



Center for Public Education



Report

Ten Thousand Democracies, One Common Goal

School Board Accountability, Evaluation, and Effectiveness

AN **nsba** PUBLICATION

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Introduction

In the United States, most students attend a public school in a district overseen by a democratically elected school board. In political science, school boards are often portrayed as ten thousand democracies (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005). School board members are often described as “citizens-policymakers” because they “constitute a middle ground between normal citizens and professionalized policymakers — with large variations based on the size of the districts and the model of selection” (Asen, 2015; Delevoye, 2020).

School board members have been regarded as one of the largest groups of policymakers in the U.S. (Delevoye, 2020). Fostering an educational environment in which every student reaches a high achievement level and successful postsecondary life is a common goal of all local school boards. In education research, school board accountability, effective governance, and board evaluation are all relevant to this common goal. An important characteristic of effective school boards is “accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement” ([Dervarics and O’Brien, 2011](#)).

Media reports on American public schools have been dismal for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the perception that many American schools are failing to prepare students for the future ([Jimenez, 2022](#); [Tripses et al., 2015](#)). The 2022 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show dramatic and sobering declines in math and reading scores for the nation’s fourth- and eighth-graders. Some researchers report that, historically, school boards have not focused to any great extent on student achievement (Tripses et al., 2015). For example,

- Dating back to the early 1700s, the main role and function of school boards was to hire the head schoolmaster and oversee the maintenance of the school building ([Tripses et al., 2015](#)).
- A study conducted in West Virginia (McCall, 1997) found that school boards spent 3% of their time on policy development and as much as 54% on administrative matters.
- Researchers conducted a study of 55 randomly selected school boards and found that “financial and personnel issues were among the most frequent areas of decision-making, displacing deliberations on educational policy by a significant margin” ([Beckham and Wills, n.d.](#)). The authors observed that school boards often play a quasi-judicial role instead of placing policymaking as the board’s priority, and “many local boards act as hearing agencies for employee and student grievances.” It has been recommended that school districts delegate the responsibility to hear complaints and appeals from individual students or employees to administrative law judges or other qualified third parties.

The context of highlighting student achievement as a key accountability of school boards can probably be traced back to the 1983 publication of “A Nation at Risk.” The report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education caused a dramatic escalation of national concern about public education. Since then, state and federal policymakers have been intensively requiring rigorous testing, higher graduation rates/requirements, and higher academic standards ([Tripses et al., 2015](#)). In 2002, Congress passed the law No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), which increased pressure on school boards and superintendents to be more accountable for student achievement ([Dervarics and O’Brien, 2011](#); [Sell, 2006](#)).

Introduction

“Public displays of test scores, mandated by the law, have engaged communities to some extent in the process of evaluating performance of both school boards and superintendents” (Tripses et al., 2015). At the same time, the student achievement gap has become an increasing concern for educational equity. More studies suggest that school boards can and do influence academic outcomes, and improving school board governance is viewed as a legitimate approach to improving academic achievement (Eadens et al., 2020; Ford, 2013; Land, 2002; [Shober and Hartney, 2014](#)).

To inform school leaders of some of the current challenges and potential solutions to improve education leadership, the Center for Public Education (CPE) of the National School Boards Association (NSBA) compiled this research report. There are three parts to this report. In Part I, we present readers with statistics about school districts and school boards that show the diverse nature of the education system across the country. In Part II, we share the recent NAEP data to help readers understand the urgent call for education leaders to improve student achievement. Part III will focus on what research says about the following three discussion issues:

1. The connection between student achievement and school board accountability.
2. The association between effective governance and student achievement.
3. The relationship between board effectiveness and evaluation.



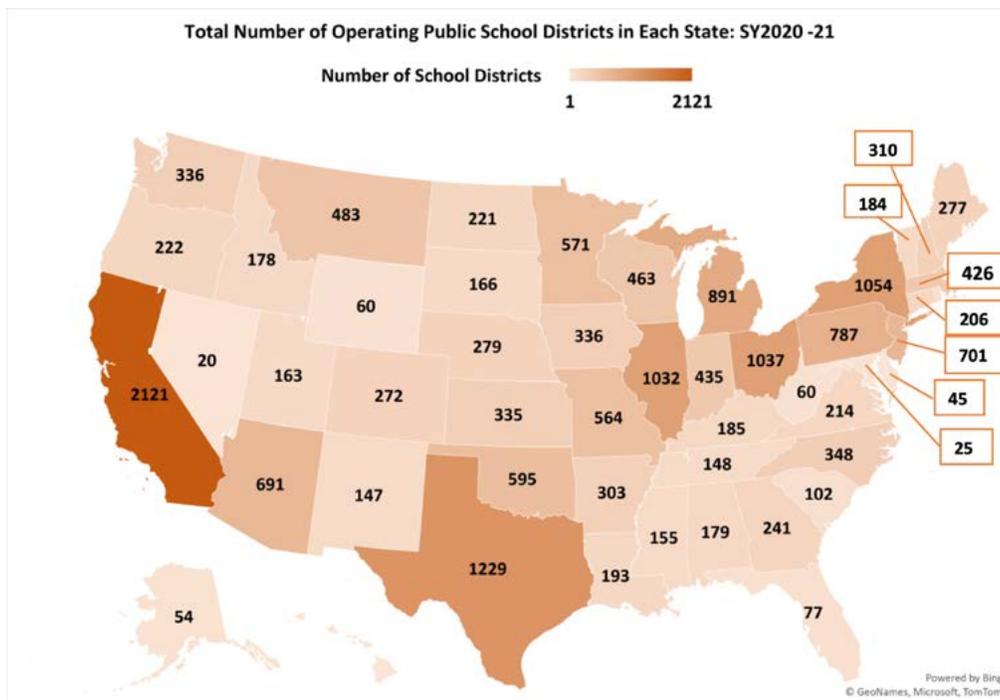
Part I

Ten Thousand Democracies: Statistics and Facts about School Districts and School Boards

In the 2020-21 school year (SY), 19,254 operating public school districts served 49,356,945 students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES](#)). Operating schools/districts include all those providing services for prekindergarten through [grade 13](#) as of the start of the reported school year. Figure 1 and Table 1 show that there are significant differences between states in the total number of school districts operating and the total number of students served in public schools. For example,

- California has more than 2,000 school districts. Texas, Illinois, Ohio, and New York have more than 1,000 school districts, respectively.
- States with more school districts often have larger student populations. More than 6 million students attend public schools in California. More than 5 million students go to public schools in Texas. More than 2.6 million students are served in public schools in New York.
- However, states with fewer school districts do not necessarily serve a small student population. For instance, in Maryland, 25 school districts serve nearly 900,000 students. In Florida, 77 school districts serve nearly 2.8 million students.
- By the same token, states with smaller student populations may have relatively more school districts. For instance, in Vermont, about 83,000 students are distributed among 184 school districts; in North Dakota, there are about 115,000 students and 221 school districts; in Montana, about 146,000 students attend 483 school districts.

Figure 1. Number of School Districts by State



Source: [Table 2. Number of operating public schools and districts, student membership, teachers, and pupil/teacher ratio, by state or jurisdiction: School year 2020–21 \(ed.gov\)](#)

Table 1. Number of School Districts and Number of Students, by State: SY 2020-21

State or jurisdiction	Number of School Districts	Number of Students	State or jurisdiction	Number of School Districts	Number of Students	State or jurisdiction	Number of School Districts	Number of Students
California	2,121	6,064,504	Montana	483	146,252	Louisiana	193	693,150
Texas	1,229	5,372,806	Wisconsin	463	830,066	Kentucky	185	658,809
New York	1,054	2,606,748	Indiana	435	1,033,964	Vermont	184	82,401
Ohio	1,037	1,645,412	Massachusetts	426	921,712	Alabama	179	734,559
Illinois	1,032	1,886,137	North Carolina	348	1,513,677	Idaho	178	307,581
Michigan	891	1,434,137	Iowa	336	506,656	South Dakota	166	139,566
Pennsylvania	787	1,704,396	Washington	336	1,087,354	Utah	163	680,659
New Jersey	701	1,373,960	Kansas	335	481,750	Mississippi	155	442,627
Arizona	691	1,111,500	New Hampshire	310	169,027	Tennessee	148	985,207
Oklahoma	595	694,113	Arkansas	303	486,305	New Mexico	147	316,840
Minnesota	571	872,083	Nebraska	279	324,697	South Carolina	102	766,819
Missouri	564	882,477	Maine	277	172,455	Florida	77	2,791,707
			Colorado	272	883,199	District of Columbia	68	89,883
			Georgia	241	1,730,015	Rhode Island	64	139,184
			Oregon	222	560,917	West Virginia	60	253,930
			North Dakota	221	114,955	Wyoming	60	92,772
			Virginia	214	1,251,639	Alaska	54	129,872
			Connecticut	206	509,058	Delaware	45	138,092
						Maryland	25	882,527
						Nevada	20	482,348
						Hawaii	1	176,441

Source: [Table 2. Number of operating public schools and districts, student membership, teachers, and pupil/teacher ratio, by state or jurisdiction: School year 2020–21 \(ed.gov\)](#)

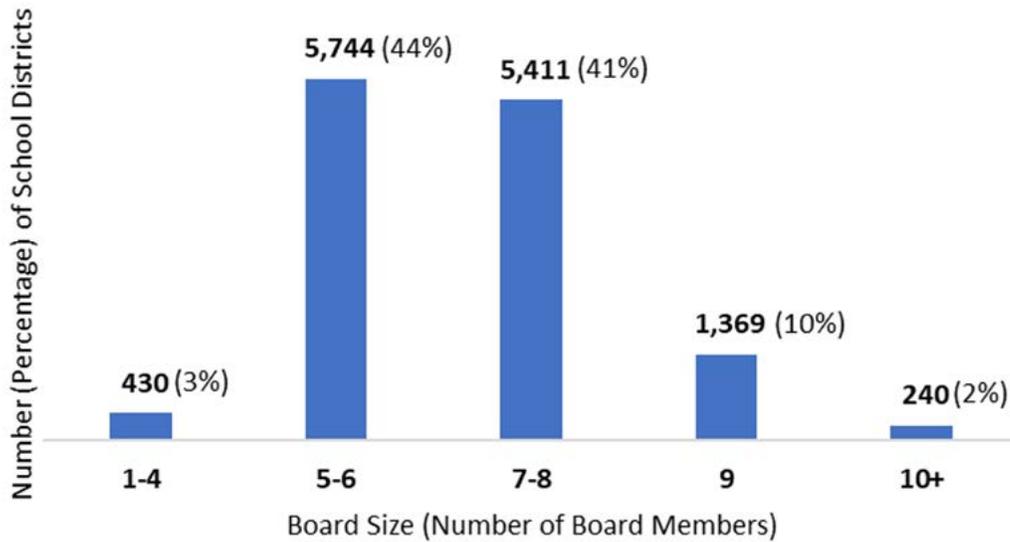
School Board Size

Differences in school districts in the U.S. often lead to diverse structures and styles of governance of the school boards. [Ballotpedia](#), a non-profit organization that collects information on elections, politics, and policy, [reports](#) that at the start of the 2022-23 school year, there were 82,423 school board members in 13,194 school districts. According to Ballotpedia, those school districts feature school board member information on the district’s website or other online platforms.

Figure 2 shows that among the 13,194 school districts in the country, 85% have five to eight school board members. In fact, [most district boards](#) are composed of either five or seven members.

- Only 495 boards have six members, and only 86 have eight members.
- About 2% or 243 districts across 18 states are governed by school boards with more than 10 members.
- The number of elected school board members per state ranges from nine in Hawaii (which has one statewide school district) to 6,994 in Texas (representing more than 1,000 school districts).
- The average number of school board members per district ranges from 3.45 in West Virginia to 9.97 in Connecticut.

Figure 2. Number and Percentage of School Districts, by Board Size: 2022



Source: [Analysis of school district and board member characteristics, 2022 - Ballotpedia](#)

Elected vs. Appointed School Board Members

Approximately 90% of school board members are elected. According to a 2002 report on American school board compositions, about 93% of school boards are elected rather than appointed (Hess, 2014). In 2018, [NSBA](#) surveyed school board members and found that among the 2018 respondents, the majority (88%) were locally elected.

The NSBA report also indicated that the number of appointed board members among the 2018 respondents more than doubled from 2010 (12% versus 5.5%). Some researchers suggest that usually, the catalyst for moving to an appointed school board system is “the elected board’s mismanagement causing poor student performance, financial crises, teacher shortages or infighting with the superintendent” ([Llamas, 2020](#); [Milliard, 2015](#)). It should be noted that each school district has unique challenges, and changes about how to form the board are often based on decisions from state or local-level governing bodies.

- In 2021, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) signed House Bill 2908, which expands the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education to 21 members beginning in 2025. Voters will elect 10 members, and the mayor will appoint the other 11. In 2026, all members of the board will be elected ([Tabor, 2023](#)).
- Unlike most localities in Virginia, Hanover County remains one of the few jurisdictions in which the local governing body appoints members to the school board ([German, 2023](#)).
- In Pennsylvania, the Butler Area School Board approved appointing two candidates to fill the seats vacated by resigning board members. The two newly appointed school board members have been in the top five of those receiving votes in the primary election, and will “have a good chance of being elected to continue for a full term” this fall ([Friel, 2023](#)).

