



# Information Briefing

## IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

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### **The Lighthouse Research: Past, Present, and Future School Board Leadership for Improving Student Achievement**

The history of education reform in the U.S. shows some evidence of success in improving education at the classroom and school levels but little evidence that those successes were able to extend or sustain beyond the individual classroom or the school involved in the improvement effort. If the United States is to achieve the excellence and equity in public education that is our promised goal, it is essential that we find the keys to broadening excellence to the district and state level and identify the key leaders for this level of impact.

The Lighthouse Research focuses on the role of local school boards and superintendents in leading and sustaining districtwide high and equitable student achievement. School boards are charged with decisions that impact what students learn, how students are taught, how learning is measured, how teachers are supported with professional development, how funds are focused on district priorities, and how effectively the community is engaged around student learning. While, by their nature school boards are removed from the day-to-day work of teaching and learning, they control the conditions that can allow successful teaching and learning to occur throughout the system.

This document summarizes the three phases of Lighthouse research to date, providing an overview of the purpose, the process, and the findings specific to each phase. The Lighthouse Multi-State Project: School Board Leadership for Student Achievement is Phase 3 of the overall Lighthouse Research, currently underway.

#### **Original Lighthouse Study (1998 – 2000): (LH 1) An ethnographic study of school districts generating unusually high levels of student achievement and school districts with similar characteristics but generating significantly lower levels of student achievement.**

- **Purpose:** Research has repeatedly shown that some teachers, some schools, some curricula, and some instructional methods generate higher achievement than others. The question this study attempted to answer was, “Do some school boards generate higher achievement than others? If so, do they do so through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others?”
- **Process:** Researchers looked first for districts with extremely different levels of student achievement but similar in other characteristics such as socio-economic status, size, location, etc; and then conducted individual interviews with board members, superintendents, district level administrators, principals, and teachers to learn about their school improvement efforts (what they were trying to improve, how they were trying to improve it, and what was influencing the change).

- ♦ **Findings** showed that school boards in districts with a history of higher student achievement were significantly different in knowledge, beliefs and actions from the boards in the lower achieving districts. This study became one of the first and only studies that made a credible research-based connection between the work of the school board and levels of student achievement.

### **The Iowa Lighthouse Project (2002 – 2007): (LH 2) A five-year, federally funded inquiry into the role of the local governance team in districtwide efforts to improve student achievement.**

- ♦ **Purpose:** To build upon the findings of the first Lighthouse study and identify the ways in which local school boards influence the conditions for success that are necessary to improve student achievement. This project also identified the types of development and supports school boards need in order to have a positive impact on district efforts to improve student achievement.
- ♦ **Process:** Researchers worked with the boards and superintendents in five pilot school districts in Iowa over a period of 5 years while studying the changes in specific conditions that support improvement, changes in beliefs, and changes in student achievement.
- ♦ **Findings:** Results from 4 years of work in 5 pilot districts reveal significant learning about key behaviors of the board/superintendent team that influence district effort to improve achievement. As a result of this phase, the research team was able to describe five main roles of the board, seven key areas of performance boards demonstrate as they play these roles, the knowledge, skills and beliefs necessary to perform in these ways, and effective strategies for board development related to the board roles. Areas such as creating a sense of urgency, developing a districtwide focus for improvement, creating conditions within the system for success, monitoring progress, deliberative policy development, and developing a leadership continuum have influenced board behaviors and the practices and beliefs of district staff in these pilot districts. Evidence of impact includes:
  - All sites participating in this project have shown significant improvement in one or more indicators of specific conditions necessary for improving student achievement;
  - On average, 91% of all staff and board members across all sites say that there is a clear and focused goal in their district for improving student achievement;
  - In 4 of the 5 sites, data show an increase of 48-90% of all staff and the board who could consistently describe the district's school improvement goals;
  - In all sites, 83-100% of all staff and the board indicate that there is a clear district-wide focus on improving literacy;
  - In 3 of the 5 sites, the amount of time spent in regular board meetings on policy and student achievement issues increased from an average of 16% to an average of 37%;
  - The boards in all 5 districts are regularly allocating additional board work session time to focus exclusively on student achievement issues;
  - By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that frequently monitoring student achievement, ensuring children's earliest school success, and partnering with the community are critical for improving teaching and learning;
  - By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that local school boards can positively impact student achievement;
  - In year 3, significant gains on a measure of reading comprehension were seen at every grade level in one district with an average of 94% of the students K-12 scoring average or above;
  - In year 4, 4 of the 5 sites showed significant gains in student reading and/or math at at least 2 grade levels over the course of 5 years.

**The Lighthouse Multi-State Project: School Board Leadership for Student Achievement: (LH 3) A 5-year national expansion of the Lighthouse research, accompanied by a study of best practices of state school board associations and board/superintendent teams in 8 states for developing board leadership for improving student learning.**

- ♦ **Purpose:** To build on and scale the learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Project across districts and states and to clearly define best practices for school boards and for the state associations in supporting them. By working with the other states in this project, Iowa will learn from an expanded implementation of the Lighthouse work how and when the interventions are most effective and what state school boards associations can do to scale up the Lighthouse implementation efficiently and effectively to large numbers of school districts.
- ♦ Key questions include: How can state school boards associations efficiently and effectively scale the Lighthouse interventions to large numbers of districts across a state? What does it take to create a state-wide focus on improving student achievement and what supports are necessary to sustain that focus (state school boards association, state education association, state administrators' association, etc.)? What kinds of effort does it take to support and sustain that focus and to build the effectiveness of boards and superintendents?
- ♦ **Process:** California, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky and Wisconsin will replicate the Lighthouse interventions from the Iowa project in districts across those states. State association staff from these state school boards associations are training with the Lighthouse staff on a quarterly basis to learn the interventions and practice implementing them before taking them to the districts in their states. In addition, Illinois, Missouri and Oregon are trying different interventions, but collecting the same data each year to measure impact. This will allow us to use data to identify where the work of the state association staff is having an impact on the boards, districts, and student achievement, and to analyze what was done with those districts where the impact was greatest in order to identify best practices in board leadership and development.
- ♦ Common data that all states will monitor (at a minimum):
  - changes in the district conditions for student achievement,
  - beliefs about what is possible to expect and what impacts student learning, and
  - levels of student achievement.
- ♦ 8 participating states:

▪ California	▪ Kentucky
▪ Idaho	▪ Missouri
▪ Illinois	▪ Oregon
▪ Iowa	▪ Wisconsin