



Engaging Local School Boards to Catalyze, Support, and Sustain School Turnaround from **The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices**

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RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Rhim, L. M. (2014). Engaging local school boards to catalyze, support, and sustain school turnaround. In L. M. Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), *The state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practices* (pp. 49–62). San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Engaging_Local_School_Boards1.pdf

About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
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- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
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- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

Engaging Local School Boards to Catalyze, Support, and Sustain School Turnaround

Lauren Morando Rhim

Engaging Local School Boards in School Turnaround Efforts

Local school boards are the embodiment of our long-standing commitment to local control; elected community representatives have the pulse of the community and ensure that public schools reflect an individual community's values and priorities. Overseeing high-quality schools that prepare students to succeed in the ever-evolving knowledge economy requires a relatively high level of collective sophistication. Local school boards must navigate federal and state policy to develop coherent local policy on a range of topics, including school turnaround. Yet, ongoing efforts to turn around failing schools focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents, as well as state and federal policy makers. Missing from this debate is a robust discussion or examination of the role of local school boards. Nevertheless, given their broad responsibilities, school boards can have a notable impact on turnaround efforts. In particular, school boards can make counterproductive decisions if they are not well versed on the need for turnaround or the changes required to dramatically improve a school's performance.

The challenge facing state policy leaders is figuring out how to leverage largely volunteer boards of lay citizens to develop effective policies and practices in a climate that frequently reduces their role to that of budget hawks or single-issue politicians. Efforts to optimize boards' contribution to turnaround efforts typically include training regarding board operations and education policy with a heavy focus on using achievement data to inform decisions. State education agencies (SEAs) are in a unique position to play a central role in providing or

enabling induction and training programs that include the board's role in school turnaround.

This chapter highlights findings from a report produced by the Academic Development Institute (ADI) regarding the role of local school boards in school accountability and transformation efforts (Rhim, 2013). The report synthesized the contemporary research regarding the role of local school boards in targeted improvement efforts and explored emerging practice through interviews with key practitioners in districts engaged in such efforts. Building on the research findings, this chapter outlines strategies SEAs can leverage to drive and support meaningful engagement of local school boards in focused school turnaround efforts.

Policy Context

Successfully initiating and sustaining meaningful improvements in the lowest performing public schools in the United States is a pressing challenge for policy leaders and practitioners nationwide. We simply cannot afford, morally or economically, to continue to undereducate generations of students (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.). Traditional reform initiatives designed to incrementally improve schools in three to five years are incongruous with the urgency driving federal and state policies focused on turning around the lowest performing schools—schools that have effectively failed to educate generations of students and are characterized as “drop-out factories” (Duncan, 2009). If we want to gain traction on scale that is sustainable, local school boards have to play an intentional and strategic role in school turnaround efforts, and SEAs can and should serve as catalysts in these efforts.

As outlined in state constitutions, school boards are agents of the state charged with fulfilling the state's obligation to provide resident students with a public education (Kirst, 2008). Within specific parameters dictated by state and federal laws, local school boards have the legal authority to craft the conditions for districts to operate successfully. Yet, historically they have focused mainly on what have been referred to as the “killer b's” (i.e., books, budgets, buildings, buses; Hess & Meeks, 2011). They have not historically focused on academic achievement. This division of labor has evolved from efforts to avoid micromanaging—schools boards set policy and manage budgets, and superintendents run districts—but this overlooks the critical link between policies, budgets, and school-level practices. Current efforts to transform schools and districts in a significant and sustainable way require meaningful engagement of local school boards beyond the “killer b's” to more strategic work focused on dramatically changing the performance of failing schools on a compressed timeline.

Key Responsibilities of Local School Boards

Regardless of district size, school boards are responsible for governing a multidimensional system and complying with federal and state regulations

attached to a variety of funding streams. District central offices typically employ a variety of specialized personnel charged with administering each district and the schools that operate within it. The exception to this is in small, often rural, districts in which administrators generally must wear a number of hats (e.g., curriculum and special education). In the last 50 years, school boards' responsibilities have morphed from administering basic operations to aligning federal, state, and local policies, crafting and shepherding complex budgets, and hiring and evaluating superintendents responsible for leading districts within a high-stakes accountability environment (Kirst, 2008; Land, 2002).

