared decision making. This conceptualization is often referred to as *power-with*. What's the implication of this distinction? If a superintendent is more likely to conceptualize his or her legitimate or position power as *power-over*, then there is great potential that any board member who seeks information could be construed as engaging in micromanagement, thus endangering the superintendent – board member relationship. This difference in conceptualization extends to board member to board member relationships as well. Mountford also introduces yet another variable in this dynamic: gender. Her research clearly suggests that many superintendents (most of whom are men) tend to conceptualize power as *power-over*, and many women (who are increasingly gaining ground as members of boards of education) tend to conceptualize power as *power-with*.

Mountford and Brunner (2001) and Mountford (2006, 2007) have also identified *voice* as a potential aggravating factor in board and superintendent relationships. Because of a number of personal characteristics, some individuals tend to be extroverted, outgoing, and vocal, while others tend to be introverted, introspective, and silent. Their research suggests that, because board deliberations are characterized more by debate than dialogue, those who are more willing and able to skillfully engage in debate tactics often prevail. Moreover, those whose voices are less privileged often feel "silenced" and left out. Retreating to the "parking lot," these individuals feel disenfranchised. Thus, it is important that all members of boards of education are conscious of their voices so that they can collectively monitor board deliberations and guard against one or two dominant (consciously or unconsciously) members and other manifestations of "turf control."

Recognizing Personal Capacity for Trust

Another important topic in the scholarly literature is trust. Reina and Reina (2006) discuss several aspects of personal and interpersonal trust. Some individuals possess a more abstract capacity for trust, and they are willing to trust others until those others have clearly demonstrated that they are unworthy of such trust. On the other hand, there are different individuals who possess a more concrete capacity for trust, and they are unwilling to trust anyone for whom there

is no concrete evidence that such trust has been earned. Reina and Reina also offer complex vs. simple capacities for trust. Individuals with more simplistic capacities for trust see things as "all or none" or "black and white." There is no middle ground, no "grey" areas. They either trust someone or they don't. On the other hand, those with a more complex capacity for trust understand that trust can be situational. They recognize that people have differential sets of skills; they can be good at one thing and not so good at something else. Hence, those who are more complex in their capacity to trust can trust selectively, depending on the specific strengths and weaknesses of others. Since so much of board members' interpersonal relationships is predicated on trust, it is important that they understand the dynamics of trust. Board members need to be able to self-assess their own capacity for trust as a prerequisite for trusting others.

Reflective Practice

Simply stated, reflective practice is a systematic process for checking to make sure that we are "walking our talk." Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) report that, in order to ensure that the objectives that we seek to achieve are actually being achieved, we need to periodically check for congruency (or lack thereof) between our *espoused theory* and our *theory in use.* The former is what we *say* we do; the latter is what we *actually do.* "Actions speak louder than words" is therefore not an empty expression. Often, either consciously or unconsciously, our words and our actions do not align. However, if we never establish a process for periodically assessing the extent to which the two do align, we'll never recognize the dis-connect between we *say* and what we *do*. Moreover, if we don't see the dis-connect, we have no reason or motivation to change. Hence, with a nod toward an operational definition of insanity, we will continue to do things the way we've always done them – confused and bewildered as to why we keep getting the same results.

Unless we check to see if what we are achieving as a result of our actions is actually what we want to achieve, we'll never really know whether our inability to accomplish our objectives is because of external variables over which we might not have any control or if it is because we're not really doing what we think we're doing. In other words, we think we're one thing when, in actuality, we're doing something quite different. Similarly, in board deliberations that are often characterized by debate rather than dialogue, communication is an important commodity. Sometimes, when we are speaking, the message that is being sent is not the message that is being received. We believe that people understand what we're saying, but because of the way in which we say it, or because of some unconscious body language that accompanies our words, their meaning is misinterpreted. If there isn't a process for the giving and receiving of constructive feedback, we tend to continue acting and communicating in ineffective ways, and our objectives and messages continue to be denied or misinterpreted.

