

# Governance and School District Leadership: Addressing Race-Based Academic Achievement Disparity and Board Member Perceptions

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*Public school board members are charged with the responsibility and accountability to provide governance-level advocacy for equity and excellence in public education. This qualitative study examined the perceptions of school board members in three K–8 school districts in the midwestern part of the United States regarding the 50+ year Race-Based Academic Achievement Disparity (RBAAD) in public education. Virtual one-on-one interviews, a virtual focus group, and member checks were used to gather data. Utilizing servant and moral leadership as the theoretical frameworks, the findings revealed that school board members are empowered with governance-level authority and the responsibility to address the RBAAD phenomenon, school board members encounter obstacles that challenge their ability to mitigate the RBAAD phenomenon, and school board members contend that opportunities exist to promote mitigation of the RBAAD. Implications for future research and practice are addressed.*

*Keywords:* Achievement disparity, Board member perspectives, School board governance, Servant leadership theory, Moral leadership theory, Equal access

## Background and Context

The United States' tradition of investing authority in local school boards to promote quality public education has a long history dating back to at least 1837, when Massachusetts became the first state to create a state board of education (George Washington University, C. on E.P. (CEP), Kober & Renter (2020). Horace Mann served as secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education and became an advocate for the creation of public schools available to all children at no cost and funded by state government (George Washington University, C. on E.P. (CEP), Kober & Renter (2020). Mann argued that a universal, non-sectarian, and common public institution was the most efficacious way to achieve moral and socioeconomic growth of all Americans, mitigate social class conflict, and promote citizen engagement (George Washington University, C. on E.P. (CEP), Kober & Renter (2020); Warder (2015). Over time, every state has invested authority over public education to local school boards. Across the United States, local school boards are composed of community members who take an oath to discharge their statutory educational duties and responsibilities faithfully to the benefit of all students and the entire community. Over time, every state has invested authority over public education to local school boards. Across the United States, local school boards are composed of community members who take an oath to discharge their statutory educational duties and responsibilities faithfully to the benefit of all students and the entire community.

In the 21st century, public school board members serve over 51 million public-school students across 13,000 American public-school districts. These volunteer advocates for public education are charged with providing leadership and governance that ensures that all students have access to an excellent public education where they live (National School Boards Association, 2019).

The complex and rapidly changing nature of public education in the United States requires community school board members to respond to an array of challenges to honor its academic, societal, and moral commitment to provide a quality and just public education to every student in every public school. Those challenges include, but are not limited to, ensuring safe and supportive learning environments (National School Boards Association, 2021); providing adequate and equitable school funding (Epstein, 2011); genuinely engaging students, families, and the greater school community (Lamb, 2014); maximizing the benefits of technology (Tawfik et al., 2016); creating curricula and assessments that are responsive to the attitudes and needs of contemporary students (Education Commission of the States, 2020; Graesser et al., 2018); and preparing students to compete and succeed in a fast-paced, global, technological world (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018).

While all these educational challenges are of critical importance, possibly the greatest challenge lies in addressing a problem with which U.S. public education has struggled for over 75 years: the Race-Based Academic Achievement Disparity (RBAAD). The existence of a significant and persistent disparity between the academic achievement of K–12 students of color and their White peers is not only a problem for public education, but also a problem that impacts individuals and U.S. society (Bowman et al., 2018; Ratcliff et al., 2016).

The threat that RBAAD poses to equity and excellence in American public education has been characterized as the greatest civil rights issue of our time (Paige & Witty, 2010), and a perpetual national recession on the economy of the United States (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

Hanson et al. (2011) asserted that the disparity produces harmful effects on the academic, social, emotional, and health outcomes of students of color (as cited in Voight, 2013).

### ***Review of the Literature***

In U.S. public education, a persistent phenomenon has resulted in short- and long-term negative effects on children, families, and society: RBAAD. Throughout U.S. history, quality public equitable education has been viewed as essential for promoting the social and economic well-being of individuals and the nation because quality and equitable public education ensures that each generation can call on qualified women and men to serve others and their country with honor and guarantee equality of opportunities for all children (Baker & Cummings, 2015; Center on Education Policy, 2007).