As synthesized by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), school boards' primary responsibilities are: establish vision, articulate standards, conduct assessments, implement accountability systems, align programs and resources, cultivate a climate for learning, foster collaboration and community engagement, and manage a continuous improvement process. However, if the role of the school board can be boiled down to a single critical action, it would be the hiring and supervising of the superintendent charged with meeting specific performance goals (Maeroff, 2011).

Correlation Between School Board Actions and Student Outcomes

To create the optimal conditions for student outcomes, local school boards must understand how their macro-level decisions impact principals, teachers, and students and then align resources accordingly (Gremberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000). The literature examining the correlation between school board behavior and student outcomes is limited and somewhat dated given the current policy context. Nevertheless, the seminal multiyear Lighthouse Inquiry Project conducted by the Iowa School Boards Foundation from 1998-2000 documented a correlation between student achievement and the actions and beliefs of board members that has potential relevance today (Delegardelle, 2008). The original study and subsequent follow-up projects demonstrated that particular school board actions and beliefs transfer to district personnel and lead to better student outcomes, even in high poverty districts. Specifically, the Lighthouse study found the following school board characteristics present in high performing, high poverty districts and missing in low performing, high poverty districts:

- Elevating as opposed to accepting belief systems (e.g., board members see schools as elevating students' potential as opposed to seeing students' potential as fixed);
- Understanding and focusing on school renewal (e.g., board members understand improvement initiatives); and
- Demonstrating awareness of actions in buildings and classrooms (e.g., board members are knowledgeable about schools and specific goals; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000).

While school and district performance is influenced by multiple external factors, the Lighthouse Inquiry Project documented that school board members are positioned to make a difference. Given this correlation, SEAs cannot overlook the value of effectively building and leveraging board capacity in order to drive and sustain turnaround efforts.

Intentional goal setting and strategic planning are foundational to effective improvement efforts (National School Board Association, 2010; Rhim, 2013). Developing a coherent district mission and vision, along with a well-aligned strategic plan, can ensure that school board and district personnel have a clear understanding of priorities and a road map to achieve goals (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000; Walser, 2009). When turning around low-performing schools, this clarity and alignment can ensure that specific schools are prioritized when it comes to extending operational flexibility, targeting hiring, and distributing resources (e.g., willingness to extend the turnaround principal autonomy, increase the amount of time district administrators devote to visiting the school and supporting the principal).

A growing body of literature pertaining to effective school turnaround stresses the importance of school districts, as opposed to just individual schools, in achieving sustainable turnaround at scale (Education Resource Strategies, 2011). Districts, starting with their school boards and superintendents, need to set agendas and thereafter allocate resources and develop policies to support these agendas, including prioritizing schools identified for turnaround (Brinson, Kowal, & Hassel, 2007; Public Impact, 2008).

State Role in Optimizing School Boards in School Turnaround

State education agencies have multiple tools they can leverage to encourage and support local school boards' efforts related to turnaround. Building on the existing research on school boards and emerging turnaround efforts, three tools have particular promise: 1) prioritize and promote the role of school boards, 2) incentivize school board member training, and 3) develop meaningful accountability policies and systems. These three levers are explored in the following sections.

Prioritize Role of School Boards

State education agencies issue policies and promulgate regulations related to planning and implementing school turnaround initiatives. SEAs can prioritize the role of school boards by elevating their involvement from simply being signatories to active participants in planning; failure to engage school boards can undermine change efforts.

Newspaper reports and accounts from state officials working with districts to implement Race to the Top (RTTT) and School Improvement Grant (SIG) initiatives document that boards are often left out of planning and implementation. This exclusion can lead to school board members not understanding and

potentially resisting unpopular but necessary changes (e.g., removal of popular but ineffective school leaders, school closures; Rhim & Redding, 2011). For instance, in 2011, the Christina, Delaware school district embarked upon a turnaround effort in two local schools that entailed replacing a large number of teachers. While the school board had initially signed off on the turnaround efforts initiated under the state's Race to the Top grant, when the practical implications became public, the board reversed course and voted not to support the turnaround actions. The state intervened, threatening to withhold \$11 million of federal funds, and the board eventually supported the staff replacements (Mussoni, 2011). This incident highlights the key role school boards can play in turnaround efforts. If the Christina school board had been more substantively engaged in the planning process, the district could have preempted the spectacle that arose when it came time to implement the school turnaround plan.

