

Growing Evidence of the Value of School Board Training

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The last three decades of board research has embarked on various aspects of school boards (Alsbury, 2008b; Delagardelle, 2008; Resnick & Bryant, 2010; Strauss, 2018) including characteristics of effective boards (Alsbury & Gore, 2015; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2016), importance of targeted school board trainings (Cook, 2014; Gann, 2015; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Plough, 2014; Pollard, 2012; Reimer, 2015; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2014; Wilkins, 2015), boards and student achievement (Blasko, 2016; Brenner, Sullivan, & Dalton, 2002; Ikejiaku, 2000; Lorentzen, 2013; Peterson, 2000; Saatcioglu & Sargut, 2014; Shelton, 2010), board behaviors (Bradley, 2013; Choi, 2013; Gates, 2013; Gomez, 2013; Murray, 2013; Nava, 2013; Richter, 2013; Turley, 2013), and board professional development and grades (Gates, 2013; Lee & Eadens, 2014; Roberts & Sampson, 2011; Turley, 2013). Eadens, Schwanenberger, Clement, and Eadens (2015) found a positive relationship between participation in Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) trainings and state rankings of school district performance/grades. The current study furthers that previous research three years later. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between district (n=203) performance scores/grades and number of trainings governance team members attended during the 2017-18 school year. Essentially, higher attendance at ASBA trainings again was correlated with higher grades (Performance Ranked [4.0 to 0.0 / A to F]). Once again, the districts that had lower training attendance tended to have statistically significantly lower grades, $r_s = .168, p = .017$. Given this repeated relationship between training participation rates and performance scores/grade rankings, it is evident that Arizona districts' which desire to improve student academic achievement should commit to ensuring regular participation in trainings. While some

districts may argue against devoting the financial resources to pay for conference registration fees, lodging, and travel, in even the smallest of districts, this expense would represent a fraction of a percent of the district's operating budget. Given the payoff of higher student achievement potential, it appears that the benefits would far outweigh the minimal cost in time and funding. Recommendations included school boards schedule annual planning meetings, calendar of trainings available, engage members in committing to meaningful participation in school board trainings, establishing a practice of assigning a mentor to each new board member to accompany to their first training events. Future research recommendations included developing a deeper understanding of the differences in board training and actions in districts that are making achievement gains versus those that are not. Such research could provide rich insights into the complex and vast dynamics of the superintendent-board governance relationship and the outcomes of participation in trainings.

Keywords: *Governance, School Board, District Grades, Leadership, Education.*

Ford and Ihrke (2016) operationalized U.S. school board best practices, *The Key Works of School Boards*, originated by the National School Boards Association, and found more support for the ideas that “school board governance behaviors are linked to district-level academic outcomes” (p. 87) and “school board governance does affect district performance” (p. 93). This growing body of evidence continues to offer measurable value to school board member training. The current study is a continuation of research previously completed by Eadens, Schwanenberger, Clement, and Eadens (2015). That study also found a significant positive relationship between participation in Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) training opportunities and state rankings of school district performance. In short, school districts in Arizona that sent board members to ASBA sponsored training sessions in 2014 received higher effectiveness ratings, *grades*, as determined by the Arizona Department of Education. This current study updates prior research and provides current data that further substantiates findings from the original 2015 study.

Background, Literature, and Theory

Ansell and Torfing (2016) professed in their *Handbook on theories of governance*, that “there is no single *theory* of governance, but rather many overlapping theoretical discussions and debates” (p. 2). They well defined governance and discussed “the governance debate in Western liberal democracies” and claimed “governance theory is also a particularly interdisciplinary endeavor—with roots in political science, public administration, sociology, economics and law and with branches that extent into many applied fields” (p. 2). Their ideas of theories of governance seem to indicate that a new paradigm has arisen in governance and has reoriented practitioners (Ansell & Torfing, 2016). The myriad of governance theories, philosophies, concepts, and approaches today are diverse, but we can all agree that there is much more work needed to better prepare board members to be highly effective at school governance. While theories help us to try to conceptualize, reality may be different in each case depending on political and social structures of each district.

