Making the Case for Arizona School Board Training

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Abstract

A review of Arizona, Texas, New York, Georgia, and Connecticut's legal requirements regulating candidacy for local public school board found strong similarities of minimally low qualification requirements (ASBA, 2015; TASB, 2015; CABE, 2015; GSBA, 2015 & NYSSBA, 2015) however, the dichotomy lies in the fact that the legal duties and responsibilities of school board members are very extensive and highly complex. Being a school board member today requires perceptive characteristics, ethical behaviors, and sophisticated skill sets. Hess (2010) claims that school boards suffer from real and deep-seated problems. Dervarics and O'Brien (2011) found that one of the dozen danger signs of school boards is little professional development. Lee and Eadens' (2014) claim that targeted trainings could greatly enhance governance effectiveness. Unfortunately, there is not enough rigorous statistical research that consistently evaluates effectiveness of school board development that links to districtwide effectiveness. Using a Pearson's Chi-squared analysis, this study compared Arizona's school districts' effectiveness in relation to trainings. Comparing school years 2012/13 and 2013/14 district letter grades indicated that on average, districts who sent individuals to 2014 trainings had a higher district letter grade mean, witnessed their grades drop less on average, had a higher average grade percentage, dropped less on average grade percentages, and were more high-performing districts than those districts that opted against sending individuals to school board association sponsored trainings. Without engaging in targeted professional development provided by a state school board association, many board members might spend time micro-managing, instead of macro-leading.

Keywords

educational leadership; school boards; board training; school districts; district grades; school districts

Making the Case for Arizona School Board Training

Background

Resnick and Bryant (2008) believe that a reason to have elected school boards "is so that decisions affecting children and the school environment are shaped and approved by people who represent the community" and "school boards hold superintendents accountable for managing the schools….school board members, in turn, are themselves accountable to the public" (p. 8). There is wide variety of levels of public accountability for ineffective board members. Hess (2010) wrote about the frailties of school boards including the challenges for voters to hold elected representatives accountable, disproportional influences, lack of discipline and continuity, and boards that operate in isolation from civic leadership. Hess (2010) claims, "School boards possess real virtues, but they also may suffer from real and deep-seated problems" and in some districts, "elected boards have been blamed for a lack of coherence, discipline, and continuity" but, "despite the widespread complaints about board dysfunction and micromanagement, it's not clear that most superintendents see boards as the hindrance that popular critiques suggest" (p. 4).

After reviewing research descriptions of ineffective boards, Dervarics and O'Brien found that one of the dozen danger signs of school boards is little professional development (2011). The other danger signs were that school boards are:

> "only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning", "focused on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parental support,

> societal factors, or lack of motivation", "offer negative comments about students and teachers", "micro-manage day-to-day operations", "disregard the agenda process and the chain of command", "left out the information flow; little communication between board and superintendent", "quick to describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach", "looked at data from a *blaming* perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance", "little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers", "slow to define a vision", and "did not hire a superintendent who agreed with their vision". (p. 8)

A review of Arizona, Texas, New York, Georgia, and Connecticut's legal requirements regulating candidacy for local public school board found strong similarities. Based on these findings, prospective school board candidates must meet the following qualifications prior to being placed on the election ballot: be a registered voter, be a resident of the school district in which he or she resides for at least one year, if elected, cannot be employed by the district in which you live, if elected, and cannot have a spouse employed by the district. (ASBA, 2015; TASB, 2015; CABE, 2015; GSBA, 2015 & NYSSBA, 2015).

Although these qualifications are clearly minimal, the dichotomy lies in the fact that the legal duties and responsibilities of school board members summarized by the state school board associations in this same sample are very extensive and highly complex. In most states, statutes require school board members to execute specific duties. To name only a few, they typically include hiring and evaluating the district superintendent, setting and approving budgets, calling for budget related elections, setting employee salaries, closing and constructing schools, and adopting curriculum (ASBA, 2015).

As part of the governing board, in addition to the superintendent, school board members are also expected to follow and adhere to a strict code of ethics, which are often adopted as formal policies. These codes tend to address behavior, both inside and outside the boardroom. In a summary for the American School Board Journal, attributes of effective board members often include respecting the oath of office, working as a team, researching issues, asking tough questions, and avoiding a single issue approach (Blumsack & McCabe, 2015).

