



Information Briefing

IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

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The Politics of Excellence: Trustee Leadership and School District Ethos

Summary

This article reported a study by Dr. Linda LaRocque and Dr. Peter Coleman that examined the role of school boards in the development of a productive ethos in nine school districts in British Columbia. A productive district ethos was associated with higher than expected student achievement and lower than expected costs over a five-year period. The more successful boards were found:

- To be considerably more knowledgeable about district programs and practices;
- To have a clearer sense of what they wanted to accomplish, based on a set of firmly held values and beliefs; and
- To engage in activities that provided them with opportunities to articulate and discuss these values and beliefs

Some key points from the study:

It is generally agreed that implementation of policy is the responsibility of the superintendent and the board is responsible for policy making and oversight. However, the successful boards in this study were vocal advocates of their policies and the values/beliefs underlying the policies. They promoted their policies in ways that complimented implementation efforts, without overstepping the boundaries into the administrative domain. (p. 451-452)

There is considerable evidence of the direct involvement of policy implementers in the policy making arena. The need to involve teachers and principals in making policies that directly affect them is well recognized. The role of the board related to a continued active interest in the implementation of a policy is less well recognized (p. 456)

A major theme running through the research findings is the necessity of pressure balanced with support. Pressure is necessary to focus attention and support is needed to enable implementation. It is possible to envision board members providing both pressure and support in ways that do not entail interference in administrative matters. (p. 457)

It seems possible, and even desirable, that school boards play a meaningful role in policy implementation, by providing pressure and support and by maintaining a focus on the policy intent throughout the complex and dynamic implementation process. (p. 457)

The board members from the successful boards were able to discuss district programs, practices, and performance more specifically and in more detail than the board members from the unsuccessful boards.

All board members expressed a number of similar values and beliefs related to fiscal responsibility, accountability for academic achievement in the district, and responsiveness to the community.

- The board members of the successful boards felt more accountable to the public for the wise management of the budget.
- The board members of the successful boards believed their main responsibility was for the academic achievement of the students.
- All boards felt responsible for reporting to the public but the unsuccessful boards tended to emphasize “success stories” whereas the successful board reported overall district results.
- All boards felt boards should be responsive to community concerns.
- The unsuccessful boards shared the values and beliefs of the successful boards but their values and beliefs were (a) not as clearly articulated, (b) did not serve as frequently as a basis for board initiatives, and (c) did not inform program and monitoring decisions. The successful boards had a much clear vision of what the district should be like. The links between their expressed values and beliefs and their actions were much stronger.

The successful boards engaged in a much wider variety of activities than did the unsuccessful boards, activities that enabled them to keep informed about district programs, practices, and performance, and to interact with district staff on topics of interest to the board.

LaRocque, L. and P. Coleman (1993). "The Politics of Excellence: Trustee Leadership and School District Ethos." *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* XXXIX(4): 449-475.