In the 21st century, public education is expected to provide learning environments in which all students develop their core curricular, interpersonal, and technological skills while laying a foundation that will prepare them to compete in a global workplace (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education & the Partnership for 21st Century, 2010; Silliman & Schleifer, 2018). Despite the evolution of U.S. public education and the avowed commitment to high ideals that speak to advancing the individual and common good, the realities of public schools have sometimes failed to live up to those espoused ideals (Center on Education Policy, 2007).

Perhaps the most troubling dissonance between ideal and reality has been what appears to be public education's inability to deliver equitable achievement and success for every student, in every school in the United States (Coleman et al., 1966; Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007; Hursh, 2007; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Over time, academic progress has been made based on National Assessment of Educational Progress data that indicates the 2023 average reading scores for both Black and White 13-year-old students were higher than their 1971 peers, the year of the first reading assessment year (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022a). However, longitudinal achievement data from 1990-2022 confirms significantly lower scale scores of Black students when compared with scale scores of white students in both math and reading in Grades 4, 8, and 12 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022b). Long-run trends indicate that race-based performance disparities within the United States remain significant and highly persistent (Hanushek et al., 2020; National School Boards Association, 2020).

Public education's inability to deliver on its goal of success for every student in every U.S. school is exhibited in a variety of forms. The inability to reach that goal may be most recognizable and best exemplified by the decades long RBAAD. The persistent RBAAD and its deleterious impacts on children and society has been characterized as unequal opportunity due to race and education (Darling-Hammond, 1998), the greatest civil rights issue of our time (Paige & Witty, 2010), the race-based income inequality gap (Voight, 2013), and one of the most concerning problems in American public education (Wixom & Education Commission of the States, 2015). The RBAAD has been identified as a contributing factor in the school-to-prison pipeline (McKinsey & Company, 2009), which produces disproportionate minority incarceration rates and lifetimes in poverty (Sens & van Rompu, 2017).

## Race Based Academic Achievement Disparity

Due to the complexity of the RBAAD, no single definition can fully capture its depth and multifarious nature. America's largest, continual, and nationally representative assessment of the student performance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015), defined the RBAAD as a phenomenon in which one racial group of students outperforms another group with a difference larger than the margin of error. Researcher definitions of the RBAAD include below-par achievement of minority students, race-based achievement differences both within and between groups, historically patterned differences in learning and attainment outcomes between groups of students, and statistically significant differences between race-based student groups regarding academic standards of excellence set by educational institutions and society (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2012; Carpenter et al., 2006; Wixom & Education Commission of the States, 2015). The varied definitions and consequences of the RBAAD require its examination and understanding in the context of its historical roots and impact on society, especially on children.

### School Factors

There are three themes detailing school factors contribution towards the RBAAD: teacher quality, school composition, and school finance (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Desimone & Long, 2010; Enamorado, 2019; Epstein, 2011; Goldhaber et al., 2018; [Learning Policy Institute et al. \(2020\)](#)). First, the relationship between teacher quality and the RBAAD is strongly suggested in the literature. Significant teacher quality gaps were identified as a widespread and persistent feature of public education in America that exacerbated the well-documented RBAAD (Enamorado, 2019; Goldhaber et al., 2018). Often the teachers assigned to support students experiencing learning disparities compared to peers are the same teachers who lack a proven record of classroom success (Goldhaber et al., 2018; Hanselman, 2018). The [Learning Policy Institute et al. \(2020\)](#) asserted that to make schooling accountable for all students, especially the historically underserved, it is necessary that certified and experienced teachers present meaningful and relevant curricula in safe and inclusive learning environments. Finally, a study by Benson and Gezer (2020) found statistically significant trends and evidence that student race in correlated to access to more experienced teachers over time and that white students are more likely to be assigned to teachers with experience than Black students.

In addition to disparities in teacher quality in and across school systems, another school-based factor impacting the RBAAD is school composition. School compositions that reflect a disproportionate number of students of color from low-income backgrounds perform much worse than schools with more diverse student populations, and that underperformance remains significant even in otherwise high-performing states (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Black student achievement is lower in schools with the highest density of students of color, as opposed to student performance in schools with a lower density of students of color (Bohrstedt et al., 2015; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). Research also suggests that not only do school and classroom composition matter, but the size of the racial groups matter because they can promote racial and socioeconomic diversity that fosters a beneficial sense of student belonging, particularly for low-income students and students of color, and classroom diversity

that ensures equal access to opportunities that have long-term impacts on life outcomes (Seider et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2022).