The Center for Public Education examined studies in research literature in depth including meta-analysis, case studies, district comparison studies, and reports and books and reasonably concluded "that school boards in *high-achieving* school districts look different, and that they often feature characteristics and approaches that differ, from those in *lower-achieving* districts" (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011, p. 4). From this preponderance of information, they established eight characteristics of effective boards (p. 5):

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 school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of 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 time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

5. Effective 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.

7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts. (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011)

A landmark study conducted for the Iowa Association of School Boards (Rice et al. 2000), further illustrated the need for school board members to possess and demonstrate a sophisticated skill set. This study involved interviewing 159 board members in three *high-achieving* and three *low-achieving* districts. The qualitative data was analyzed and recurring patterns were compared and contrasted. The research team reported similarities that included: caring about children, positive superintendent board relationships, and amicable relationships with other board members. Major differences which emerged from this study included high achieving district's board members having higher expectations for students than low achieving district's board members; and higher achieving board members having a deeper understanding and focus on school renewal and continuous improvement than board members in low-achieving districts (Rice, et al., 2000).

In a more recent study, Lee and Eadens (2014) conducted a quantitative study comparing board behavior during meetings in *high*, *medium*, and *low* achieving districts using a MANOVA. This study involved the researchers observing over 115 videos of board meetings. The

researchers reported statistically significant differences between the three groups. For example, board meetings in low-performing districts were less orderly along with the board members spending less time on agenda items dealing with student achievement than high performing district boards. Additional findings included low-performing board members not listening respectfully and having poorer working relationships with the governance team (Lee & Eadens, 2014). The evident disconnect between school board member legal qualifications and the multifaceted skills sets, knowledge and dispositions needed to be effective board members creates a compelling argument for comprehensive on-going board member training and evaluation. Lee and Eadens' summary indicates that this type of targeting training could greatly enhance governance effectiveness, "highly refined and target-enhanced school board training programs might lead to lasting governance success with superintendents in tandem with their board members, and could lead to more effective governance teaming that affects districts, and ultimately, student achievement" (p. 1).

States, including Arizona, typically have a school board association or another organization that conducts targeted trainings to improve school boards. Not being naive, board trainers well realize that being a board member requires very extensive and highly complex abilities, perceptive characteristics, ethical behaviors, and sophisticated skill sets to effectively rise to the challenges and ever increasing responsibilities that board members need today to not fall into the dangers of becoming low-performing boards in low-performing districts. Ironically, other than the studies listed above, there is not enough rigorous statistical research that consistently evaluates effectiveness of school board trainings that links to districtwide effectiveness.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to begin to conduct independent and unbiased examinations of Arizona School Boards Association trainings that were performed during the 2013/14 school year, specifically linking the trainings to district overall grade performance effectiveness. Based upon the impetus from an internal Faculty Grants Program award, educational leadership researchers at Northern Arizona University (NAU) collaborated with the Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) to ascertain any relationships between board trainings and district effectiveness and academic achievement/district grades. The general idea behind the study was to investigate any relationships between the school board trainings and district effectiveness. Researchers anticipated they would discover that the more that districts sent more individuals to board trainings, the higher the overall average of the districts' grades.

Method

Sample

The State of Arizona's auditor general website provides public domain annual district grades and performance and effectiveness data. Only public school districts that received an annual district-wide grade, at the time this analysis occurred that were listed on the auditor general's website, were included in this study so that effectiveness comparisons via statistical analysis could occur. One hundred fifty-two school districts were involved in the quantitative analysis. These districts grades were chosen solely based upon the data displayed from the website's school district reports and publications for school year 2013-14. These grades represent the dependent/outcome variable of the data analysis.

Grades were initially coded by the researchers and a graduate assistant, were independently verified by additional researchers, and were input as A=5, B=4, C=3, D=2, F=1. To maintain anonymity, ASBA provided only the number of trainees from each school district for each training during this school year, representing the independent variable. The districts sent school board presidents and governing board members, superintendents and assistant superintendents, and a wide variety of other individuals to their trainings during school year (SY) 2014. Some districts sent no one to trainings while other districts sent many. For this analysis, districts that sent at least one individual to at least one ASBA training during the year were separated from districts that sent no one to any ASBA training during the school year.

Limitations and Assumptions

The data used in this study was delimited to regular pubic school districts in Arizona only; not special, private, or charter districts or districts that do not receive an annual grade. Additionally, this study was limited to only Arizona school board training data for a single school year from July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014, referred to as SY 2014. Researchers in this study realize that during this period some districts might have sent individuals to regional or national school board trainings, other state's trainings, or may have hired consultants to train locally; however, this study did not examine that data. Researchers in this study assumed accuracy from the data that was displayed on the auditor general's website and from the data provided from ASBA.