“While school boards are a quintessential example of representative democracy, many districts experience low participation by both candidates and voters” (Cai, 2020). While voter turnout for political office elections has increased since 2014, in local school board elections, voter turnout has been discouragingly low — often just 5% to 10% (Cai, 2020). At the same time, according to [Ballotpedia](#) (2023), approximately 2.03 candidates are running for each seat in the 1,428 school board races in 2023, which is 11.4% less than in 2021 (2.29 candidates per seat).

Turnover and Retention of School Board Members

Researchers suggest that student achievement is correlated with two sources of social capital of school boards, namely internal and external ties. Internal ties refer to the bonding of members within a school board; external ties can be conceptualized as the bridging between board members and all other stakeholders ([Saatcioglu et al., 2011](#)). Data from 175 Pennsylvania districts between 2004–05 and 2006–07 school years show that these two sources of social capital are positively associated with financial and academic outcomes at the district level.

Bonding and bridge-building within a school board often require time. [Alsbury \(2008\)](#) found “student test score decline as board turnover increased, particularly in smaller districts and when delineating politically motivated board turnover.” Additionally, school boards have to overcome the challenge that many board members serve terms of two to four years, and turnover is unavoidable ([Korelich and Maxwell, 2015](#)).

NSBA [data](#) show that, on average, board members who responded to the 2018 survey served 8.6 years on their boards. In many cases, school board members end their service terms subjectively. According to a study conducted by School Board Partners, a nonprofit group that trains new school board members, in 2016, more than 70% of school board members planned to pursue another term on the board; in 2022, only 38% of current school board members planned to run for reelection ([Merod, 2022](#)).

Unfortunately, we did not find data about how many school board members resign each year. Anecdotal reports show that there seems to be an increase in the resignation of school board members, but it is unclear to what extent the early exit of board members affects student achievement. For instance,

- In Oregon, [Zaitz \(4/25/2023\)](#) reported that a school board was out of business after five of its seven members quit amid growing concern about a new ethics requirement. “Until the seats are filled, those school districts don’t have governing boards to consider budgets, approve contracts or consider hiring.”
- In Connecticut, [Ryser \(5/31/2023\)](#) reported that two school board members in a district have resigned amid a battle over two ‘sexually explicit’ books that a committee has recommended keeping on the library shelves. The school board chairperson said, “Their energy, tenaciousness, team spirit, and constructive contributions to our discussions will be sorely missed.”
- In Colorado, [Grimes \(3/13/2023\)](#) reported that three board members in a school district resigned, and only two members remained on the board. The superintendent stated, “It is always disappointing when adult issues impact a school district and keep it from focusing on the most important work — ensuring our students receive the best education possible.”

Another way to cut short a board member's term is through school board recalls. School board recalls are the process of removing a member or members of a school board from office through a petitioned election instead of during a regularly scheduled election. "Bad behavior, mismanagement of funds, conflicts with district administrators or teachers, refusing to listen to their constituents, and violating open meetings laws are some of the reasons listed on petitions seeking to recall school board members" ([Ballotpedia, 2023](#)). According to [Ballotpedia](#) (2023), on average, there were 34 recall efforts involving about 80 school board members each year between 2009 and 2022.

Time Spent on School Board Services

More than half of school board members (52%) reported that their entire school board meets twice per month, while 43% said the entire board meets only once a month, according to the [2018 NSBA study](#). It should be noted that board members often engage in other activities that add hours to their board service. "It's not atypical that a large-district school board member would work about 40 hours a month on board-related duties" ([Great Schools, 2022](#)).

- "Serving on a local school board requires lots of it. No longer is it reasonable to expect board service to take one night per month. Public education has become far too complex and community expectations far too great, for the leisurely pace of yesteryear to be the rule today. Today's board members say they can easily spend 30 or more hours per month on school issues: negotiating contracts, planning, work sessions, community meetings — not to mention personal phone calls and other contacts made." ([The Association of Alaska School Boards, n.d.](#))
- "Years ago, when the role of the board member was perceived more as a 'trustee' the current legal requirement of holding at least one regular board meeting per calendar month may have been realistic. Today, however, most boards hold more than one meeting per month with some holding weekly meetings. These may include Regular Board Meetings; Special or Emergency Board Meetings; Work Study Sessions - open meetings with staff (issues, reports, etc.); Public Input Meetings - no decisions, only public comment; Judicial Hearings - grievance/discipline matters; Planning Retreats, and so on. Individual board members will also be involved with Board Committees and certain advisory committees, spending hours on the phone with constituents, some of which will undoubtedly be employees and reading all the materials in preparation of meetings. Board members can easily spend 15 hours per week on Board-related business." ([The New Mexico School Board Candidate Manual, 2021](#))
- "Today's board members say they spend an average of 45 hours each month on board work. This estimate may increase each year because of the changing nature of our society and its schools." At the same time, a discouraging phenomenon has often been that "being a school board member may seem like a thankless job – struggling with complex problems for long hours and taking criticism when things don't go right." ([The Colorado Association of School Boards, 2022](#))



Compensation for School Board Members

According to the NSBA report, most board members (61%) in 2018 were volunteers who received no annual salary for their board service. This remained comparable to the 2010 survey data when 62.3% indicated no annual compensation. In addition, 73% of the 2018 respondents indicated they received no stipend for individual meetings, just slightly less than the 76.5% who responded to that same question in 2010.

In January 2021, we examined state policies regarding how the services of school board members are compensated. We found that among 50 states, approximately:

- Seventeen states (34%) do not pay school board members, although some of the states may pay travel expenses or training fees for board members.
- Thirteen states (26%) compensate school board members with limited amounts based on their participation in board activities, such as board meetings or traveling for training or conferences.
- Eleven states (22%) do not have any specific legislation for compensating school board members. In some of the states, school board members are not paid at all, while in other states, board members may be paid by certain decisions made by municipal or county governments.
- Only six states (12%) have state statutes that define annual salary or compensation for board members.
- Nevada and California compensate school board members based on their county or school district population.



Professional Development of School Board Members

As we mentioned above, most board members serve limited terms, which is the nature of a democratic system. Since turnover is unavoidable, training for newly elected board members becomes a necessity ([Korelich and Maxwell, 2015](#); Zion, 2008). [Data](#) from NSBA show that most school board members receive training after being elected. In 2018, 81% of the surveyed school board members reported that they had received training from their state school boards association, followed by 57% who had received training from their board or district and 47% from NSBA. Compared with 2010, more board members reported receiving training or participating in professional development. It is unclear whether such training is required or optional for school board members.

With respect to training content, most school board members (78%) reported that they had training about board roles, responsibilities, and operations; more than half (56%) said that they had training in funding and budget issues. In the same survey, school board members were asked what new or additional training they would like to receive. More than half (51%) said that they wanted more training on student achievement issues.

We examined the states that have laws in place to require school board members to participate in professional development after being elected (Table 2). In 22 states, there is clear statutory language addressing training requirements (e.g., the amount of training time and the topics of training content) for school board members. In several states, board members are required to attend training focusing on student achievement. For example,

- **New Jersey** — In 2007, the state’s School District Accountability Act was signed into law. “This multi-faceted legislation impacts school boards/charter school trustees in a variety of ways and one key area is board member/trustee training,” according to the New Jersey School Boards Association ([NJSBA](#)). One of the mandated training programs provided by NJSBA is focused on student achievement.
- **Texas** — School board members are required to participate in training on “Evaluating and Improving Student Outcomes” for three hours within the first 120 days in office and three hours every two years.
- **Louisiana** — If a school district is deemed “academically unacceptable or in need of academic assistance” by the state board, school board members must participate in training on student achievement and school improvement at least two hours annually ([Erwin, 2022](#)).



Figure 2. Number and Percentage of School Districts, by Board Size: 2022

State	Training Requirement	Source
Alabama	The Governance Act outlines specific training requirements for all city and county school board members in Alabama. Local school board members must take a school board member orientation that covers certain topics, and must earn 6 hours of training every year.	AASB
Arkansas	The state requires a local school district board member to obtain no less than 6 hours of training and instruction each calendar year. Members elected for an initial or non-continuous term are required to meet additional training opportunities during their tenure.	ECS
Florida	The state-required training for school board members is 4 hours of training on ethics that addresses Article II, Section 8 of the Florida Constitution, the Code of Ethics for Public Officers and Employees, and the Government-in-the-Sunshine provisions in Chapters 119 and 286 relating to public records laws and public meeting laws.	FSBA
Georgia	The state requires the state board of education in the department of education to craft and oversee local school board member training. In 2009, the state board of education convened a task force to, among other things, develop and recommend standards for local school boards and guidelines for member training. The task force established a new lexicon around central themes to reflect local education priorities and maintain student achievement. The themes identified in the state standards for local education boards include governance structure, strategic planning, board and community relations, policy development, board meetings, personnel, financial governance, and ethics. The state standards may include an expectation on knowledge, skill, or performance. If the state designates a high-risk school within the local board of education's purview, the members must complete additional training.	ECS
Illinois	The state requires that each voting member of a school board must complete 4 hours of professional development training within the first year of their first term. Topics of the training must include financial oversight and accountability, labor law, and fiduciary responsibilities of a school board member.	ECS IASB
Kentucky	The annual in-service training requirements for all school board members in office as of December 31, 2014, shall be (a) 12 hours for school board members with zero to 3 years of experience; (b) 8 hours for school board members with 4 to 7 years of experience; and (c) 4 hours for school board members with 8 or more years of experience. The Kentucky Board of Education shall identify the criteria for fulfilling this requirement. For all board members who begin their initial service on or after January 1, 2015, the annual in-service training requirements shall be 12 hours for school board members with zero to 8 years of experience, and 8 hours for school board members with more than 8 years of experience.	KY
Louisiana	The state requires each local public school board member to receive a minimum of 16 hours of training and instruction during the first year of service on the board to receive the "Distinguished School Board Member" designation. Each member must receive a minimum of 6 hours of training and instruction annually beyond the first-year requirements. The training topics currently include state school laws, governing the powers, duties, and responsibilities and educational trends, research, and policy. The Louisiana School Board Association provides the training programs.	ECS LA

State	Training Requirement	Source
Minnesota	A member shall receive training in school finance and management developed in consultation with the Minnesota School Boards Association and consistent with section 127A.19. The School Boards Association must make available to each newly elected school board member training in school finance and management consistent with section 127A.19 within 180 days of that member taking office. The program shall be developed in consultation with the department and appropriate representatives of higher education.	MN
Mississippi	The state law says that “Each school board member shall be required to file annually in the office of the school board a certificate of completion of a course of continuing education conducted by the Mississippi School Boards Association.”	ECS MSBA
Missouri	The state law, The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, requires that all new school board members have at least 16 hours of orientation and training within one year of their election or appointment.	MARE
Nevada	The state implemented training requirements in 2016. In the first and third year of a member’s term, they must complete a minimum of 6 hours of instruction in public records laws, open meeting laws, local government relations, the K-12 education system, ethics, violence and sexual violence prevention, financial management, fiduciary duties, and employment and contract laws.	ECS NASB
New Jersey	The state requires first-year school board members to complete a training program that includes instructional programs, personnel, fiscal management, operations, and governance. In subsequent years, board members must complete a school district governance training on school law and other information to enable the board member to serve more effectively. The New Jersey School Board Association is charged with providing school board member training, and outlines the training schedules based on 4 topic areas. One of the areas focuses on student achievement.	ECS NJSBA
New Mexico	According to state statute 22-5-12, school board members are required to attend 5 hours of training a year.	NMSBA
New York	Section 2102-a of the Education Law requires certain board members to obtain a minimum of 6 hours of training on the financial oversight, accountability, and fiduciary responsibilities of school district and BOCES (i.e., Board of Cooperative Education Services) board members. School district and BOCES board members who were appointed, elected, or re-elected for a term that begins on or after July 1, 2005, must obtain the training. School board training courses are required to address financial oversight, accountability, and fiduciary responsibilities of school board members.	NYSED
North Carolina	The state requires all local boards of education members to receive a minimum of 12 hours of training every 2 years. The training must include public school finance in addition to public school law and the duties and responsibilities of local boards of education.	ECS NCSBA