Develop Policies and Allocate Resources to Support School Board Member Training

To be effective managers overall, and specifically to initiate, support, and sustain targeted school turnaround efforts, local school board members require a clear understanding of their role in district governance and substantive knowledge about what changes are required to dramatically improve schools. Training provides school board members the opportunity to learn about their key roles and responsibilities, as well as more substantive content related to education policy and practice (Carr, 2012; Walser, 2009). Unfortunately, training in general is an area where boards are underinvesting both in terms of time and resources (Rhim, 2013). This is particularly problematic when a district is embarking upon an ambitious turnaround effort that will require the school board to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to change, even in the face of discord (e.g., complaints stemming from changing school norms and traditions to improve instruction). To support effective turnaround efforts, board members need to be aware of the strategies and human dynamics in the school and community that are likely to accompany a vigorous turnaround effort.

Of note, training board members about how to use data is a priority for the National School Board Association (NSBA, 2012) and affiliated state associations. These groups promote data use as the foundation of meaningful planning and to hold superintendents accountable (NSBA, 2011). Research on school turnaround has demonstrated that planning and accountability are critical to success (Public Impact, 2007, 2008; Rhim, 2011). States can support and encourage turnaround-specific training by developing policies incentivizing school board members to obtain training and allocating resources to create a robust turnaround training portfolio.

Develop Policies to Support School Board Member Training

Twenty-three states require school board members to obtain training with varying levels of prescription, rigor, and compliance (NSBA, 2010). The state of Maine, for instance, requires new board members to participate in a single, two-hour orientation about freedom of information laws, while Texas requires new board members to complete at least 16 hours of training, specifies the focus (e.g., initial district orientation, orientation to state education code, team building), and requires experienced board members to complete at least eight hours each year. In New York, newly elected members are required to complete six hours of training regarding fiscal oversight and governance skills. Of the states that require training, most allow both the state school board association as well as other approved external vendors to provide the training.

Requirements, however, only have meaning if the training is high quality, compliance is tracked, and there are consequences for noncompliance. Enforcement provisions range from states simply requiring that districts report information about training to the state and the local community to the authority to remove board members who have not obtained the required training (e.g., Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Virginia). A NSBA (2010) survey regarding training requirements documented that it was extremely rare for the state commissioner or state board to actually exercise their authority related to the training requirement.

By way of example, following a school board scandal in Georgia, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the state has the authority to withhold funding from districts in which board members failed to comply with training requirements, but the state had never exercised this option (Badertscherv & Salzer, 2010). Due to concern about local school board capacity and a resulting crisis (i.e., loss of district accreditation), in 2012 the Georgia legislature added language that now permits the state to bar members from running for reelection if they have not completed their required training. Designating compliance with the training requirement as a criterion for reelection presumably infuses a degree of accountability into the requirement. Individual board members' ability to devote adequate time to obtaining training is a practical challenge that is difficult to overcome; especially in the majority of districts in which board members are essentially volunteers (i.e., paid less than \$1,000 a year for board service) and district budgets are perpetually tight. The SEA can help diminish this challenge by investing in developing high-quality opportunities that are readily accessible across the state, including distance-learning opportunities.

SEAs can also engage private philanthropies to support board training. For example, in Seattle, a local nonprofit associated with the district sponsors board retreats and training to build board members' capacity and improve board operations, management oversight, and support for student achievement (Institute

for a Competitive Workforce, 2012). In Texas, a group of philanthropies in partnership with the Center for Reform of School Systems offers an annual retreat for new board members. The Texas Education Agency also requires vendors interested in providing school board training to register with the state; the registration process requires vendors to meet specific standards to control for quality (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

Training Approaches

School board training approaches range from very structured and recurring training for boards and superintendents to relatively unstructured individual professional development (Rhim, 2013). For instance, Memphis participated in the Broad Foundation's Board Training offered by the Center for Reform of School Systems over the course of a year, and their chairperson credited the training with significantly improving board capacity. Board members in Alexandria, Virginia obtained board training through a national executive search firm. Building on findings from the Lighthouse Project documenting the correlation between effective school boards and student achievement, the state of Idaho provides ongoing intensive training to local school boards. The Lighthouse framework focuses on preparing board members to communicate a sense of urgency, focus on improvement, create conditions for district and school success, track progress, develop effective policies, and cultivate leaders (Delegardelle, 2008; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007).