In fact, many of the efforts to reform U.S. public schools over the last three decades have focused on issues related to governance of schools. Some reflected an effort to push authority down to individual schools through site-based management (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), and some reflected a desire to *eliminate the middleman* (Finn, 1991) and *undermine the public’s ability to govern its schools* (Strauss, 2018). Lashway (2002) studies schools and also “suggest that board actions are a key part of a *culture of improvement*” (p. 3). At that same time, Land (2002) asserted that “some critics of current educational governance have charged that school boards are anachronistic and/or chronically ineffective and have advocated for their demise” (p. 245). While there can be little doubt that state and federal governments today heavily influence the direction of public education, local school boards continue to play a significant role in linking schools to local communities. Resnick and Bryant (2010) argued that “the responsibility for drawing community and business leaders, parents, civic groups, and the public into the schools falls squarely on the shoulders of the local school board” (p. 14). In fact, some characteristics of districts influences student achievement (Leithwood & Azah, 2017).

While many opinions based on experience and observation have been offered regarding the characteristics of effective school boards, there has been insufficient consistent empirical research on school board effectiveness as it relates to student achievement. Board’s very distance from the classroom calls into question the influence that they might have over teaching and

learning. It is important to recognize, however, that “While by their nature school boards are removed from the day-to-day work of teaching and learning, they control the conditions allowing successful teaching and learning to occur throughout the system” (Delagardelle, 2008, p. 192). Politically-motivated actions of board members impacting turnover of key leaders has been established as a factor in student achievement (Alsbury, 2008b).

Although the lists of characteristics of effective boards can vary, the qualities articulated by Dervarics and O’Brien (2016), citing Delagardelle (2008), capture the overarching responsibilities:

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
2. Effective boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and about the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective school boards are data savvy: They embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals (pp. 10–12).

These characteristics may set unreasonably high expectations for board members who may have little or no training to perform these tasks. In an extensive review of school board meetings, Lee and Eadens (2014) found that boards in low-performing districts were prone to exhibit practices including disorderliness, spending less time on issues related to student achievement, not listening respectfully, and being focused on personal agendas rather than the policies of the district. It is reasonable to conclude that shortcomings such as these may be diminished through training and support for board members and through the influence of school board presidents and school superintendents. This furthers the importance and benefits of targeted school board trainings (Gann, 2015; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Plough, 2014; Reimer, 2015; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2014; Wilkins, 2015). Brenner and colleagues concluded correctly when they stated that, “Board members cannot monitor what they do not understand” (Brenner et al., 2002, p. iv).

Walser’s (2009) descriptions of sixteen school boards across the U.S. identified as high-functioning help to illustrate the characteristics that distinguish boards that are perceived as effective. Walser noted,

On the most basic level, members have to keep up with continually changing state and federal mandates and laws... They also need to keep up with promising initiatives to raise student achievement in and outside their district as well as continually evolving systems for monitoring data and engaging the community in school improvement. New board members especially need training in their roles and responsibilities and in laws pertaining to ethics and conflicts of interest (p. 73).

According to the National School Boards Association (Cook, 2014; Pollard, 2012), at least twenty U.S. states require some type of training for individuals elected to school boards. Like most states, Arizona imposes no training requirements for school board members, and mandates

minimal requirements for those who wish to serve on a school board. In order to serve on a school district governing board, board members must only be a resident for at least one year immediately prior to election, and be registered to vote. Some charter boards do not even require that much. In many cases, these minimum requirements could not be lower.

Both the National School Boards Association and state associations across the U.S. offer trainings to school board members. In some cases, superintendents undertake the responsibility to provide training and orientation to new board members. Such training generally encompasses topics such as board member responsibilities, governance, ethics, school finance, open meeting laws, communication with staff and members of the public, school law, and the law-making process.

It is important to note that individual board members have no legal authority when acting alone. Therefore, they carry out their duties as a board member only when acting in concert with their fellow elected members and professional staff. This implies that training should include a significant emphasis on strategies and behaviors to improve interpersonal relations and to increase open communication and collaboration.

As noted above, the relationship between board effectiveness and district performance has not been extensively examined. In fact, a team from the University of Texas at El Paso concluded a decade and a half ago that “Empirical evidence linking school board practices with high levels of student achievement is so scant that it is virtually non-existent” (Brenner, Sullivan, & Dalton, 2002, p. ii).