State	Training Requirement	Source
Oklahoma	The state requires all elected school board members to undergo training. The law indicates that training hours depend on the length of term served by the board member. Training requirements include one hour each of finance training, open records/meetings training, and ethics training. New members must complete 9 hours of continuing education (three for incumbent members). Instruction is provided by the Oklahoma School Boards Association or the Oklahoma Department of State.	ECS OSSBA
Pennsylvania	The state enacted an omnibus education bill in 2017 requiring the department of education to provide a training program for new school directors (board members). The training must consist of a minimum of 4 hours of training that addresses instruction and academic programs, personnel, fiscal management, operations, governance, ethics, and open meetings. Additional training requirements for reelected or reappointed school directors, as well as charter school trustees, are also included.	ECS PADOE
South Carolina	The state requires all elected or appointed members of a school district board of trustees to complete an orientation program covering the powers and duties of a board member within one year of taking office. The orientation, which must be approved by the state board of education, must include training on “policy development, personnel, superintendent and board relations, instructional programs, district finance, school law, ethics and community relations.”	ECS
Tennessee	The state law outlines the specific training course requirements for new and experienced board members and the timeline for approving new training courses annually. State Board policy 2.100 includes the list of approved training courses for local school board members to complete their annual training requirement.	TNBOE
Texas	Continuing education requirements for independent school board trustees are established in Texas Education Code, §11.159, Texas Administrative Code §61.1, and Texas Government Code, §§ 551.005, 552.012, and 2054.5191. There is a table that provides a summary of these requirements. For example, school board members are required to participate in training on “Evaluating and Improving Student Outcomes” for 3 hours within the first 120 days in their office and 3 hours every two years.	TEA TASB
Virginia	The state requires its state board of education and local boards of education to participate in professional development. The state board must participate in professional development on “personnel, curriculum and current issues in education.” For local boards of education, members must participate annually in professional development at the state, local, or national levels of governance, including “personnel policies and practices; the evaluation of personnel, curriculum, and instruction; use of data in planning and decision making; and current issues in education as part of their service on the local board.”	ECS

State	Training Requirement	Source
Washington	There are three types of training required by the Washington Legislature for school directors, but the Office of Native Education training is required for only 39 school boards. In July 2021, Senate Bill 5044 became law, requiring cultural competency, diversity, equity, and inclusion training for Washington state’s K-12 public school educators, district leaders, and school directors. Every school director must complete training on the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA), Public Records Act (PRA), and records retention within 90 days of taking the oath of office following appointment or election.	WSSDA

Source: [State-Information-Request_School-Board-Training-Requirements.pdf \(ecs.org\)](#); [Mandatory Board Member Training | IASB](#); [School Board Trustee Training | Texas Education Agency](#); [A How-To Guide to Required Training by Tier for Texas School Board Members \(tasb.org\)](#); [Board Member Training :Educational Management:NYSED](#); [Required Training - WSSDA; Governance \(pa.gov\)](#); [Oklahoma State School Boards Association \(ossba.org\)](#); [Accountability Act - New Jersey School Boards Association \(njsba.org\)](#); [statute.aspx \(ky.gov\)](#); [New School Board Members – Florida School Boards Association \(fsba.org\)](#); [Board Training – New Mexico School Boards Association \(nmsba.org\)](#); [OpenExhibitDocument \(state.nv.us\)](#); [Get on Board: Training \(alabamaschoolboards.org\)](#); [Sec. 123B.09 MN Statutes](#); [School Board Training Advisory Committee \(tn.gov\)](#); [Missouri Association of Rural Education - Board Training Information \(moare.com\)](#); [Louisiana Laws - Louisiana State Legislature](#); [MSBA - Mississippi School Boards Association > Board Members > Board Service \(msbaonline.org\)](#); [Board Member Training - North Carolina School Boards Association \(ncsba.org\)](#)

Simply put, data about school districts and school boards corroborate the description “ten thousand democracies” about the diversity of the U.S. school governing system. In general, school board members are elected officials who make decisions and policies based on their district’s unique conditions and the expectations of their communities.



Part I I

One Common Goal: Every Student's Success

“Improving student achievement became the mission for public education more than a decade ago, putting educators, including school boards, on notice” ([Lorentzen and McCaw, 2019](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic added more pressure to accomplishing this mission. Now, school leaders must tackle the weightiest policy question — “how to make up learning lost during the most prolonged and widespread instance of school closures in American history” ([Kogan, 2022](#)).

The Nation's Report Card, aka NAEP, provides a common measure of student achievement across the country. NAEP is, and for decades has been, “America's premier gauge of whether its children — all our children — are learning anything in school, whether they're learning any more today than years ago, and whether the learning gaps among groups of children are narrowing or widening” (Finn, 2022). A brief review of NAEP data should be a good start to initiate a conversation with all stakeholders about improving academic achievement for all students.

NAEP Basic vs. Proficient

[NAEP achievement levels](#) are performance standards that describe what students should know and be able to do. NAEP reports percentages of U.S. students performing at or above three achievement levels (NAEP Basic, NAEP Proficient, and NAEP Advanced). While the NAEP Proficient level is not intended to reflect grade-level performance expectations, the information helps parents, school leaders, and educators to better understand what fourth- and eighth-graders should know and be able to do in math, reading, and other subjects (e.g., history, civics, science).

To close the student achievement gap, school leaders should understand the [NAEP Basic and Proficient Levels](#) as achievement benchmarks. In general, students performing at the NAEP basic level have fundamental knowledge and skills about the subject (Table 3). By contrast, students performing at the NAEP proficient have acquired higher-order comprehension skills and developed adequate critical thinking, analytical, and problem-solving abilities. If educators and school leaders can strategically help most students to advance from the basic to the proficient level, the next Nation's Report Card will show a significant difference.



Table 3. Examples of What Students Can Do at NAEP Basic vs. Proficient Levels

	Students Performing at this Level Can Likely —	
	NAEP Basic	NAEP Proficient
Reading Grade 4 (When reading informational texts such as articles and excerpts from books, ...)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the relevant meaning of familiar words using context from a single section of the text. Locate a specific detail from the text and make simple inferences from one section of the text. Provide a description of a text feature or author’s craft using a general reference to the text. Provide an opinion using a general reference to the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the relevant meaning of words with multiple meanings. Use a specific detail from the text to make inferences or provide a description or an explanation about text features. Provide an opinion with relevant support from the text. Describe, explain, or draw conclusions about text structures (e.g., compare and contrast, cause and effect, sequence and order). Integrate ideas across a text to determine purpose and main idea.
Math Grade 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reason and determine measurements, including length, area, and volume, with descriptions, labeled diagrams, and units provided. Apply proportional reasoning to solve problems in context using scale factor, distance, unit conversion, and quantities. Apply simple scale factor value to find unknown lengths of triangles and rectangles without setting up a proportion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate an understanding of solving problems that relate to comparing measures of two or three dimensions of space. Determining possible dimensions given area and volume as well as selecting appropriate units of measure and applying scale factor to area. Reason abstractly using addition and subtraction in contextual situations. Solve problems involving capacity, area, and weight. Classify angle measurements using diagrams and protractors.

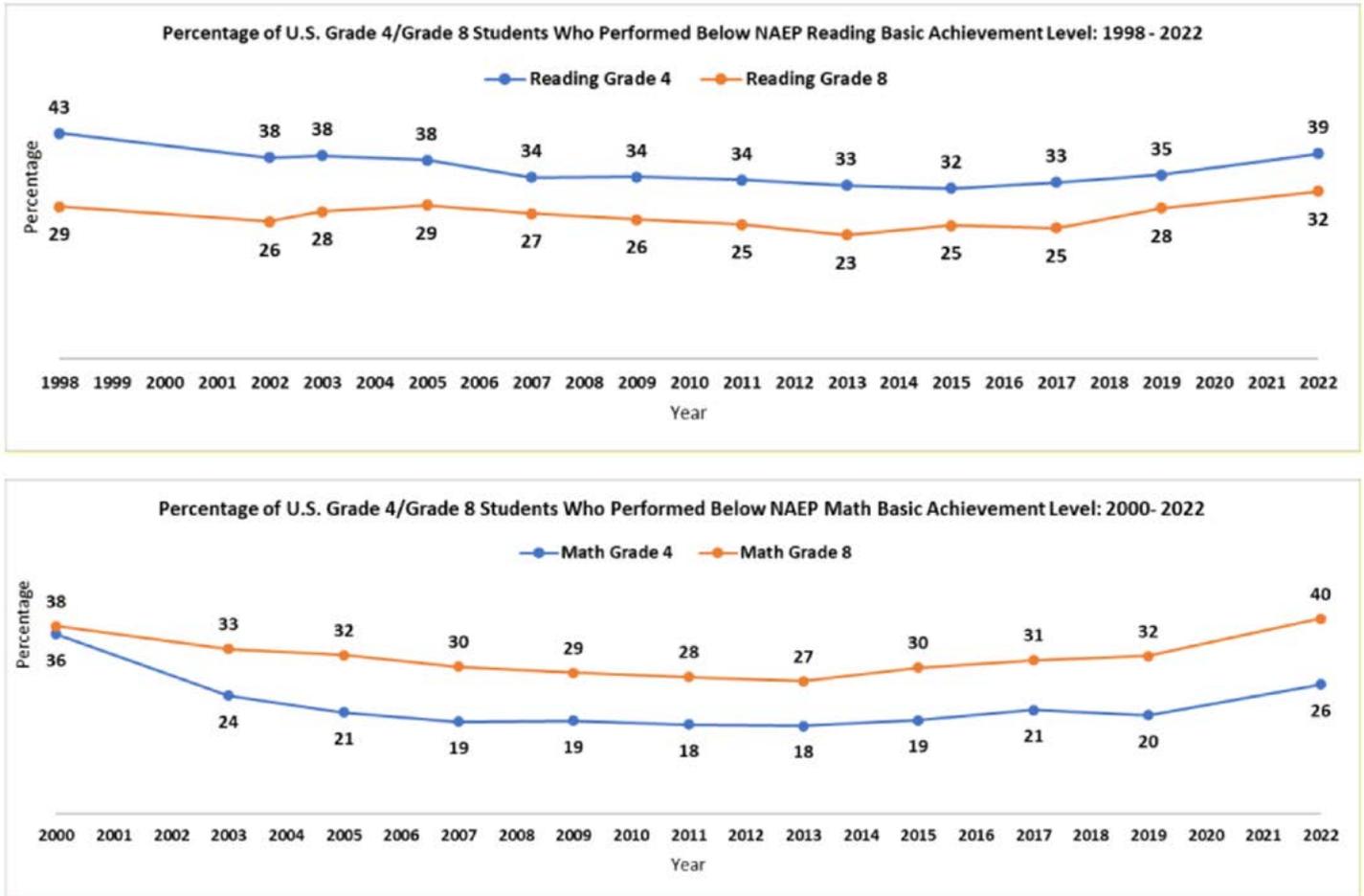
Source: [NAEP Nations Report Card - The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade \(ed.gov\)](#); [NAEP - NAEP Mathematics Achievement Levels by Grade \(ed.gov\)](#)

Reaching the Basic Achievement Level: Why It Matters

Students not reaching the basic achievement level should be a source of great concern. In 2022, 39% of American fourth-graders performed below the NAEP basic achievement level in reading. For eighth-grade math, 40% of students performed below the basic level (Figure 3).

- More than half of Black fourth-graders (57%), more than half of Hispanic fourth-graders (51%), and more than half of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) fourth-graders (57%) failed to reach the basic level in reading.
- Among fourth-graders who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NLSP), more than half (52%) could not reach the basic level in reading.
- Nearly 3 in 4 students with disabilities (71%) and about 2 in 3 English language learners (67%) performed below the basic level in fourth-grade reading.
- Compared with suburban students (34%), more rural students performed below the basic level in fourth-grade reading (36%). For eighth-grade reading, more rural students (31%) performed below the basic level than their peers in suburban schools (28%).

Figure 3. Public School Students Who Performed Below NAEP Basic Achievement Level in Reading and Math



Source: www.nationsreportcard.gov

Reaching the basic achievement level is the first step for students to become proficient in reading, math, and other subjects. Helping students reach the basic level should be an urgent goal for educators and school leaders to solve the national education crisis. The fact that most disadvantaged students cannot reach the basic level in reading and math is a serious equity issue. In Kansas, the district leaders of Dodge City Public Schools ([DCPS](#)) have made a clear case for promoting districtwide literacy programs. On the district website, they educate their constituents by listing the following facts:

Why is literacy important?

- Illiterate workers earn 30-42% less than those who are literate.
- 43% of adults living in poverty can barely read or can't read at all.
- A Harvard University study found that people with at least 12 years of education live a year-and-a-half longer than those with less education.
- Data from the U.S. Department of Justice show that 75% of state prison inmates have low literacy skills or did not graduate from high school.