The final school-based factor contributing to the RBAAD is inequalities in school financing. Darling-Hammond (2014) asserted that the United States allocates significantly less funding and resources for the neediest students than other developed nations. Baker (2017) claimed that significant evidence in academic literature indicates that resources matter. Baker maintained that state school finance reforms that create more adequate and equitable school finances improve student outcomes.

Two positive outcomes of equitable school funding were higher graduation rates and higher levels of educational attainment, especially for students from minority and low-income families. Governmental commitment to sustainable state finance systems ensuring equitable funding and improved access to resources is a key strategy to improve student outcomes and to close the RBAAD (Baker & Cummings, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2014). Additionally, there is evidence that appropriate school funding also promotes equitable student and district access to high-quality teachers and the increased per-pupil funding levels that exist in wealthier school districts (Baker, 2017; Cardichon et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2009).

### **Socioeconomic Factors**

McKinsey and Company (2009) contended that the achievement gap among students from low-income situations is severe and appears early in children's lives. Low-income situations typically place students at least 2 years behind more financially secure same-age peers and persist over students' lifetimes. Family finances appear to explain the persistent nature of the RBAAD by limiting parental ability to provide children access to quality health care and rich social, emotional, and academic preschool experiences (Barton et al., 2010; Burchinal et al., 2011; McKinsey & Company, 2009; Porfeli et al., 2009; Reardon, 2013; Robinson & Harris, 2013).

Porfeli et al. (2009) offered that neighborhood social capital can positively or negatively impact the RBAAD. They found that community capital is a powerful predictor of academic outcomes. Neighborhood social capital also determines the quality of local schools, libraries, and enrichment activities (Barton et al., 2010). Porfeli et al. (2009) found that even after factoring in parent education and income, children and adolescents who experienced positive family or community social capital had higher high-school graduations, college enrollments, and economic stability, lower rates of teenage pregnancy, fewer mental health issues, and lower incarceration rates than peers from neighborhoods with less social capital. Dufur et al. (2013) differed from researchers who applied a single social capital lens as the key factor in the persistence of the RBAAD. Those researchers concluded that future studies should consider examining the implications, benefits, and outcomes of the interplay between family and community social capital, not limiting the impact to family or social capital alone.

### **RBAAD: Incomplete Knowledge in the Literature**

While school-related and socioeconomic factors are dominant themes regarding the persistence of the RBAAD, there are additional factors as well. Though not at the broad thematic, patterned level of school based and socioeconomic RBAAD factors, there appears to be an incomplete

understanding of factors that include inequities regarding access to technology (Tawfik et al., 2016), school discipline (Gopalan, 2019; Gregory et al., 2010; Pearman et al. 2019), tracking and the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students in special education, remedial, or advanced classes (Ahram et al., 2011), and RBAAD-related pedagogical intervention strategies (Fergus, 2016).

### **RBAAD: Apparent Gaps in the Literature**

There are multiple studies addressing the RBAAD from the perspectives of teachers and administrators and the attitudinal and behavioral commitment and leadership that will be required of teachers and administrators to combat it (Annamma et al., 2014; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Petrilli, 2019; Ratcliff et al., 2016; Ruff, 2019; Webb & Thomas, 2015). Nonetheless, there are few studies regarding school board members and the RBAAD.

Shober and Hartney (2014) asked whether, and to what extent, school board leadership matters anymore in the 21st century era of accountability. Plough (2014) did not share the view that some researchers now consider school boards archaic educational institutions in the modern educational world.

Hess and Meeks (2010) noted that school boards matter when it comes to the RBAAD. They offered that although the RBAAD has been identified as negatively impacting American students of color for over 50 years, only in the years immediately following the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) has the link between school board member governance and student achievement been considered. Hess and Meeks (2010) valued the body of research focused on students and the adults who instruct them, but they contended that since the passage of NCLB (2001), school boards' accountability may be even more critical to addressing the RBAAD.

In terms of accountability for equitable student outcomes, Plough (2014) posited that all who seek to play a role in education reform movements that produce systemic high-level student performance need to focus more attention on public school boards. Plough emphasized that since school board members hold positions of significant influence and responsibility within their communities, their understanding of policies that address and potentially mitigate achievement disparities among students is critical. Consequently, it is imperative to scrutinize and research how these officials govern with a focus on fostering equitable educational outcomes.