Taking a different approach, the state of Montana hired school board coaches for its three lowest-performing districts to build rural school board members' capacity. The coaches work directly with school boards and provide them with guidance related to running effective meetings and maintaining a productive relationships with their superintendents as well as on more technical issues such as using data to inform policy. After two years of implementation, Montana officials have seen a dramatic switch in board agendas and a rise in levels of board involvement—a switch that is seen as positive and is credited with helping schools make notable academic improvements. The coaches have facilitated a shift to a more intentional discussion of academics (Rhim & Redding, 2011). Reflecting on the potent impact of intentionally building school board capacity, one official from the Montana Office of Public Instruction noted, "I have seen a huge switch from boards just talking about sports to talking about academics and following policies and procedures. They see that they set the tone for everything." A second official explained, "We had been hearing for years and years that the board is the decision-maker, and they need to set the right tone. We heard cries from across the state that they, the boards, were the biggest problem, but also could be the heart of the solution" (Rhim & Redding, 2013).

Training is generally funded at the local level, although some states fund their training through a combination of state and local funds. Allocating adequate time

and resources is a persistent challenge for school boards. Specialized training can be cost-prohibitive and, consequently, limited to large districts with correspondingly large budgets. Board member turnover can also be a challenge; it can be hard to justify the return on investment in training when board members cycle out of office every few years. Nevertheless, SEA investments in training are potentially a high leverage tool as it can build capacity that can pay dividends, especially in districts where limited board capacity has contributed to superintendent churn and operational dysfunction.

Establish Meaningful Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability to local constituents is a leading claim proffered regarding the merits of local school boards; local communities elect board members and therefore board members will be responsive and accountable to local communities. However, data regarding the extent to which board elections are generally contested—rarely—and low voter turnout raise questions regarding the validity of this accountability claim (Kowalski, 2002). In other words, the notion that local school board governance ensures a high level of accountability to local communities appears to be more façade than fact. Each year there are highly contested school board races (e.g., Los Angeles Unified School District in 2013). But, in general, the vast majority of school board members who wish to continue to volunteer significant quantities of time to govern local schools run unopposed and remain in office until they decide to leave (Kowalski, 2002; Samuels, 2011). Absent meaningful accountability for individual school board members, the SEA can develop policies to collectively hold school boards accountable.

Efforts to infuse accountability into public education include shifts from school board governance to mayoral control and a variety of school choice initiatives (e.g., charter schools and vouchers) that shift control to individual parents. The ultimate and most controversial manifestation of school board accountability is state statutes authorizing removal of locally elected boards or significant reconfiguration of their responsibilities under dire circumstances. Multiple cities have shifted from elected boards to mayoral control in an effort to improve district financial or operational health (e.g., Boston, Cleveland, New York, Washington, DC). Multiple states, (e.g., Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania) have passed legislation authorizing removal of elected boards and replacing them with appointed boards or emergency managers charged with turning around the district's fiscal operations. These efforts are generally highly controversial and, to date, have had mixed results (see, Hess, 2008; Rhee & Fenty, 2010; Wong & Shen, 2005).

A less explored option is state- or district-initiated school board evaluations. Initial guidance regarding the federal Race to the Top Districts grant competition included a requirement that districts conduct school board evaluations, but it lacked details regarding meaningful implementation. While dropped from the

final requirement, it spurred a preliminary discussion of the potential value and logistics of school board evaluations (e.g., National School Board Association, n.d.).

Potential strategies SEAs can explore to increase school board accountability include encouraging school boards to conduct rigorous self-evaluations, explicitly incorporating school board training and performance in existing state accountability systems (e.g., data dashboards, district report cards), and working with external entities to evaluate school boards. In instances of egregious behavior (e.g., inappropriate contracting, open meetings violations), SEAs can also take a proactive stance and pursue allegations of board member misbehavior that violates education codes and board ethics policies.

Based on years of school board dysfunction, in 2009 a local nonprofit in Pittsburgh initiated Board Watch. Local volunteers were trained to evaluate board members during meetings on five measures of good board governance: focus and mission, transparency, conduct, role clarity, and competency. Board Watch founder, Carey Harris, explained the program “is as much about holding the board accountable as it is about engaging the public” (Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012, p. 59). The organization releases report cards evaluating the board and making recommendations for improvement multiple times during the year (Maxwell, 2009).