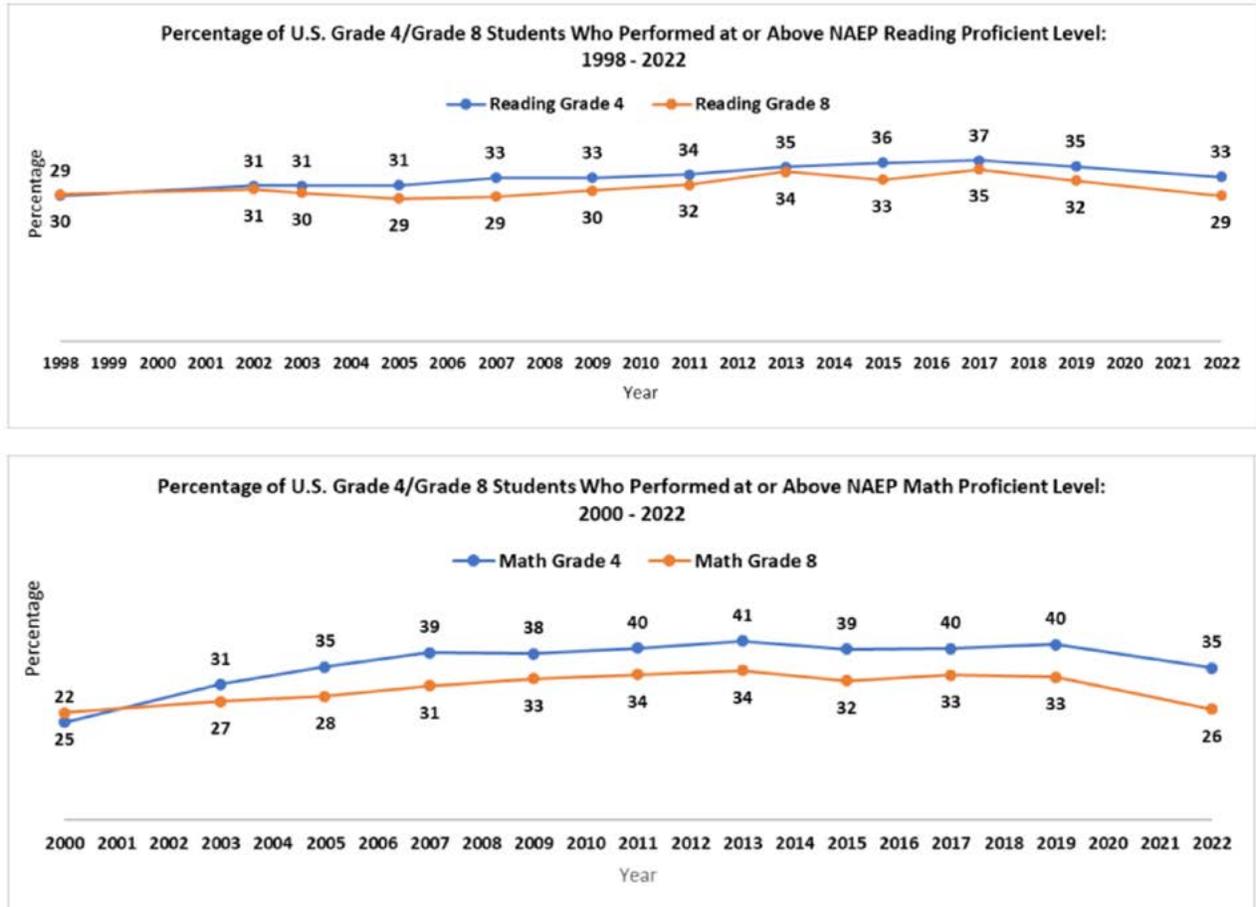
Helping All Students to Reach Proficiency in Reading and Math

“The Pandemic Erased Two Decades of Progress in Math and Reading,” The New York Times reported ([Mervosh, 2022](#)). “The pandemic has smacked American students back to the last century in math and reading achievement,” according to Education Week, which describes itself as America’s most trusted resource for K-12 education news and information ([Sparks, 2022](#)). It is true that student learning has been seriously disrupted by the pandemic, but student achievement data show another concerning trend over the past 20 years.

Nationwide, only around 30% of public school students have performed at or above the NAEP proficient level in reading and math for decades (Figure 4). Even in the “best” years (i.e., students performing the best, compared with other years), only 37% of fourth-graders and 35% of eighth-graders reached the proficient level in reading. As for math achievement, in the “best” years, only 41% of fourth-graders and 34% of eighth-graders performed at or above the proficient level.



Figure 4. Public School Students Who Performed at or Above NAEP Proficient Levels in Reading and Math



Source: [NDE Core Web \(nationsreportcard.gov\)](https://nationsreportcard.gov)

If we use 2017 as the year when students performed the best in reading and compare student performance between 2017 and 2022, we can see the discouraging situation that has lasted for half a decade (Table 4). Nationwide, 65% of fourth-graders could not reach the proficient level in reading in 2017, and in 2022, the percentage was 68%. If we look at disaggregated data, most students from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds could not reach the proficient level in fourth-grade reading. For example,

- Nine in 10 fourth-graders who were identified as English language learners performed below the proficient level in reading (91% in 2017; 90% in 2022).
- Nearly 9 in 10 fourth-graders who were identified as students with disabilities performed below the proficient level in reading (88% in 2017; 89% in 2022).
- More than 8 in 10 Black students in fourth grade could not reach the proficient level in reading.
- Approximately 8 in 10 Hispanic students in fourth grade performed below the proficient level in reading.
- About 8 in 10 fourth-graders from low-income families (i.e., students eligible for the National School Lunch Program) performed below the proficient level in reading.

Figure 4. Public School Students Who Performed at or Above NAEP Proficient Levels in Reading and Math

	2017	2022
English Language Learner (ELL)	91	90
Students with Disabilities	88	89
Black	81	84
American Indian/Alaska Native	79	82
Eligible for National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	78	81
Hispanic	78	80
National (All students)	65	68
Two or more races	60	63
White	54	59
Asian/Pacific Islander	44	45

Source: [NDE Core Web \(nationsreportcard.gov\)](https://nationsreportcard.gov)

Research suggests that being unable to read proficiently as early as fourth grade has serious consequences. Without foundational reading skills, students often lose interest and motivation in middle school, struggle to keep up academically, fail to master the knowledge and content needed to progress on time, and in the end, drop out of school ([The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010](#)). Many studies have examined and explored philosophical and pedagogical ways to help students become proficient readers. For example,

- **Parental Involvement** – Evidence shows that time engaged in reading is associated with reading achievement, and one way to increase the sheer amount of reading done by students is to encourage reading at home ([Crosby et al., 2015](#); [Morgan et al., 2009](#)). Researchers find that home involvement is a key ingredient in student reading success ([Fawcett, Padak, and Rasinski, 2013](#)).
- **Educator Professional Training** – A rich body of literature suggests that graphemes representing phonemes in alphabetic writing systems do not typically come naturally to children, and most children must be taught explicitly about phonetics to make further progress in reading. Researchers suggest that teachers should receive more professional training to teach students how to read. In an empirical study, [Correnti \(2007\)](#) found that teachers who received professional development in how to teach reading offered 10% more comprehension instruction than teachers without this training. In recent years, some states passed laws requiring “evidence-based and scientifically-based” reading instruction. In Colorado, for example, teachers are required to go through 45 hours of training to learn the science of how to teach literacy ([Eden, 2022](#)).
- **District Leadership** – “Student outcomes are strongly linked to adult mindsets, and teachers and leaders at high-performing schools tend to share a common set of high expectations for success” ([CAO Central, 2021](#); [de Boer et al., 2018](#)). [Delagardelle \(2008\)](#) conducted a two-year in-depth interview with school leaders and educators and found that “There was a significant difference in beliefs between school board members in high- and low-achieving districts: those in high-achieving districts often expressed a positive belief in students’ potential and in the district staffs’ ability to improve achievement, while those in low-achieving districts did not express this belief and more often blamed outside factors and the students themselves for low achievement” ([CSBA, 2017](#)).

In summary, without solid foundational reading and math skills, it is hard for students to go into any pathways to postsecondary success. Fostering an education environment in which all students can be proficient in reading and math during their K-12 education should be a mission for school leaders.

Increasing Graduation Rate and Raising the Graduation Bar

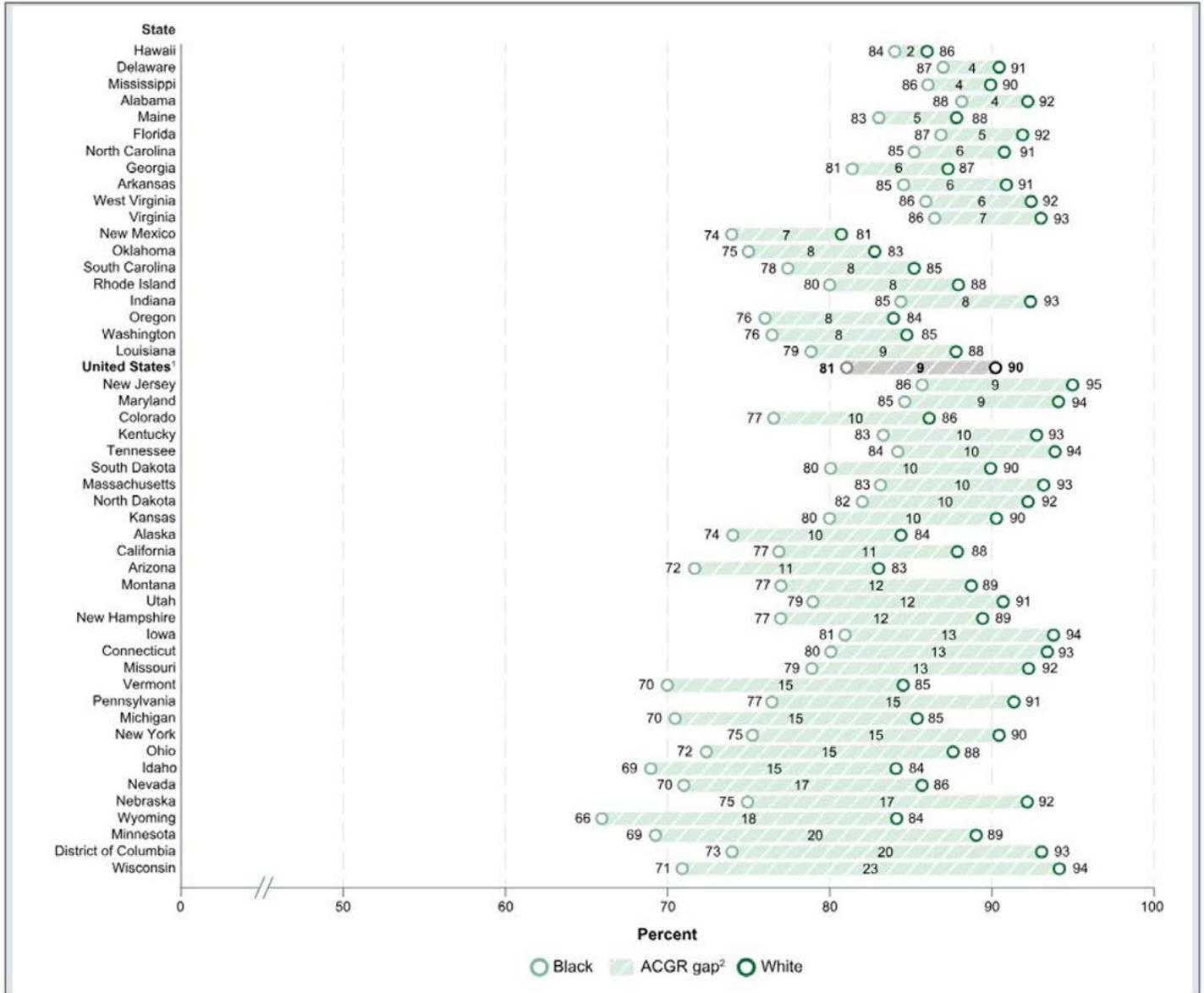
At the core of school board accountability is to see every student successfully graduate from high school ([Darling-Hammond et al., 2016](#); [ED, 2009](#)). For decades, school leaders and educators have made great efforts to help students to complete K-12 education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES, 2023](#)), the overall dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds decreased from 8.3% in 2010 to 5.2% in 2021. During this time, the dropout rate declined substantially among Hispanic (from 16.7% to 7.8%), American Indian/Alaska Native (from 15.4% to 10.2%), and Black students (from 10.3% to 5.9%).

Despite the progress, increasing graduation rates, particularly of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is still a priority for all school leaders. According to NCES ([2023](#)), in the 2019–2020 school year, the graduation rates for students with disabilities (71%), English learner students (71%), and economically disadvantaged students (81%) were below the U.S. average graduation rate (87%).

- As shown in Figure 5 and based on the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), in 2019–20, the U.S. average graduation rate for Black public high school students (81%) was 9 percentage points lower than that of White students (90%) and 11 percentage points lower than that of Asian/Pacific Islander students (93%).
- Black students had lower graduation rates than White and Asian/Pacific Islander students in every state and the District of Columbia. Wisconsin reported the largest gap between the graduation rates for Black and White students (23 percentage points).
- Figure 6 shows that in 2019–20, the U.S. graduation rate (based on the ACGR) for Hispanic public high school students (83%) was about 8 percentage points lower than that of White students (90%) and 10 percentage points lower than that of Asian/Pacific Islander students (93%).