In the post-2001 NCLB era of accountability, how school board members understand, make meaning of, and govern in response to the RBAAD has taken on increased importance. Community school boards exercise extensive statutory and mandatory authority as servant leaders and representatives of the community and advocates for students and the school district. School boards govern by policy to develop administrative structures, approve, and maintain an annual budget that is aligned with the vision of the local school district, and make curricular and staff hiring decisions (Mountford, 2008). The National School Boards Association (2021) asserted that community school board members are expected to ensure the right of every student across the United States to access an excellent and equitable public education and that school boards achieve this goal by taking direct responsibility for effective leadership and governance.

## ***Summary and Integration***

The purpose of this study's literature review was to examine the perspectives and understandings of educational researchers, practitioners, and other key stakeholders regarding the RBAAD phenomenon. The literature review revealed that the RBAAD phenomenon has led academic and social researchers to conduct studies using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods study approaches framed in various theoretical frameworks including behavioral, change, and servant leadership frames (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The study participant groups in those studies included researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, and politicians. However, the literature review also revealed a gap in or at least an incomplete understanding of how locally elected public school board members describe, interpret, and make meaning of the RBAAD. This is problematic because an analysis and synthesis of the literature yielded two interconnected themes that underpin the persistence of the RBAAD: school-based and socioeconomic factors. These factors directly intersect with statutory school board governance responsibility to determine how local revenues and resources are allocated, communicate how allocation equitably benefits all students, and monitor district performance to assess the state of the district's attainment of equitable student outcomes. Plough (2014) contended that in light of school board member statutory obligations, how they understand the complexities of the RBAAD and their governance practices to mitigate the disparity warrants further research and examination.

## ***Conceptual Framework***

The conceptual frameworks of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1990, 2005) guided this qualitative case study on the RBAAD phenomenon in public education. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (2021) viewed servant leadership theory as a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals and builds better organizations. The leader who chooses to serve first as opposed to leading first and focuses on the growth and well-being of people and community is a servant leader. Greenleaf (2012) concluded that the greatest opportunity to build a more equal and more just society lies in the opportunity to function as servant leaders within existing institutions and to harness the regenerative forces operating within them.

The second theoretical framework, Sergiovanni's (1992) moral leadership theory, posited that effective leaders are change agents who help individuals learn to process change, and to consider how change impacts them, the organization, and those they serve. Sergiovanni asserted that moral leadership practice begins within the individual and is driven by melding one's heart, head, and hands. Sergiovanni upheld that when leaders model purposes, values, norms, and responsibilities in a school's everyday activities, words and deeds are one and goals are attainable. Finally, Sergiovanni argued that when moral leadership becomes part of a school culture, leaders know and focus on what is important, care deeply about their work, learn from success and failure, and take calculated risks.

Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1990, 2005) are complementary frameworks (Lemoine et al., 2019; Muhammad & Mohamad, 2016). Servant leadership and moral leadership both provided context for how the voluntary service experiences

of school board members shape and impact their perceptions of and actions in response to the RBAAD phenomenon.

### ***Methodology***

To investigate how board members' perceptions and leadership promote mitigation of a district RBAAD, the researchers utilized a qualitative methodology, as this methodology is appropriate when investigating research questions that require in-depth understanding of a particular issue (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Qualitative methods are used to explore complex problems, gain detailed understandings of phenomena from the perceptions of the study participants, and identify the meanings people construct from those understandings and perceptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Within the qualitative research paradigm, the researchers employed a qualitative case study method to examine multiple data points centered around a particular unit to answer the research question (Yin, 2014). Case study research must utilize two or more data sources.

The first data source was collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews foster a social interaction in which the interviewer inquires and the interviewees express what is on their mind, construct knowledge from experiences, pose follow-up, probing questions, and collect in-depth, rich information related to research questions, (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Six 1-hour, one-on-one virtual interviews with six participants were conducted. The virtual interviews allowed board members to share their perceptions on the RBAAD as a national and local district phenomenon in K–8 public education.

The second data point was collected through a focus group with three out of six participants. Focus groups are often used in qualitative research to collect narrative data, provide for participant sharing of perceptions, and frequently follow one-on-one interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The one-hour focus group discussion included three of the participants from the one-on-one interview sample. The focus group participants responded to five predetermined questions that were developed as concluding questions to the study's five research questions.