The most significant challenge associated with regulatory attempts to introduce school board accountability measures is the previously mentioned conviction that locally elected school boards are a critical reflection of our democracy; infusing regulations into the selection process fundamentally conflicts with our notion of representative democracy. Nevertheless, in line with their constitutional obligation to provide a public education, SEAs can explore a variety of means to not only hold low-performing districts accountable for results but also the school board members responsible for making critical decisions that shape public schools.

Conclusions

Local school board governance is an historical carryover reflecting our rural roots as opposed to an intentional structure designed to produce optimal results for students. Whereas it was rational to elect local citizens to run small public schools to ensure the schools reflected the community’s values and distinct economy in the 19th century, today’s complex policy context and global economy could arguably benefit from a different structure. Nevertheless, our collective commitment to local control and school board governance runs deep; regardless of concerns about challenges involved with locally elected school board members governing complex systems, school boards are a mainstay of our public school governance structure. As we strive to address nagging concerns about

performance, it is critical that SEAs consider strategies to leverage their authority and resources to boost local school board capacity to turn around failing schools.

There is an established link between effective boards and effective schools and districts, but it is unclear whether the link is causal or correlational (i.e., are high performing districts able to recruit and sustain effective boards, or do effective boards lead to high performance?). In districts with low-performing schools, school boards can, and arguably should, play a central role in creating the right conditions to initiate, support, and sustain bold improvement efforts. To assume this important role, boards need to move past focusing on the “killer b’s” to a more sophisticated leadership model in which they intentionally set priorities, develop strategic plans, align resources, and hold key actors accountable for actions required to sustain a laser sharp focus on student outcomes.

As policy leaders at the federal, state, and local level continue to devote increasingly scarce resources to school turnaround efforts, local school boards must be part of the conversation if there is hope for dramatic and sustainable change. Rather than dismiss school boards from the conversations as antiquated holdovers from a different time and short of a massive overhaul of how school districts are governed, local school boards are positioned to play a critical role in turnaround.

Action Principles

Communicate importance of local schools boards to turnaround efforts

- Embed guidance related to meaningfully engaging local school board members as critical stakeholders positioned to shepherd coherent, effective, and sustainable turnaround efforts in training and written documentation related to federal and state interventions (e.g., ESEA Flexibility waivers, Race to the Top for states and districts, SIG, 21st Century Schools).
- Produce tools to assist a school board to develop strategic goals and robust implementation plans to drive focused, bold turnaround efforts and ensure the budget process and priorities align with the strategic plan.
- Create incentives for districts (e.g., waiver of state required administrative, streamlined reporting requirements) embarking upon turnaround efforts to nurture a culture of board professionalism that includes paying board stipends and allocating financial support for turnaround-specific board training opportunities.

Integrate local school boards in Regional Comprehensive Centers’ and Content Centers’ plans

- Promote meaningful local school board engagement and training as essential components of successful and sustainable school turnaround initiatives.

- Incorporate local school board training, coaching, support, and self-evaluation in individual state technical assistance plans developed by Regional Comprehensive Centers.

Develop policies and allocate resources to facilitate school board training

- Promote training requirements for new and experienced school board members focused on process as well as substantive issues critical to establishing conditions for district and school turnaround (e.g., effective superintendent hiring, supervision and evaluation, understanding data, negotiating for performance-based teacher assessment systems).
- Provide experienced board members, and especially board chairpersons, with access to relevant and timely training related to school turnaround.
- Develop tools to track and publish board training and capacity building efforts as part of broader state accountability systems.
- Incubate executive education opportunities with local institutions of higher education (e.g., colleges of education; colleges of business) to secure turnaround-specific leadership training opportunities for new and experienced board members in districts with low-performing schools identified for turnaround.

Engage external stakeholders to drive and support local school boards

- Network with regional philanthropies to invest in school board capacity building efforts in districts with schools identified for turnaround.
- Enlist the business community (e.g., local chambers of commerce with a vested interest in the success of public schools) to cultivate a sense of urgency related to school turnaround, invest in building board capacity, and promote board member accountability.
- Engage and support key associations' (e.g., state superintendents and school board associations) work to ensure they have the capacity to be key resources for local school boards embarking upon focused turnaround efforts.

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