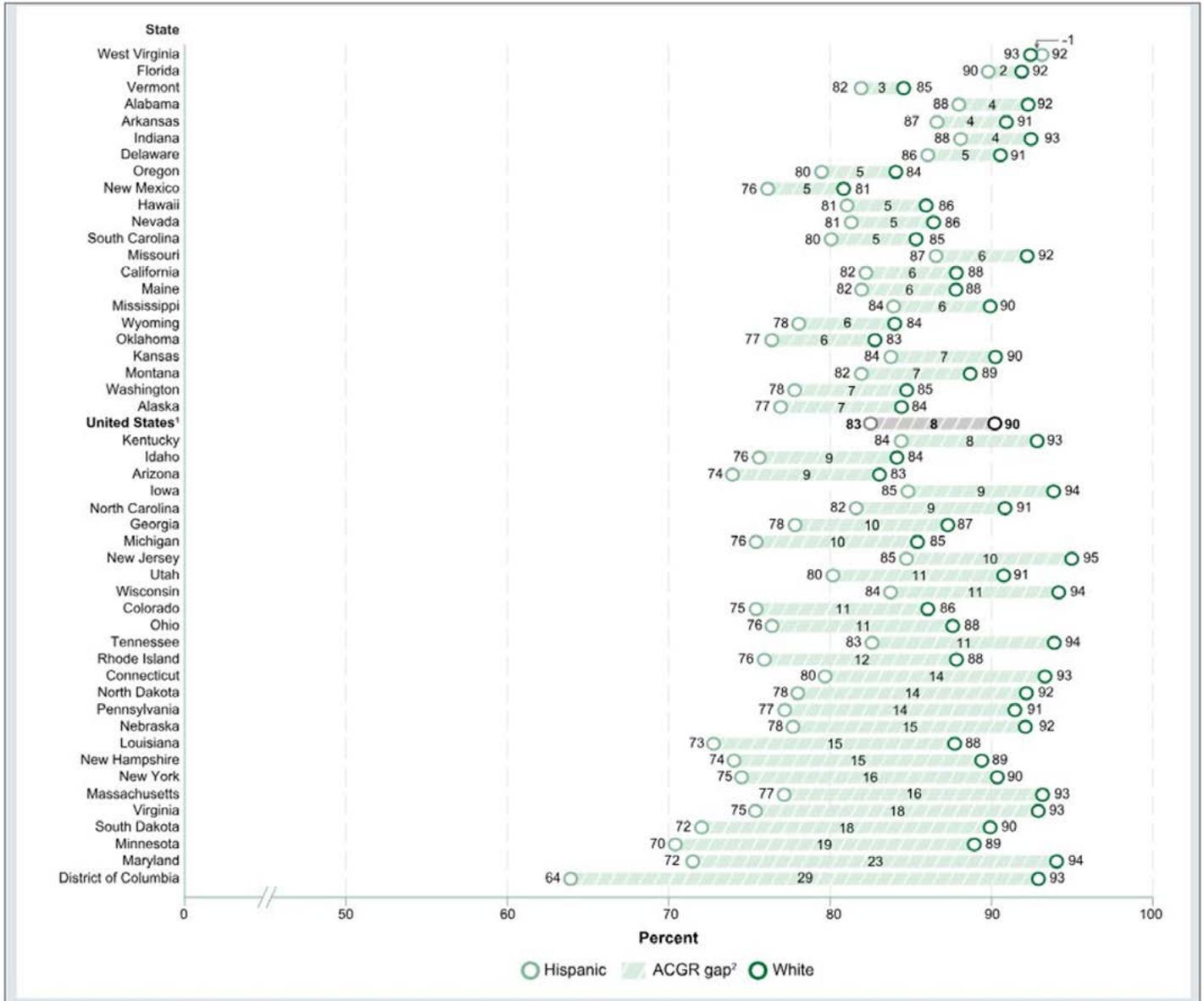
Figure 4. Public School Students Who Performed at or Above NAEP Proficient Levels in Reading and Math



Note: The Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) refers to the percentage of U.S. public high school students who graduate on time. To calculate the ACGR, state education agencies first identify the “cohort” of first-time 9th-graders in a particular school year. The cohort is then adjusted by adding any students who immigrate from another country or transfer into the cohort after 9th grade and subtracting any students who subsequently transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die. The ACGR is the percentage of students in this adjusted cohort who graduate within 4 years of starting 9th grade with a regular high school diploma or, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, a state-defined alternate high school diploma.

Source: COE - Public High School Graduation Rates (ed.gov)

Figure 6. Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for White and Hispanic Public High School Students, by State: 2019–2020.



Source: *COE - Public High School Graduation Rates (ed.gov)*

Beyond increasing graduation rates, raising the graduation bar has also become an urgent call. For instance, while rural students, on average, have higher graduation rates compared with their peers in urban schools, rural student college enrollment has been low ([NCES, 2022](#)). In rural areas, more adults (age 25 and above) only had a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment (34%) in 2019, compared with their city (23%) and suburban peers (25%). At the same time, compared with adults in cities (37%) and suburban areas (37%), only 25% of rural adults had a college degree (i.e., a bachelor's or higher degree).

Evidence shows that parents, particularly low-income parents, have concerns about the future of their children after high school. In a statewide poll of Texas parents ([EdTrust, 2023](#)), 65% worry about whether their child is prepared for life after high school; this is especially true for the parents of Spanish-speaking students (86%) and students from low-income backgrounds (70%). In brief, raising the graduation bar means ensuring that all students graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in college and the workforce ([ED, 2012](#)).



Policy/Practice Discussion Box 1: Pathways to Postsecondary Success

Career, College, and Service: Three Pathways to Postsecondary Success

Being proficient in literacy and numeracy is a critical part of all pathways to postsecondary success ([Fazekas and Warren, n.d.](#)). Many school board members believe that the objective of K-12 education is to prepare students for college, career, and citizenship. From the perspective of school district leadership, pathways to success often mean:

- Preparing students for college both academically and psychologically.
- Providing career-gearred programs for students who may want to start a job immediately after high school.
- Taking advantage of scholarships and other opportunities provided by the military or other civil service sectors, and then going into public service after graduation.

With the above-mentioned pathways in mind, school boards may ask questions about how their district policies can help every student in a focused way. Schools should support all students in setting their own achievement goals. One vision of a district may be for all students to know what they need to learn; for educators to teach students the steps to get there and motivate every student to do the work; and for all students to accomplish what they need to have a chance to succeed. In practice, school leaders may start by thinking about what a student profile looks like and what a graduate would say in terms of “When I graduate, this is what I can do for my life.”

There are many education, training, and work-based pathways to decent jobs. Researchers have different ways of categorizing pathways to postsecondary success. For instance, in May 2023, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) released a new [report](#) titled “What Works: Ten Education, Training, and Work-Based Pathway Changes That Lead to Good Jobs.” In the report, CEW researchers identified three different combinations of pathway changes:

- Expanding access to bachelor’s degree programs and increasing bachelor’s degree completion.
- Expanding access to middle-skills programs and also increasing completion of either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree.
- Moving young adults on the high school pathway from a low-paying occupation to a STEM or other high-paying profession while ensuring continuous employment from ages 20 to 22.

Simply put, every student should have a strategic learning plan; all students should feel capable and prepared when they graduate.

Part III

School Board Accountability, Effectiveness, and Evaluation

Accountability means “the fact of being responsible for your decisions or actions and expected to explain them when you are asked” ([Oxford Learner’s Dictionary](#)) or “the fact of being responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it, or the degree to which this happens” ([Cambridge Dictionary](#)). Accountability, especially, refers to “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions” ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)). In brief, accountability means responsibility, frequently used in the context that elected officials are entrusted with public duties.

School Board Accountability and Democracy

Governing schools has become far more difficult and complicated since the pandemic, and many school boards have become “mired in partisan political controversies that have little to do with their core function: educating students” ([Harvard Kennedy School of Government, 2023](#)). Because of many challenging situations that school boards are facing today, society at large, including scholars and researchers, has raised the question — “[Should school boards run schools?](#)”

In a democratic system, perhaps it is more meaningful to ask how responsive U.S. school boards are to the preferences of voters than to ask whether school boards should govern. Theoretically, the accountability of school boards is intricately intertwined with the fact that boards are primarily elected officials, and voters are supposed to know what they are looking for and what they expect regarding the effectiveness of boards. However, research in this field is limited, and no conclusive answer has been provided.

- Earlier studies found that the 2000 elections revealed considerable evidence that voters evaluate school board members on the basis of student learning trends, but during the 2002 and 2004 school board elections, “when media (and by extension public) attention to testing and accountability systems drifted, measures of achievement did not influence incumbents’ electoral fortunes” ([Berry and Howell, 2007](#)).
- [Ren \(2022\)](#) examined how responsive school boards were to the preferences of their voters in Virginia. One hypothesis the researcher tested in the study is that “If a school district has at least one incumbent board member up for reelection in 2020, it will be less likely to adopt a remote learning policy during the Fall 2020 school semester.” While the findings are complicated and narrowed to certain specific issues, the study provides preliminary evidence that “the increased attention American voters are investing in local school boards is not in vain.”

Another issue surrounding board accountability and democracy is representation. A few recent, empirical studies provide different perspectives on whether elected officials of school boards represent their district’s parents and community and how representation may influence student learning and achievement. Some studies focus on interest groups, while others emphasize the connection between racial/ethnic minority representation and student achievement. The following are some examples:

- [Hartney \(2022\)](#) found that union-endorsed school board candidates have done exceptionally well — won roughly 70% of all competitive races — in elections held across all three states (i.e., California, Florida, and New York). The criticism is that school board elections nowadays have become increasingly political, more focused on interest groups than on students, and such elections can lead to ineffective governance of school boards and hence affect student learning. An example the researcher provided is that during the pandemic, “students who attended school in districts where their teachers’ unions are very active in electioneering were the least likely to receive significant in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year.”
- [Shi and Singleton \(2021\)](#) analyzed data of California school board elections between 1996-2015 and found that there is no statistically significant relationship between an educator being elected to serve on the school board and student achievement. While the study has limitations, the researchers suggest that electing an educator to the school board has an insignificant effect on increasing student scores in reading and math or increasing high school graduation rates.
- Research in political science suggests that school districts with large Hispanic, Black, or other racial/ethnic minority student populations benefit school board elections, as more minority board members can be elected to represent the community, empower and engage the parents they represent, and increase the performance of disadvantaged students ([Morel, 2021](#); [Morel and Nuamah, 2019](#); [Morel et al., 2016](#)). [Kogan et al. \(2020\)](#) found that greater representation of racial and ethnic minorities on school boards has a positive effect on the achievement of non-White students; specifically, “increases in minority representation could lead to cumulative achievement gains of approximately 0.1 standard deviations among minority students by the sixth post-election year.”

What Research Says About School Board Accountability and Student Achievement

Research suggests that with more federal and state laws being passed to regulate K-12 education, school board members seem to have less authority to make decisions, yet are increasingly held accountable for student performance ([Alsbury, 2008](#)). Theoretically, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities, school boards can provide accountability and monitor performance, thus creating the conditions for improving student achievement ([Hess, 2008](#)). While there is a shortage of empirical studies on school board accountability and student achievement, evidence shows that district leaderships do have an impact on student achievement ([Leithwood et al., 2019](#); [Plough, 2014](#)).

- Researchers ([Waters and Marzano, 2006](#)) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies and found a positive relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement. In districts with higher levels of student achievement, local school boards always ensure that student achievement goals are the primary focus of the district’s efforts and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals.
- In 2022, [Sutherland](#) published a research study titled “Tell them local control is important”: A case study of democratic, community-centered school boards. The researcher focused on small rural school districts in Vermont and conducted a qualitative multiple case study of local school boards. The findings of this study explained how small, locally controlled school boards can employ elements of democratic governance and how community-based school board governance can influence students’ schooling and enhance student learning.
- In a dissertation study ([Holmen, 2016](#)), the researcher investigated 23 school districts and interviewed and surveyed school board members in Washington State. “The findings of this research study confirm and extend the empirical evidence that has been presented over the last 20 years linking school board characteristics and improved student achievement results” (Holmen, 2016).

States’ Requirements for School Accountability

State governments use accountability systems to “measure student and school performance, identify schools in need of support, and prompt action to raise student achievement” ([The Education Trust, 2023](#)). Different states may focus on different measures or standards in their accountability systems. In general, school accountability systems attempt to help parents, communities, and policymakers measure school quality to make decisions and target resources to support student achievement.

For example:

- [Colorado's education accountability system](#) “is based on the belief that every student should receive an excellent education and graduate ready to succeed.”
- [Maryland's accountability system](#) measures school and school district performance and provides the information to educators, parents, and the public for improving student achievement.
- In [Massachusetts](#), the state's accountability system aims to provide clear, actionable information to families, community members, and the public about district and school performance.
- [Michigan's school accountability systems](#) use statewide student assessment scores and other quality metrics to provide transparency on school performance for all Michigan public schools.
- In [New Mexico](#), the state government defines accountability in education as “the responsibility of students learning to teachers, school administrators, and students and incorporates a number of factors such as test results and graduation rates, as measurements.”
- [Virginia's accountability system](#) supports teaching and learning by setting rigorous academic standards and thorough annual statewide assessments of student achievement.
- [Texas](#) emphasizes its annual academic accountability ratings to its public school districts, which examine student achievement, school progress, and whether districts and campuses are closing achievement gaps among various student groups. The ratings are based on performance on state standardized tests; graduation rates; and college, career, and military readiness outcomes.

How Districts Describe School Board Accountability

“Student achievement is the primary agenda for school boards” ([WSSDA, n.d.](#)). The Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) has issued guiding principles about the role of school boards in improving student achievement. As policymakers, school boards play a significant part in “ensuring that students learn what they need to know to be prepared as productive citizens and that they are able to demonstrate that knowledge on state and local measures of achievement” (WSSDA, n.d.).

The Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA), as another example, believes that it is the work of school boards to ensure a systemwide culture in which excellent teaching and successful learning can take place. According to OSBA, school boards should commit to a continuous improvement plan regarding student achievement throughout the district. “Accountability is based on the expectation that all students can and will excel, meaning we expect minority students, students who live in poverty, students with disabilities and other student groups to learn and perform the same as their peers” ([OSBA, 2023](#)).