### **Trustworthiness**

The quality of qualitative research is situated in trustworthiness (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Following the one-on-one virtual interviews and participation in the virtual focus group, participants were provided an editable Word transcription of their interview to conduct a member check. The member check provided participants the opportunity to assess the data's accuracy and credibility, and, as needed, to edit their responses to the interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researchers also employed a critical friend to provide honest and impartial feedback and to help the researchers to clarify the data collected in the focus group. The critical friend concept provides a trusted advocate who takes the time to understand the context of the study and assists the researcher to work toward the successful completion of the research study (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).



## Participants and Setting

Six participants who served as board members shared their perceptions regarding the RBAAD phenomenon and educational equity. Participants were selected as (a) they served in racially diverse school districts, (b) overall district test scores were at or above standards, and (c) there were below average test scores for students of color. All participants experienced multiple years of board experience (two or more) and multiple years (two or more) of experience with the RBAAD phenomenon and educational equity. Six participants completed virtual one-on-one interviews and four also took part in the focus group. Table 1 presents a visual depiction of the participants' K-8 board member years of service, service experience related to the RBAAD phenomenon and educational equity, participation in the one-on-one virtual interview, and participation in the audio-only focus group.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Experience*

Participant Number	Years' Experience as a K-8 Board Member	Years' RBAAD and Educational Equity	Experience with Educational Equity	Virtual One-on-One Interview or Both (Virtual Interview/Focus Group)
1	4	4		I
2	6	6		I
3	2	2		B
4	4	4		B
5	4	4		B
6	2	2		B

## Analysis

The first level of coding reduced the raw language-based data in the transcripts to meaningful chunks of salient words, phrases, and comments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Watts, 2014). Subsequent transcript readings underpinned the second-level coding process that combined the codes into broader categories or themes that reflected a comparative method of analysis and were responsive to the study questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Emergent themes were utilized to generate findings responsive to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Findings were placed in literary form, and there were multiple iterations of the outcome of inquiry, which resulted in an understanding with respect to the RBAAD from the narratives and perspectives of school board members (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Keywords and ideas developed from multiple readings of the transcripts led to the identification of 18 codes. Codes are researcher-produced words, phrases, or visualizations that represent significant and recurring themes during qualitative data analysis (Medelyan, 2020; Saldana, 2013). Data analysis of one-to-one interviews and focus group identified three major themes and three related sub-themes that reflected a credible connection between the data collected and analyzed and the research questions. The three data-dependent major themes that emerged from the

data analysis indicated three key findings addressing how board member perceptions and leadership promote mitigation of a district RBAAD

## Findings

Theme 1: The participants' perceptions indicated that public school board members are uniquely empowered and positioned to address the RBAAD phenomenon. All study participants shared that K–8 school board members are empowered with governance-level authority and responsibility to address the RBAAD phenomenon to the benefit of all students. The participants also noted their responsibility in establishing policies to provide equitable support and services to position all students for success is a necessary board responsibility. For example, Participant 5 stated, "I think the board's responsibility is to ensure that every child in that district is getting access to an equitable and high-quality education." Similarly, Participant 2 asserted, "I think very carefully about resources, building accountability structures. It takes a lot of time and funding, and you have to think carefully about what you're investing in and why."

Multiple coding iterations led to three Theme 1 sub-themes: The board has the authority and responsibility to develop and implement policies that provide equitable support and services to position all students for success, the board is duty-bound to approve and ensure justifiable resource allocation, and the board must actively engage the school and broader community in candid conversations focused on mitigating a district RBAAD. These board member perceptions reflected assertions in academic literature that all who seek to play a role in education reform movements that produce systemic high-level student performance, need to focus more attention on school boards' accountability for equitable student outcomes (Plough, 2014; National School Boards Association, 2021).

Theme 2: The participants' perceptions reflected the reality that school board members encounter obstacles, that challenges their ability to mitigate the RBAAD phenomenon. Influencing factors included structural obstacles with respect to mitigation, issues pertaining to accountability, and external factors. For example, Participant 3 declared that: Our job is to remove obstacles, provide resources, and align all the incentives such that our team knows where they have to go and have the tools to get there. And that anything that gets in their way, we can clear the way.

Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "One of the major obstacles to overcoming this issue (RBAAD) is getting people to admit and believe that this really exists, that it is a long-standing structural, systemic problem, while avoiding saying that anyone did something wrong."