A study of 258 districts in New York revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between boards that use a *professional* policy-making style (as opposed to a *political* style) and student performance (Ikejiaku, 2000). Young found that board members saw no relationship between training intended to improve achievement and any discussions among the board members regarding student achievement (2011), even though other research has demonstrated that board members believe such training to be important (Pollard, 2012). In a survey of state directors of school boards associations, Roberts and Sampson (2011) found that states that have a statutory requirement for board professional development received an overall rating of B or C in the Education Week ratings of the states, while those states that did not require professional development received a rating of a C or a D.

Peterson (2000), analyzing data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (Ingels, Scott, Taylor, Owings, & Quinn, 1998), concluded that overly-intrusive school boards reduce student achievement by approximately 2%, in part through negative effects on school climate. Despite reaching these conclusions, Peterson argued that “Education is too important for society to abdicate democratic responsibility for our schools and leave decision-making to professionals who have their own interests and their own agencies” (2000, p. 62), and proposed training that could help board members to better understand the bounds of their authority and expertise.

A study of board and superintendent turnover in the state of Washington revealed that a statistically significant relationship exists between increasing school board member turnover and a decrease in student achievement (Alsbury, 2008a). This study also found a relationship between an increase in student achievement and low school board turnover in very small school districts.

Recent doctoral research carried out at the University of Southern California has produced findings that:

- School board training resulted in an increased focus on student achievement (Canal, 2013; Gogel, 2013);

- Board members are motivated to take part in such training by virtue of the culture of the district (Gates, 2013; Turley, 2013) and the accessibility of the training (Gates, 2013);
- Board members who receive specific training in governance are likely to exhibit behaviors reflecting good governance (Bradley, 2013; Choi, 2013; Gates, 2013; Gomez, 2013; Murray, 2013; Nava, 2013; Richter, 2013; Turley, 2013);

Holmen (2016) studied the relationship between ten different variables related to the “Balanced Governance®” (Alsbury & Gore, 2015) approach to school board leadership and overall effectiveness. He found that the odds of finding a high performing school district is nearly eight times greater in a school district with a board adhering to this model. He also concluded that Board actions in three key areas (advocacy focus, exercise of influence, and decision-making style) have the greatest potential for influence on student performance.

Lorentzen (2013) found a significant correlation between student achievement, as measured by proficiency scores on state criterion-referenced tests, and certain board actions identified via a board assessment tool available through the Washington State School Directors Association. A positive relationship was found between student performance and board actions including effective governance, setting high expectations for learning, creating conditions for success, holding staff accountable for students’ learning expectations, and effectively engaging with the community. School boards that manage to effectively carry out tasks such as these lead those districts with the highest proficiency scores. Saatcioglu and Sargut (2014) purported that scores on eighth grade reading and mathematics assessments are highest in those districts where boards exhibit high levels of both *brokerage* (when members engage with others possessing new ideas and resources) and *closure* (when members engage with one another in an efficient and collaborative manner), and lowest in those districts where brokerage and closure are both low.

Although Shelton (2010) did not find a direct relationship between board members’ actions and mathematics achievement, Shelton did find a relationship between superintendent turnover and mathematics achievement. He concluded that the actions of the board could indirectly influence the superintendent’s actions by delivering chaos or stability through the Board’s governance behaviors.

Blasko’s (2016) research regarding *aligned* and *unaligned* boards and superintendents discovered, for the most part, no statistically significant relationship between the alignment of attitudes and beliefs and mathematics achievement. However, a statistically significant relationship was found between such an alignment in attitudes and beliefs and scores on an end-of-course mathematics assessment.

Attempts to find more recent empirical studies, journal articles, dissertations and other relevant sources in this particularly narrow focused area of research proved challenging. We recognize that the majority of references are not within the last five years. However, this is the current state of literature today and one of the purposes of this study is to aid in bringing the literature up to date. However, the investigations of governing board effectiveness, and the influence of governing boards on student outcomes, remain critically important areas of inquiry. As choice and privatization initiatives expand and gain taxpayer support and funding, research that reveals the effects of democratic governance on students can not only help to inform school boards and their associations, but also those who influence and make policy at state and federal levels.