Most school districts incorporate their accountability in their vision and/or mission statements. Many school districts explicitly state that the most important responsibility of school boards is improving student achievement. The following are some examples:

- [Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland](#), implements an [Equity Accountability Model](#). The model “moves beyond the typical state and federal aggregate reporting to performance reporting for specific focus groups of students who have not experienced the same level of access, opportunity or success as other students.”
- [Claremore Public Schools, Oklahoma](#) – The district’s mission is “to increase student learning and achievement.” The district’s vision is that “ALL students will have the options to provide evidence of their learning in numerous ways while gaining necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve their dreams and become successful members of the community in which they live.”
- [Hamilton Unified School District, California](#) — One of the ways in which school boards serve the community is by prioritizing student achievement and ensuring accountability for student and district performance.
- According to the [Darlington Community School District, Wisconsin](#), “Accountability means measuring and judging how well the district is putting the vision into practice and making progress on key goals; Accountability starts with (1) the adoption of goals and academic and other standards, and (2) the assignment of responsibility and authority.”

In summary, as NSBA (2018) points out in “[The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook](#)” accountability is one of the five action areas (i.e., vision, accountability, policy, community leadership, and relationships) in the key work framework of school boards, and “High academic standards, transparency, and accountability undergird a world-class education.”



Policy/Practice Discussion Box 2: Has School Board Governance Been “Hijacked?”

Is There a Push for a “Uniform” Accountability System?

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), each state educational agency (SEA) and local educational agency (LEA) that receives Title I Part A funds must prepare and disseminate an annual report card that includes a variety of data about public schools. The data cover a wide range of measures on student and school performance, accountability, per-pupil expenditures, and educator qualifications, as well as any other information that the SEA or LEA deems relevant ([Cai, 2019](#)). In a sense, federal and state-mandated or promoted measures on student report cards look like a push for a “uniform” accountability system.

To what extent do federal and state accountability systems impact school boards?

An earlier study reported that more than three-fourths (78%) of school boards agree — with 34% agreeing strongly — that federal and state accountability systems have created much pressure to the effect that boards need to “celebrate hard work and initiative” on the part of teachers and administrators ([Hess, 2010](#)). Some researchers suggested that performance information disseminated via school “report cards” directly shapes voter perceptions about the quality of local schools (e.g., [Chingos et al., 2012](#), [Jacobsen et al., 2013](#)).

It should be noted that research results regarding the influence of federal and state accountability systems on school board election and operation are inconclusive. For example,

- According to an early study ([Jacobsen et al., 2013](#)), under the law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal and state governments attempted to implement two accountability strategies simultaneously — raising standards and public pressure through publicizing performance data. Using data from New York City, the researchers found that parent satisfaction declined when school performance grades dropped after the implementation of higher standards. The authors were concerned that the public or voters might misunderstand the drop in achievement that occurs when the bar is raised and become dissatisfied with school performance. They pointed out that “Because public support for sustained and successful reforms is key, understanding how accountability policies may erode support is critical.”
- According to researchers from Ohio State University ([Kogan et al., 2015](#)), school districts in Ohio often need to put school tax referenda on the ballot more frequently than in other states. The researchers estimated the impact of federal performance measures on local school tax referenda in Ohio from 2003 to 2012 and found that a signal of poor district performance increases the probability of failure of school tax levies. They concluded that a widely publicized federal indicator of local school district performance may not necessarily lead voters to draw valid inferences about the quality of local educational institutions. The end result may be that school districts may lose voter support for school tax levies, which are often substantial financial sources for schools of impoverished communities. They “call this burgeoning phenomenon ‘performance federalism’ and argue that it can distort democratic accountability in lower-level elections.”
- In another Ohio study, researchers ([Kogan et al., 2015](#)) focused on local school board elections held from 2003 to 2012 across a sample of 611 Ohio school districts. They examined whether the federal and state accountability systems might influence local school board elections and lead to improvements in educational quality. Their data analysis revealed little evidence that publicized measures of school and district performance had an impact on the likelihood of turnover on school boards, the electoral success of sitting school board members, or turnover among district administrators.

Who Approves K-12 Curricula in Public Schools?

The State Department of Education of [Rhode Island](#) defines curriculum as “a standards-based sequence of planned experiences where students practice and achieve proficiency in content and applied learning skills.” Curriculum is the central guide for all educators as to what is essential for teaching and learning, so that every student has access to rigorous academic experiences. According to the [Ballotpedia research](#) (2022):

- In 34 states, state laws task local districts with approving K-12 curricula.
- In 12 states, school boards, sometimes in conjunction with state entities, approve K-12 curricula.
- In Rhode Island, Texas, North Carolina, and Alaska, state entities, like the state board of education or the commissioner of education, approve K-12 curricula.

School boards govern by the adoption of policies that have the force of law; the adoption of some specific policies by boards is often required by legislative mandates and state or federal administrative rules and regulations ([California School Boards Association](#), [Illinois Association of School Boards](#), [Maine School Boards Association](#), [Pennsylvania School Boards Association](#), and [Washington State School Directors' Association, 1998](#)). In recent years, the expansion of federal intrusion on public education has impacted local policymaking in many ways ([NSBA, n.d.](#)). However, establishing a curriculum is primarily a state and local responsibility.

School Board Effective Governance: A Key to High Achievement for All Students

“The lack of a unified consensus on what school boards actually do presents both a practical and theoretical problem when attempting to research the institution” (Ford, 2013). School boards may be judged effective by measures other than student achievement, such as their ability to balance budgets, comply with legislation, and respond to local concerns. However, research suggests that student achievement should be the predominant measure of interest (Land, 2002).

Empirical Research on Characteristics of Effective School Boards and Student Achievement

Effective means “successful or achieving the results that you want” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). High achievement for all students is one of the most important successful results that school boards want through their effective governance. According to Lorentzen (2013), “Whatever their decisions, boards must be able to justify their actions to the community as effectual in promoting the smooth functioning of the district in all ways conducive to optimal student achievement.”

The following empirical studies reported data on the relationship between some characteristics of effective school boards and student achievement:

- Lorentzen (2013) conducted a non-experimental quantitative study that examined the relationship between school board governance behavior (i.e., boardsmanship) and student achievement scores. The researcher found that student achievement significantly correlated with school boards that could (a) provide responsible school district governance, (b) set and communicate high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations, (c) create the conditions districtwide for student and staff success, (d) hold the school district accountable for meeting student learning expectations, and (e) engage the community.
- Ford (2013) surveyed school board members from six states, where school board members often make significant time and effort commitments to serve in a position that does not provide them with economic support. The researcher found that (a) school boards collaborating with superintendents and holding them accountable has a positive relationship with student graduation rates, (b) board planning and vision are linked to enhanced student learning outcomes, and (c) statistically, the absence of board development or the lack of board members' professional training can predict low reading scores of students in the district. In brief, while the education environment faced by school boards in Utah, Florida, Nevada, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are vastly different, the common characteristics of effective school boards include minimizing conflict, focusing on vision and continuous improvement through policy-setting and strategic planning, and good superintendent-board relations.
- Holumen (2016) conducted an observational study of 23 school districts in Washington State and collected data on the 10 individual board characteristics[®] identified in the Balanced Governance[®] approach (Alsbury and Gore, 2015). The researcher analyzed the data using statistical modeling, found that school boards' decision-making style and exercise of influence had the largest impact on student achievement, and recommended that school boards focus on their decision-making processes and advocacy strategies. It should be noted that as many variables affect student achievement levels (e.g., poverty, language abilities, mobility), this study does not establish a causal link between school boards and student achievement. As empirical research, the study supports conclusions from previous research that school districts with effective school boards are likely to increase student achievement.
- Samuel Osahene Osei Yaw Bonsu, Jr. (2020) conducted a quantitative study with a sample size of 65 school districts and 520 school board trustees in Texas. The researcher ran a multiple regression analysis on school board trustees measuring board governance through the WSSDA five standards: (a) responsible school district governance, (b) communication of and commitment to high expectations for student learning, (c) creating conditions districtwide for student and staff success, (d) holding the district accountable for student learning, and (e) engagement of the community in education. The dependent variable in the study was the districts' A-F Accountability Rating scores in the Texas accountability system. The results of the study suggested that the higher the scores a school board receives when evaluated for its governance, as measured by the WSSDA five standards, the higher the district performs in terms of student academic achievement.

What Parents Want Regarding Student Achievement

The Pew Research Center reported that “One-in-five parents of K-12 students say their children’s school doesn’t spend enough time on core academic subjects like reading, math, science and social studies” ([Horowitz, 2022](#)). At the same time, according to a recent [survey](#) by the National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA®) and other research organizations (2023), nearly half of parents (43%) worry about their children being behind academically for their grade level. Among Hispanic parents, about 3 in 5 (59%) are concerned that their children academically cannot reach their grade level.

Prior to the pandemic, 41% of parents whose children attended public schools were not “very satisfied” with the academic standards of their children’s schools ([NCES, 2020](#)). Data show that most parents see school safety and student well-being as paramount factors when selecting schools for their children. Nonetheless, many parents consider the quality of educators, curriculum, and student performance as “very important” factors when selecting their children’s schools (Table 5). Among K-12 students whose parents considered other schools for their children:

- Nearly 4 in 5 (79%) intended to change their children’s schools because of the quality of teachers, principals, and other school staff.
- Nearly 3 in 5 (59%) reported that they wanted their children to attend another school because of curriculum focus or unique academic programs (e.g., language immersion, STEM focus).
- More than half (53%) said that they wanted their children to attend another school because of the academic performance of students (such as test scores, dropout rates, and so on).

Table 5 shows some interesting trends regarding what important factors parents from different backgrounds use to select schools for their children. Further research is needed to explore why parents use these factors to make the decision. For example,

- Parents of private school students (86%) are more likely to rate the quality of educators as a “very important” factor when selecting schools for their children compared with parents of public school students (78%). According to one study on private schools, the top reasons for parents to decide to switch schools for their children are (1) the child’s happiness and well-being and (2) insufficient attention to individual student needs ([Henebery, 2022](#)).
- Nearly 40 million public school students attend district-assigned schools; only 6 million public school students go to a school that they can choose. Compared with parents of students who attend district-assigned schools, parents of students who attend public schools of their choice are more likely to rate the quality of educators (82% vs. 77%), quality curriculum (65% vs. 58%), and student academic achievement (55% vs. 53%) as “very important” factors when selecting schools for their children.
- Parents of students in small schools — under 300 students (79%) and 300 to 599 students (81%) — are more likely to rate the quality of educators as a “very important” factor when selecting schools for their children, compared with parents of students in large schools. By contrast, parents of students in large schools — 600 to 999 students (55%) and 1,000 or more students (54%) — are more likely to rate student academic performance as a “very important” factor when selecting schools for their children, compared with parents of students in small schools.

- Compared with rural parents, urban parents — city (60%), suburban (67%), and town (61%) — are more likely to switch their children's schools because of advanced programs (e.g., language immerse programs, programs focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or STEM). Additionally, urban parents are more likely than rural parents to rate student academic performance as a “very important” factor when selecting schools for their children. Overall, suburban parents seem more “demanding” of their children's schools in terms of the quality of educators, advanced curriculum, and student academic performance.
- Compared with parents of other racial/ethnic groups, parents of Black students are more likely to rate the quality of educators (84%), student academic achievement (70%), and quality curriculum (69%) as “very important” factors when selecting schools for their children. Researchers find that Black parents tend to have high expectations of their children in public schools ([Howard, 2015](#); [Rall and Holman, 2021](#)). According to [Watkins \(2019\)](#), “Parents’ promotion of children’s academic resilience is especially crucial for Black children, who are three times more likely than White children to live in poverty.”

In brief, regardless of where students go to school and what family backgrounds students come from, all parents want their children to attend schools that have high-quality educators, advanced curriculum, and good student academic performance.



Table 5. Among K-12 Students Whose Parents Considered Other Schools for Their Children, Percentage of Students Whose Parents Rated as “Very Important” Factors Used to Select Child’s School, by Selected School, Student, and Family Characteristics: 2018–19

Characteristic	Quality of Educators	High-Quality Curriculum	Student Academic Performance
School Type			
Public	78%	59%	53%
Public School, Assigned	77%	58%	53%
Public School, Chosen	82%	65%	55%
Private	86%	61%	51%
School Size			
Under 300 Students	79%	58%	47%
300 – 599 Students	81%	61%	52%
600 – 999 Students	78%	57%	55%
1,000 or More Students	76%	60%	54%
Locale of Student’s Household			
City	77%	60%	50%
Suburban	81%	61%	58%
Town	78%	57%	49%
Rural	75%	54%	45%
Student Race/Ethnicity			
White*	77%	53%	44%
Black*	84%	69%	70%
Hispanic	77%	64%	54%
Asian/Pacific Islander*	79%	60%	65%
Highest Education Level of Parents/Guardians			
Less Than High School	71%	60%	55%
High School Graduate or Equivalent	76%	62%	57%
Vocational/Technical or Some College	77%	62%	55%
Bachelor’s Degree	79%	57%	49%
Graduate or Professional School	84%	57%	52%
English Spoken at Home by Parents/Guardians			
Both/Only Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Speak(s) English	80%	60%	53%
One of Two Parents/Guardians Speak English	67%	54%	55%
No Parent/Guardian Speaks English	66%	52%	53%
Poverty Status			
Below Poverty Threshold	74%	60%	57%
At or Above Poverty Threshold	79%	59%	52%

Note: *Non-Hispanic. Source: [Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2019](#)

How School Boards Address Effective Governance and Student Achievement

In 2019, the Canadian School Boards Association published a study titled “Elected School Boards and High-Quality Public Education” ([Overgaard, 2019](#)). As in the U.S., school boards in Canada are among the institutions that have been an important part of the democratic system. Yet, school boards in Canada have come under criticism and even are experiencing moves to be eliminated or replaced with alternative structures. Eliminating or changing the structure of the democratically elected school boards will not address the concerns, according to the study author.