This study's data analysis revealed that all study participants referenced experiences and issues that impact a school board's ability to successfully address and lessen a district RBAAD phenomenon. The participants' perceptions generated three sub-themes of obstacles: structural (long-standing beliefs, practices, and structures), accountability (defining, assigning, and evaluating), and externalities (factors outside the control of the school district that impact mitigation of the RBAAD). While the study participants described several challenges and obstacles school board members face in service of their school district and community, each in their own way expressed a genuine commitment to overcome those obstacles.

Theme 3: The participants' perceptions optimistically expressed that a variety of opportunities exist to promote mitigation of RBAAD. For example, participants emphasized the importance of the board's support for building relationships with staff, students, and the broader school community as an avenue to mitigate the RBAAD. As Participant 5 remarked, "I think we do, at every level, need ongoing training and reflection and space for discussing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and social justice issues." Similarly, Participant 2 concurred, stating, "I think resources around relationship building and culture building and continual reflection on our equity work is super important."

The data analysis evidenced that all study participants believed the persistence of the RBAAD phenomenon did not mean it could not be overcome. That mindset underpinned their recommendations for overcoming RBAAD obstacles from which three sub-themes emerged: the need for greater commitment to relationship building across stakeholder groups, the need for RBAAD specific training for both the board and staff to build their RBAAD problem-solving skills and knowledge, and need for information and knowledge sharing across stakeholder groups both locally and beyond to identify what isn't working and what is.

The board member participants in this study without knowing the researcher's theoretical frameworks, reflected the theories advanced by Sergiovanni (1992) and Greenleaf (2012) <sup>8</sup> that the opportunity to build a better world can be realized when leaders within and across organizations strive to become effective change agents who coalesce and unleash the knowledge and power of all stakeholders to the benefit of all.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative case study examined K–8 public school board members' perceptions of the persistent Race Based Academic Achievement Disparity (RBAAD) in American public education. This study had three primary aims: (a) to address what appears to be a gap, or at minimum, an incomplete representation in the literature of the RBAAD from the perspectives of school board members, (b) to give voice to K–8 school board member perceptions and understanding of the RBAAD, and (c) to examine the unique role K–8 school board members' perceptions of the RBAAD may play in offering implications for potential school board governance to mitigate and eventually close the RBAAD.

Analysis of the one-on-one virtual interviews and focus group data revealed three key findings that linked the participants' perceptions of school board member responsibilities with essential school board actions. First, K–8 school boards are empowered with governance-level authority and responsibility to address the RBAAD via policy, procedures, and two-way stakeholder engagement. To address this responsibility effectively, school boards must model compliance with their state school board associations' principles of effective board governance. Second, school boards must address internal structural and organizational obstacles, including curricular, philosophical, and pedagogical concerns that impact equitable student growth and achievement. To address and overcome those obstacles, school boards should balance support with accountability, while holding themselves, the administration, and the staff responsible for student outcomes. Third, despite the challenges posed by the K–8 school board members' perceptions indicated that opportunities exist to promote mitigation of the RBAAD. If school boards seek to convert those opportunities to actions that promote the success of all students,

they will need to focus on building relationships with students, staff, and other stakeholders; actively seek training experiences directly related to building board capacity to mitigate the RBAAD; and actively promote and lobby for information and knowledge sharing across stakeholder groups.

In addition to the study findings, participant perceptions generated recommendations for practice. One recommendation for practice called for an overarching school board mindset and leadership guide that established a high-quality education for all students as the top district priority. Another recommendation for practice called for an ongoing series of public RBAAD-focused forums or panel discussions that bring together school parents, community leaders, social organizations, the school board, superintendent, key cabinet members, and teacher leaders to clarify the scope of their separate roles and responsibilities, and their collaborative efforts to provide an equitable and high-quality education to all students. A final recommendation was that school boards should place a high priority on budgeting the time and resources to support district research efforts focused on identifying the beliefs, policies, institutional knowledge, staffing, and practices in high-achieving school districts that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts.

Local school board members are charged with critical duties and responsibilities. One overarching duty is to sit in trust for the entire community. To honor that trust, school boards must use their authority and collaborate with staff and community to provide every student an equitable and high-quality public educational experience.

Additional research studies focused on understanding the role school boards play in promoting broad-based accountability and building stakeholder partnerships can help to hasten the end of the RBAAD phenomenon and usher in a new era in public education when all children in every community have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

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