Summary

It is quite reasonable to ask why these three topics have implications for future board of education training. The answer is this: if board members and superintendents are unaware of the reasons why people are motivated to join boards of education, if they don't understand how their own conceptualizations of constructs (e.g., power and voice) and their own capacity for trust influence their interpersonal relationships, and, perhaps, most importantly, if they do not understand the importance of reflective practice, then they will generally continue to act as they have consistently done in the past, and will, therefore, be doomed to continue to experience the

difficult and challenging relationships they always have. Hence, one of the recommendations of this evaluation study is to introduce these topics in future training sessions. One of the important outcomes of this training project was to help board members to begin to better understand their colleagues and where they were coming from. Introducing these topics in future training efforts will help to facilitate this level of understanding.

Summary Conclusions

Based on the data that have been collected during this evaluation effort, the following conclusions have been reached:

1. The SAELP training project enjoyed differing degrees of success. Both the Southern and Central Districts enjoyed the most success. The data provide substantial evidence that they are progressing well toward becoming effective and cohesive teams. The Northern District has demonstrated the least amount of success. The data strongly suggest that, their participation in the training notwithstanding, they remain largely dysfunctional, hostile to one another, entrenched in their beliefs as they see them, and resistant to change.

2. The data suggest that there are at least five benefits of the training. These were cited throughout the evaluation effort by those who found the training to be successful as things that the training had helped them to do. These benefits are as follows:

   It helped them to…
   a. get to know each other better and understand where others were "coming from,"
   b. communicate better and to better give and receive constructive feedback,
   c. improve their interpersonal relations,
   d. become more collaborative, and
   e. begin to increase their trust and respect for each other.

3. Two contributing factors that helped to make the training successful were that (a) the training involved the board as a team, and (b) the training sessions included several different boards.

4. The training itself may have been most effective with boards that were most amenable to change. For those members more resistant to change, the length and scope of the training (i.e., 2 days of training and periodic visits by the project team facilitators) may simply have not been sufficient.

5. By all accounts, the training was well received, even by those board members from the district that evidenced the least success. Special recognition should go to the lead facilitator and the representatives of the NJASA and NJSBA, who worked with the boards between training sessions. The content and processes included within the training format were especially useful in helping boards to make progress and achieve success.

Recommendations for Future Training Efforts

1. Follow-up training with the three pilot board of education teams should be offered. With the April 2007 elections now completed, the membership of these boards is likely to have changed. As a result, these boards face new dynamics and, perhaps, new challenges. As a way of helping these boards sustain the progress they have made, however large or small, every attempt should be made to provide for their continued training. To the extent possible and practical, this follow-up training should be reinforced by periodic site visits by project team facilitators.

2. Future training should continue to provide opportunities for board members as a team to explore ways in which they can get to know each other better. Hands-on activities and case studies that allow the participants to problem solve real life situations they are likely to encounter will be well received and probably will be very effective. To the extent possible and practical, training should include multiple boards. Further, it should be more sustained over a longer period of time. Finally, again, to the extent possible and practical, it should be held in a retreat setting away from the district and should be reinforced by periodic site visits by project team facilitators.

3. In addition to the hands-on approaches and case study content described above, future training sessions should include exposure to the most current research in superintendent and board relations, associated topics (e.g., why individuals become board members), and reflective practice.

4. School districts that experience challenges as a result of their participation in the CAPA and/or QSAC assessment process should be offered training as a way of helping to improve their shared leadership.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. In order to contribute to the expanding knowledge base about board and superintendent relations, there should be a collaborative effort to present the information about this training project and its evaluation at a scholarly conference and to publish a scholarly article heralding its successes and benefits.

2. The sustained effects of this training on the three pilot districts should continue to be studied. Every effort should be made to collect data periodically from these districts to determine the long term impact of the training.

3. The Interagency Governance Project should continue to conduct research on the extent to which board of education teams in the state practice the characteristics of effective and cohesive teams as identified in the scholarly literature.

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