In fact, the concerns that should be addressed are effective governance and student achievement. School boards offer their communities the opportunity to engage directly with their representatives and to participate in setting a vision for education; communities can advocate for their educational values, promote equity, and hold their representatives directly accountable for student achievement ([Overgaard, 2019](#)). Philosophically and practically, effective governance is a mechanism for creating a safe and healthy learning environment in which every student can succeed.

In the U.S., many state school boards associations emphasize the relationship between effective governance and student achievement. They believe that through effective local governance, every student can receive quality education and achieve high academic goals. Many state associations embed this belief in their board member training programs. States often address effective governance and student achievement in diverse ways. For example,

- Association of Alaska School Boards ([AASB](#)) — Every three years, the AASB Board of Directors lays out a path for the fulfillment of its mission and vision. The Board named its plan “Pathways.” According to [Pathways — The Long-Range Plan 2022-2025](#), the mission of AASB is “To advocate for children and youth by assisting school boards in providing quality public education, focused on student achievement, through effective local governance.”
- Colorado Association of School Boards ([CASB](#)) — CASB cites the Iowa Lighthouse research for the [highly effective standards](#) of its school boards. School boards should provide effective leadership for quality instruction and high, equitable student learning. To reach this goal, school boards should have Clear Expectations (i.e., Set and communicate high expectations for student learning with clear goals and a focus on strengthening instruction), Conditions for Success (i.e., Support conditions for success through board actions and decisions), Accountability (i.e., Hold the system accountable to reach student learning goals), Collective Commitment (i.e., Build the collective commitment of community and staff to achieve the student learning goals), and Team Learning (i.e., Learn together as a whole team to inform decision-making around the student learning goals).
- Maryland Association of Boards of Education ([MABE](#)) — The mission statement of [MABE](#) is to “Provide members with a strong collective voice and support local school board governance through professional development, advocacy and member services.” The goal of [MABE’s professional development](#) is “to promote student achievement and effective local governance of schools by ensuring that all school board members understand the NSBA Key Work Model for effective school board leadership.”
- Michigan Association of School Boards ([MASB](#)) — [MASB](#) emphasizes that “Ethics are essential to the successful operation of the educational system,” and believes that “high ethical standards translate into a focus on student achievement, culture and conduct at board meetings and consistent accountability.”
- Washington State School Directors’ Association ([WSSDA](#)) — In 2019, WSSDA published a research-based leadership [guidebook](#) titled “Serving on Your Local School Board: A foundation for success.” The guidebook provides a roadmap for each school board to govern effectively and for every board member to become an effective school leader. WSSDA also published [Data Dashboards for School Directors](#), which shows school boards how they can distill and interpret essential information about student academic performance and use data to target policies and resources that improve student learning effectively.

Policy/Practice Discussion Box 3: Examples of School Districts Practicing Effective Governance

Shared Governance in the Salt Lake City School District, Utah

In Utah, school boards can have the exclusive right to determine the goals and direction of the district, but this is not the case for the Salt Lake City School District ([SLCSD](#)). The SLCSD Board of Education recognizes that a school district is a complex organization and believes that everyone's ideas are important. In 1974, the board agreed to delegate the right to local sites to make some decisions using the Shared Governance process.

Shared Governance is based on the philosophy that education is a responsibility of all employees and the community, and that when people work together to make decisions, many advantages accrue. Under Shared Governance, district personnel and, at the school level, members of the community join to make decisions that affect the welfare of students and education. While Shared Governance allows for a broad range of decisions, all decisions must fit within the law, Board of Education policies, budgets, and professional ethics requirements.

In the model of shared governance, school boards adopt basic principles such as decision-making through delegation, dialogue, and communication with a mind of openness, trust, and equity. Accountability means that after a decision is made, all stakeholders are expected to support that decision and to help make its implementation successful. It should be noted that the practice of Shared Governance should allow certain degrees of flexibility, depending on what decisions and policies will be made.

SLCSD [Mission Statement](#): "Salt Lake City School District cultivates a love of learning in a diverse and inclusive school community, committed to educational excellence and integrity. In collaboration with families and community, we hold high expectations for all students, respond effectively to individual needs, and provide a safe, healthy environment in which every student can learn the academic, problem-solving, and social skills required for success in college, career, and life."

Policy Governance in School Districts in Colorado and Vermont

Policy Governance is a [model](#) of governance designed to empower school boards to fulfill their obligation of accountability and fiduciary responsibility for the district they govern. Policy Governance allows the board to focus on larger issues, clearly delegate authority, and direct the superintendent without interfering, while continuously evaluating what is being accomplished. A key principle of Policy Governance is governing the school district by focusing on results or clearly defined "ends" — what graduates should know, understand, and be able to do. To achieve the "ends" goals, the board

communicates to the superintendent what the board expects to be accomplished and leaves the methods for accomplishing those goals up to the superintendent and all staff.

In Colorado, the Adams County School District 14 ([Adams 14](#)) has adopted the Policy Governance model. The school district describes itself as “Located just 15 minutes from the heart of downtown Denver, Adams 14 has all the conveniences of a metropolitan school district with a small-town feel.” Adams 14 has 13 schools and serves 6,000 students. Most [students](#) of Adams 14 are Hispanic (87%). More than three-quarters (77%) participate in the free or reduced lunch program. Nearly half the students (45%) are English language learners, with 15 languages spoken at home. After adopting the Policy Governance model, district leaders accomplished two objectives, namely, strengthening connections with the community and focusing on policies that result in increased student achievement.

In Vermont, the Burlington School District ([BSD](#)) serves 3,263 students, including 20% with Independent Education Plans (IEPs), 14% English language learners (ELs), 53% who are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs, and 39% non-White. The [Board of School Commissioners](#) adopted the Policy Governance model in 2017 to focus the district on significantly improving student achievement outcomes and closing achievement gaps, while creating strong connections between the Board and the Burlington community.

With the transition to Policy Governance, the Board established several kinds of policies that have been amended over time, including substantial changes in 2018 and 2019. According to the BSD Board, the shift to Policy Governance has four noticeable immediate impacts:

- “The number of Board committees is sharply reduced, because the whole Board takes responsibility for monitoring the district’s work towards the specified ends.
- The number of community forums will increase, as the Board seeks to engage the community in topics that are pertinent to strategic planning and development. The community plays an important role in advising the board about its values and expectations.
- Board meetings will shift to focus on reviewing more detailed monitoring reports, revealing how the district is working toward ends. In addition, some of the monitoring reports will address how the Board itself evaluates its own work.
- Monitoring reports provide the board with data; the board then decides whether the district’s actions are in compliance with a reasonable interpretation of the policy. Evaluating monitoring reports keeps the Board’s focus on whether the district is achieving the specified ends. If a monitoring report does not convince the Board that the district is in compliance with a given policy, then the board will direct the superintendent to revise and resubmit the report. Regular monitoring allows the Board to decide whether policies need revision and whether the general trends in the district are moving towards the ends.”

In summary, an increasing number of school boards have adopted the Policy Governance model across the country. Regardless of which governance model a school board adopts, an essential piece of a school board’s work is continuously evaluating the work of the superintendent in relation to the broad outcomes it has specified and continuously engaging the community.

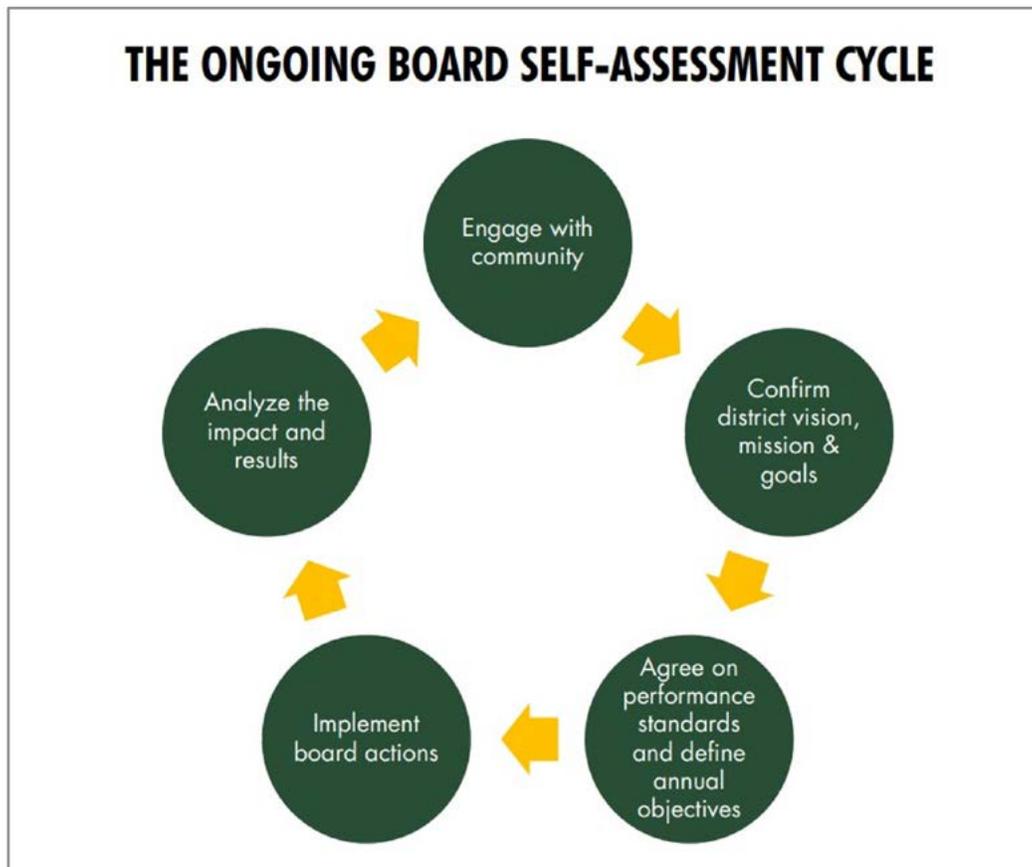
School Board Evaluation: Measuring Effectiveness to Improve Governance

The evaluation of school board performance is essential to demonstrating accountability and generating public trust. However, school board effectiveness is a complex concept and a complicated practice. Researchers suggest that “Isolating what makes an effective board—that is, one that impacts student achievement—involves evaluating virtually all functions of a board, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators, and the public” (Dervarics and O’Brien, 2011; [NSBA, 2019](#)).

Why School Boards Need Self-Evaluation

“Evaluation is first of all a control mechanism that allows the school board to make judgments about performance based on a set of predetermined and well understood objectives” ([Mike, 1991](#)). Another function of school board self-evaluation is to improve the performance of others within the school district by improving the performance of the board itself. Research suggests that good self-evaluation is part of a cycle that begins with goals setting, and then proceeds to implementing the goals, to judging the results of that implementation, and concludes with a new set of board goals (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The Ongoing Board Self-Assessment Cycle (New York State Education Department, 2015)



Source: [Microsoft Word - School Board Evaluation_FINAL.docx \(nyssba.org\)](#)

Many state school boards associations post articles/reports on their websites to answer the question why school boards need self-assessment or self-evaluation. Their descriptions often highlight and emphasize the connection between self-evaluation and the improvement of board effectiveness and student achievement. The following are some examples:

- Alaska Association of School Boards ([AASB, n.d.](#)) — “The School Board Self-Assessment ... should be viewed as an opportunity to improve how the board works — not just a critique of its operations. The purpose is to identify expectations and strategies that will help the board and superintendent enhance the performance of the district and improve student outcomes.”
- Arizona School Boards Association ([ASBA, 2020](#)) — “Student achievement, however that is defined by your district, is at the heart of why school boards exist. In Arizona, local communities get to decide what the path to success will look like via their locally elected school boards. While there is no one-size-fits-all strategy to ensure student achievement, the research is clear: school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts. Annual self-evaluation allows you as a board to assess how well you are exhibiting the characteristics of an effective board and where there may be opportunities for improvement.”
- Florida School Boards Association ([FSBA, 2016](#)) — “While not universally applied, board self-assessment is both a best practice and first step. A recent study showed boards that conducted a self-assessment within the past three years reported higher performing boards, better board orientation, and greater board cooperation, all of which impact student achievement in a positive way. Structured self-reflection provides a unique and essential opportunity for board members to ‘judge’ their collective performance, understand the extent of their individual responsibilities and take action to improve performance.”
- Kansas Association of School Boards ([KASB, 2023](#)) — “Without a clear vision and district goals, policies can and will dramatically change based on the shifting beliefs and values of individual board members that come and go. Remember, the policies are the school district’s laws, so continuity is essential, so students, staff, parents, and patrons know the expectations. Consistently reviewing the district vision and goals to ensure alignment to the current realities within the district will lead to policy adjustments. School boards going through annual board self-assessment, goals and progress updates, and school board work sessions focused on improvement and barriers to success, are systematic ways to ensure alignment.”
- New York State School Boards Association ([NYSSBA, 2015](#)) — “Effective boards engage in a continuing process of self-assessment and use the results to identify opportunities for improvement. More importantly, the NYSSBA believes it is the responsibility of the board to help drive school improvement and student achievement. The board’s willingness to engage in self-assessment acts as a model for the rest of the district. It indicates that board members take their responsibilities seriously. Their interest in self-improvement sets the tone for others in the district to engage in an ongoing review of their own performance.”