Arizona A-F Accountability System

In 2016, via Senate Bill 1430, the Arizona legislature created a framework for the A-F letter grades system, which was ultimately developed and implemented by the state Board of Education. Today,

Arizona Revised Statutes § 15-241 requires the Arizona Department of Education, subject to final adoption by the State Board of Education, to develop an annual achievement profile for every public school in the state based on an A through F scale” (<https://azsbe.az.gov/f-school-letter-grades>, 2018).

For some years, Arizona calculated school and district grades and for other years, it only gave school grades. According to the State Board of Education web site, the current system, gives parents a yardstick to compare schools. It gives school leaders a snapshot of where they are doing well and where they need to improve. It creates an incentive for the constant improvement that parents, taxpayers and state leaders expect from our public schools. (A-F Letter Grades | Arizona State Board of Education, 2018)

This system is intended to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. Schools’ grades under the system reflect year-to-year student academic growth; proficiency on assessments in English language arts, math, and science; the proficiency and academic growth of English language learners, measures on indicators that an elementary student is ready for success in high school and that high school students are ready to succeed in a career or higher education; and high school graduation rates. Cut scores for each letter-grade ranking are established by the Arizona State Board of Education.

Purpose

Based on these studies, we can clearly see a pattern that school board behaviors and trainings indeed have an impact on district performance. Continuing in that vein, the sole purpose of this study is to replicate and further previous research completed by Eadens, Schwanenberger, Clement, and Eadens (2015) that found a positive relationship in 2014 between participation in Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) trainings and state rankings of school district performance/grades. Just as this 2015 study found that districts that received higher effectiveness ratings were the districts that governance teams attended more ASBA trainings, we again hypothesize the same will be true three years later. This update of the prior research provides current data that further substantiates findings from the original study.

Research Question

This is the single research question that underlies this current study: Is there a relationship between the number of ASBA sponsored trainings that governance team members attended during the 2017-2018 school year and the district overall achievement grade?

Method

The researchers of this current study remain aware of the myriad of factors impacting school grades. However, that does not negate the importance of this study, nor its findings. This study was not designed to study every aspect of district grades, but rests its foci on specific

variables. Some of these include, but certainly not limited to, are: diverse demographics of students' socio-economic status, ages, ethnicities, genders; faculty, staff, administration, parents, business partners' demographics, experience, effectiveness, and education; and locations of the schools and communities in rural, urban, suburban locations in economically wealthy and poor areas with many and few businesses. There are a plethora other studies that unpack many of these variables in relation to school and district grades. Again, that is not the focus of this study. Based on the germane literature, although rich qualitative case studies and wide-reaching meta-analyses are both superb options for analyzing relationships of trainings to overall performance, and are highly encouraged, we decided here to quantitatively examine this simple correlation between two factors (number of ASBA trainings attended) and (District Grades) as a foundation for beginning much further research. The justification of delimiting to these variables only, are within background provided.

Sample

Approval for this study was obtained initially from Northern Arizona University's Institutional Review Board, subsequently Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) provided data including the number of ASBA sponsored trainings Arizona school districts sent their school board members and superintendents to during school year 2017-2018, including summer 2018. We separately researched each school's grade that same school year. Records from the Arizona School Boards Association indicate that very few charter school governing board members attend training sponsored by the Arizona School Boards Association. So, only district schools were included in this analysis. This meant that charter schools were excluded from this study.

For this school year, through the Arizona A-F Accountability System, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) was not required to produce district-wide rankings, as had been the case in previous years. Instead, only individual school grades were produced. In order to make district-wide comparisons, the mean of each district's individual school grades, computed on a 4.0 scale, were calculated to determine each district's overall grade. While not as accurate as a calculation taking into account each school's grade and size, this calculation yielded a reasonably accurate estimate of each district's relative performance.

The sample included only those districts with schools receiving letter grades under the Arizona A-F Accountability System. Some schools have too few students to assign a letter grade based on this system. For that reason, some districts were excluded from the analysis. Also, this analysis excluded accommodation and special districts, and only includes unified, union high school, and common school districts. Out of 227 Arizona school districts representing nearly 1,500 schools, 203 districts were included in this analysis.