What Evaluation Tools School Districts Are Using

Currently, school districts often use a wide variety of evaluation tools developed or delivered by state school boards associations. Some are frameworks or recommended structured-questionnaires; others are some online ready-to-go self-assessment tools. The following are some examples:

- In New York, the [state’s evaluation model](#) offers a three-part guide for evaluating the school board: Part I is based on standards and professional practices derived from school board best practices and a review of sample board evaluations. Part II is based on the specific board development priorities of the board itself. Collectively, the board should define three to five objectives that focus on the board’s own development for the year. In Part II, an assessment will be made regarding the successful completion of these annual objectives. Part III is the final performance summary sheet. It provides a final rating of the board’s performance standards, annual objectives, cumulative comments, and recommendations for improvement in the following year.
- In North Dakota, the state school board association ([NDSBA, n.d.](#)) recommends a free online school board [self-evaluation instrument](#). The evaluation tool is based on board competency in six dimensions — contextual, educational, interpersonal, analytical, political, and strategic. Under each dimension, there are specific descriptions of successful board practices. For instance, under the contextual dimension, the board should keep informed about what students are learning through reports on scholastic achievement, vocational programs, and the impact of extracurricular activities.

- The Oregon School Boards Association ([OSBA, 2023](#)) offers an online self-assessment survey. The survey consists of [12 standards](#) for effective boardsmanship based on the ongoing research of Tom Alsbury on Balanced Governance. The 12 standards include Vision Directed Planning, Community Engagement, Effective Leadership, Accountability, Cultural Responsiveness, Culture and Climate, Learning Organization, Systems Thinking, Innovation and Creativity, Budgeting and Financial Accountability, Using Data for Continuous Improvement and Accountability, Board Member Conduct, Ethics, and Relationships with the Superintendent.
- In Washington, the state school boards association offers an easy-to-use free online Board Self-Assessment survey tool ([WSSDA, 2023](#)). The research-based and scientifically validated survey is based on the Washington School Board Standards and helps school boards assess and strengthen their performance in governing for improved student learning.
- In Wisconsin, the state school boards association offers two board assessment tools ([WASB, 2023](#)). The Annual Board Development Tool, an online survey created by School Perceptions and the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB), aims to help each local school board to become a more effective governing board. The other assessment tool — the School Board Meeting Self-Evaluation Tool — also online, is designed to ensure that school board meetings are running as effectively as possible

A Lack of Recent Research on School Board Evaluation and Effectiveness

There is a severe shortage of literature on school board evaluation as a tool used to improve school board governance and ultimately enhance student achievement. Empirically, the establishment of causal links between effective boards and strong organizational performance “is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is the valid measurement of effective board and organizational performance” ([Gill et al., 2005](#)). Researchers often use proxy, rather than direct, measures to evaluate the effective governance of school boards or other non-profit organizations.

Earlier research on school board evaluation focused on the need for school boards to identify the strength and weakness of their governance on a regular basis and the standards or criteria that should be created to develop board self-assessment. While those studies seem out of date, many scholarly views are still valid today. For example,

- [Sutton \(1985\)](#) conducted a field study in Champaign and Ford Counties, Illinois, and found that many local boards did not define or implement a formal self-evaluation process. The author believes that a successful self-assessment program can help school boards identify their strengths and weaknesses, and then facilitate the board to develop and implement some effective action plans, particularly to improve the weaknesses identified by the evaluation tool. “It is through a commitment to effectiveness generated by strong leadership, rather than external pressure, that should establish a high standard of effectiveness for the local board of education” (Sutton, 1985).
- [Martin \(1996\)](#) surveyed school districts in Virginia, and found that most school boards in the state, more than 2 out of 3, did not practice school board evaluation. At the same time, school boards that reportedly assessed their own performance did not use many of the components of self-evaluation recommended as “best practices.” The author recommended that school boards design or select evaluation instruments that should be based on research-identified best practices, reflect local performance criteria, have a process focused on the board as a body instead of individual board members, provide a section allowing open discussion, and be able to conduct a regularly scheduled annual meeting with a predetermined facilitator and site for the event.

In recent years, a small number of studies attempted to examine to what extent school board self-evaluation improve board effectiveness. In one study, researchers ([French et al., 2008](#)) surveyed 815 school board members in Tennessee and found that most school board members perceive themselves as an effective governing body. Since the data only represent the surveyed local school districts in Tennessee, the authors remind readers to exercise caution when interpreting the result. They also recommend that future studies incorporate all school districts in the south to see whether other states are witnessing the same levels of effectiveness as Tennessee.

Additionally, we found little research to tell us clearly how the results of school board self-evaluation can be transferred to practice. In one study, researchers broadly examined the Governance Self-Assessment Checklist (GSAC), an instrument designed to assist boards in assessing their own performance ([Gill et al., 2005](#)). Based on data from 281 board members and 31 executive directors from 32 nonprofit organizations and 27 independent observers, the authors found and suggested that:

- The size of the organization's board, budget, or staff was not correlated significantly with the effectiveness of the board or that of the organization.
- Board members rated board development practices (recruitment and orientation of board members, team building, and board self-assessment) most consistently as requiring substantial improvement.
- The GSAC's Quick Check instrument may provide a feasible way of taking the board's governance pulse quickly. This may be especially useful for small-budget voluntary organizations that feel that they do not have the resources for an in-depth examination of their governance practices.



Policy/Practice Discussion Box 4: Post-Evaluation Actions of School Boards

Missing Accountability Benchmarks: What Can School Boards Do?

School board evaluation is like our regular checkups or doctors' diagnosis tests. The main purpose of board governance evaluation is to detect issues and improve. The results of a board evaluation should be actionable data, namely, information that provides enough insight for future decision-making and gives school boards clear directions to take actions to govern better.

OSBA Self-Evaluation: An Example from Well-Designed Evaluation Tools to Actionable Data

High-quality self-evaluation questionnaires should be developed under research-based domains or constructs. The self-evaluation tool from the Oregon School Boards Association ([OSBA, 2017](#)) is designed to provide both a clear objective system for board evaluation and flexibility. The tool includes two main parts, each of which provides adequate feedback on what needs to be done in the future.

- Part 1 of the evaluation follows a set of performance standards focused on the roles, responsibilities, and work of the board.
- Part 2 focuses on the board's performance in supporting the achievement of district goals.
- For boards that would like to survey the community regarding their performance, the questions in Part 1 and Part 2 of the board self-evaluation tool can be put to administrators, staff, and community members.

In Part 1, there are 12 board performance standards (e.g., policy and governance; community relations; accountability and student performance monitoring). Each standard has a series of indicators (e.g., The board's priority and focus are on curriculum, student achievement and student success; The board uses data to identify discrepancies between current and desired outcomes; The board has a process to review policies for cultural, racial and ethnic bias.). There are five levels of performance that board members can use to grade each standard:

0 UNACCEPTABLE — No indicators for this standard have been attempted and/or completed. The board needs intense focus on this standard.

1 NEEDS IMPROVEMENT — Few indicators for this standard have been attempted, but none/very few have been completed. The board needs heavy focus on this standard.

2 GOOD — At least half of the indicators for this standard have been attempted, and several have been completed. The board needs moderate focus on this standard.

3 EXCELLENT — Most of the indicators for this standard have been completed. The board needs to maintain performance on this standard.

4 OUTSTANDING — All of the indicators for this standard have been completed. This is an area of model performance for the board.

With actionable data generated from the OSBA evaluation tool, school boards can take steps to improve. For example,

1. **Contemplation.** Allow for reflection by board members on their individual and collective behavior and performance. Study the evaluation results to better understand how and why decisions are reached. Identify strengths and weaknesses of individual board members' performance and the board as a whole.
2. **Communication.** Foster open communication within the board and with all stakeholders. Resolve differences of opinion and challenge assumptions. Create opportunities for new board members to understand board processes. Enhance a common understanding of the philosophies and goals of the district.
3. **Action.** Use the evaluation data as a starting point for effective goal-setting and long-range planning.

AASB's Evaluation: Strengthening the Board and Superintendent Relationship

The annual board self-evaluation and the superintendent performance evaluation are two crucial evaluation tools. Both should be used to improve school district governance. A good relationship between boards and superintendents is crucial for student achievement, as "they must work together to maintain open and constructive communication about their roles and responsibilities create a leadership team that has a much greater opportunity of positively affecting student and school outcomes" ([Garrison, n.d.](#)).

The Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB) emphasizes the annual board self-evaluation as equally important as the superintendent performance evaluation. To have a constructive, meaningful experience, the following tips are recommended by Lon Garrison, AASB School Improvement Coordinator, when implementing a school board self-evaluation:

- It should be a facilitated process through an independent facilitator that allows every member equal participation.
- The Superintendent must be included.
- Student members should be included in this process as they have a unique and essential voice.
- The evaluation tool should be oriented around standards, such as the Alaska Association of School Boards, Board Standards, or the NSBA Key Work of School Boards.
- The prompts within each standard should push members to look for evidence supporting their ranking of board performance. Rankings must be supported with comments in order to have productive conversations.
- The evaluation tool should require an assessment of the board's work on the strategic plan and annual board priorities.
- The board should link its ability to work effectively as a governance unit to student achievement and student success within the district.
- The board should assess whether it has made progress in its own self-improvement goals during the past year.
- The board and superintendent use this as an opportunity to hold themselves publicly accountable for the work they have to do.

As Garrison says, "Effectual governance and school system management is a team effort and requires constant and regular assessment of both the board and its chief executive." To have an effective governance system and improve student achievement, the board and superintendent must develop a culture that prioritizes their team efforts and emphasizes using data from their regular evaluations to align their vision, mission, and strategic goals.

Conclusions – Governance Matters

Nationwide, 2 in 3 fourth-graders cannot reach the proficient level in reading. If we look at disaggregated data, approximately 80% of students from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds cannot reach the proficient level in fourth-grade reading. Sadly, about half of disadvantaged students cannot even reach the basic level in reading and math.

As an afterthought, school boards are often blamed for the low achievement of our students and the quality of the education provided to our children. Can school boards play a meaningful and valuable role in the improvement of student achievement? Evidence shows that high-performing school districts are more likely to be governed by an effective school board.

Although researchers constantly remind readers that their studies cannot lead to any causal-effect link between school board effectiveness and student achievement, governance matters. A key characteristic of effective school boards is that the board is composed of members with strong beliefs in and commitment to improving student learning ([Brochu, 2016](#)). To improve governance, school boards should consistently use evaluation tools to assess their own performance, adjust their practices, and align their goals with their districts' visions and missions.

Different school districts may explain student achievement differently. Ten thousand school boards may define accountabilities in ten thousand different ways. Yet, helping every student to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills and become a citizen who can freely pursue the American dream should be a common goal for all school boards in the United States.

“School districts are natural laboratories of governance, with more than 10,000 opportunities for would-be reformers to build a better democratic system” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005).



Technical Notes

In this report, we used multiple data sources to conduct a comprehensive and thorough research review. Most of the data are selected from the recently published tables prepared by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), reports published by federal agencies, as well as some academic research papers. We provide links to data sources for readers who are interested in the methodology of our data collection and estimation.

While data used in this study are from credible sources, our research has limitations. When comparing populations that have a large difference in size, reporting percentages or counts only can lead to ambiguous and even misleading interpretations. Therefore, if necessary, we report both the count of students and the percentage of students by group.

We use data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's Report Card, to compare student performance in different states, regions, and geographic locations. As Finn (2022) explains, NAEP is, and for decades has been, "America's premier gauge of whether its children — all our children — are learning anything in school, whether they're learning any more today than years ago, and whether the learning gaps among groups of children are narrowing or widening." That said, NAEP should not be used as the basis for measuring the performance of a student, school, or school district for the purpose of creating rewards or imposing sanctions.

Lastly, while we use different algorithms when searching qualitative data and cite various examples in our study, it does not necessarily mean that we endorse the product, researcher, or organization cited. The views of cited research do not necessarily represent our views. Our purpose in this study is to provide a wide range of data and information for readers to examine and consider. We encourage our readers to exercise their own sound judgment when assessing and using the information we provide in this study.



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About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a non-profit organization representing state associations of school boards and the Board of Education of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Through its member state associations that represent locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

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