Analysis and Results

The data was coded into Excel by training participation and scores for each district. District's grades (A to F grade scores) were categorized as follows: 2.59-4.00 (High-Performing), 1.50-2.49 (Moderately-Performing), and 0.00-1.49 (Low Performing). With the data available, it was challenging to run a robust analysis beyond frequency / percentage descriptives and correlation, nevertheless, SPSS version 24 was used to analyze the data after uploading grade and training data from Excel. An ANOVA was not possible because the data in a scatter plot, historically the best method to check for the linearity assumption, did not appear linear enough. While the Kruskal-

Wallis analysis, a non-parametric test, did indicate statistical significance (Table 1), the Ranks table showed that the numbers between each group were substantially different.

Table 1

Chi Square of Rank/Grade with ASBA Training Attendance

Chi-Square	6.372		Performance Rank / Grade	N	Mean
	2	Total Number Trainings	2.59 – 4.0	105	92.9
Asymp. Sig.	.041		1.50 – 2.49	65	103.98
			0.00 – 1.49	31	122.21
			Total	201	

Note. A. Kruskal Wallis Test. B. Grouping Variable: Performance Ranked

Alternatively, Spearman's Rho was used to examine any correlation. These results indicated a statistically significant relationship at the $p < .05$ level between district grade performance scores and number of trainings governance teams attended. Essentially, higher attendance at ASBA trainings (TOTAL Trainings) was correlated with higher Grades (Performance Ranked [4.0 to 0.0 / A to F]). The districts that had lower ASBA training attendance (TOTAL Trainings) tended to have statistically significantly lower Grades (Performance Ranked) / lower Grade rankings, $r_s = .168$, $p = .017$ (Table 2). The effect of this relationship is significant.

Table 2

Spearman's Rho Correlating Rank/Grade and ASBA Attendance

			Performance Ranked	Rank Total Trainings
Spearman's rho	Performance Ranked	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.168*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.017
		N	201	201
	Rank Total Trainings	Correlation Coefficient	.168*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.000
		N	201	203

* Correlation significant at .05 level (2-tailed).

Concluding Implications for Practice and Future Research

Given the significant relationship between training participation rates and school grade score rankings, it is evident that districts which hope to improve student academic achievement must commit to ensuring regular participation in targeted professional development and such trainings. Despite the distance between the board room and the classroom, this study and similar studies (Lorentzen, 2013) indicate that Board training does make a difference practical significant for districts, schools, and students. While one could argue for countless other covariates that affect district grades, those were not the focus of this study, and in no way reduces the significance of the findings of this study. Among the tremendous responsibilities borne by school board members, participation in training must be viewed as among the least conflict-laden and least burdensome of duties. While some districts may argue against devoting the financial resources to pay for conference registration fees, lodging, and travel, in even the smallest of districts, this expense would represent a fraction of a percent of the district's operating budget. Given the payoff of higher student achievement, the benefits far outweigh the minimal cost in time and funding.

Based on our findings, we also recommend that school boards schedule an annual planning meeting to discuss the calendar of training available over the course of the year, and engage each member in committing to meaningful participation in ASBA sponsored school board trainings. Since job and family responsibilities vary among school board members, it would make sense to take particular steps to accommodate those board members with jobs or with young children by providing them with the first choice of trainings that best fit their calendar and needs.

Additionally, we recommend that boards establish a practice of assigning a mentor to each new board member to accompany the new member to their first training event to assist in navigating the process of picking up registration materials, selecting breakout sessions, and making sense of the volume of new information.

A critical focus for future research in this area would be to develop a deeper understanding of the differences in board training and actions in districts that are making achievement gains versus those that are not. This could involve mixed methods research targeting low-performing districts and their demographically-similar but higher-performing counterparts. Research questions in that future study could focus on observable differences in training participation rates and board meeting practices. Though it is assumed that board variables would be but one of a host of differences to be found, findings could lead to changes in approaches to trainings and governance practices of most benefit to students.

Future research could also involve a replication of this study to determine if there is a relationship between changes in training participation rates and school rankings. This would involve comparing current and future rates of training participation and school rankings.

Finally, the field would also benefit from case study research involving school boards with a history of non-participation in ASBA sponsored trainings that have resolved to commit to participate in training for the benefit of students. Such research could provide rich insights into the complex and vast dynamics of the superintendent-board governance relationship and the outcomes, if any, of participation in training.

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