Analysis

In Table 1's crosstabulation, *high-performing* (represented via 2.00) are districts that earned an A or B district grade for SY 2014 and likewise, *low-performing* districts (represented

by 1.00) earned D or F for SY 2014. School districts that did not send anyone to an ASBA training during this school year are represented by a zero in the training column; likewise, the column with a 1 represents districts that sent at least one individual to any of ASBA trainings during this same school year. Districts that did not receive an official grade for SY 2014, even if they sent individuals to trainings, were precluded from this study because there is no way other efficient and reliable method to compare their effectiveness or academic achievement performance grade.

The information within the crosstabulation in Table 1, indicates that of the districts that did not send anyone to any ASBA training in SY 2014, earned less A's and B's, were essentially less *high-performing*, than expected (13 earned, compared to 15.3 that would be expected by chance alone). The districts that did not send individuals to training during SY 2014, also earned more D's and F's, were more *low-performing*, than expected (6 earned, compared to 3.8 expected by chance alone). The implications that might be inferred from this statistical analysis demonstrates that when districts did not send their school board members, superintendents, or others to be trained at an ASBA training, they performed more poorly on the aforementioned measures.

On the contrary, this same analysis in Table 1 illustrates that districts who did send individuals to ASBA trainings in SY 2014, earned more A's and B's, were more *high-performing*, than expected (109 earned, compared to 106.8 expected by chance alone). These districts that sent individuals to at least one training, earned less D's and F's, were more *low-performing*, than expected (24 earned, compared to 26.3 expected by chance alone). Another words, overall, districts that sent someone to training fared better with annual district grades in SY 2014. It appears that sending individuals to training in SY 2014 had a positive impact or

relationship at the district level. In this case, it does appear to possess face validity; simply stated, trained districts did better.

Table 1

*High Low Perform * Trained Not Trained Crosstabulation*

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
High Low Perform * Trained Not Trained	152	100.0%	0	0.0%	152	100.0%

			Trained Not Trained		
			0	1	Total
High Low Perform	1.00	Count	6	24	30
		Expected Count	3.8	26.3	30.0
		Std. Residual	1.2	-.4	
	2.00	Count	13	109	122
		Expected Count	15.3	106.8	122.0
		Std. Residual	-.6	.2	
Total		Count	19	133	152
		Expected Count	19.0	133.0	152.0

2.00 high performing, 1.00 low performing; 0 no training, 1 training.

Pearson's Chi-square tests are typically used to indicate the statistical significance or correlation of the results of a crosstabulation of two categorical variables that are independent of each other. Table 2's Chi-squared test can be utilized to effectively determine significant differences between frequencies that are observed and expected. This can determine if the number in a category differs significantly from the number expected due to sampling variation

differences. Although this test was not statistically significant, it revealed critically important differences and trends in means.

Table 2

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.922[a]	1	.166		
Continuity Correction[b]	1.163	1	.281		
Likelihood Ratio	1.735	1	.188		
Fisher's Exact Test				.214	.141
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.910	1	.167		
N of Valid Cases	152				

a. 1 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.75.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table.

Table 3 represents analysis of all districts that sent no one to an ASBA training in SY 2014. The first row is the overall mean grade (A-F) of these districts, 3.48 is almost midway between the grades C and B. The second line is the mean grade difference between the SY 2013 and SY 2014, -.08 indicates that the overall mean grade slightly decreased the second year in 2014. The row labeled Percentage 2014 represents the overall mean grade percentage (74.8) when A was recoded as 90% or above, B was 80-89%, C was 70=79%, D was 60-69%, and F was 59% and below for districts that sent none to training in SY 2014. The mean grade percentage difference between SY's 2013 to 2014 when districts that received no grade change between these two years were removed, actually decreased the second year by -1.25, or a quarter of a grade letter decrease (-.25). The row next to last is the mean grade percentage difference between SY's 2013 to 2014 for districts that send no one to a training, -.40.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Districts That Sent None to Training

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
coded 2014 a=5, b=4	25	1	5	3.48	1.194
Grade Difference	25	-3	2	-.08	.954
High Low Perform	19	1.00	2.00	1.684	.477
Percentage2013	25	60.00	90.00	75.200	10.049
Percentage2014	25	50.00	90.00	74.800	11.944
Recode GD	25	-9.00	6.00	-.240	2.861
Nozeros GD percent	8	-20.00	20.00	-1.250	15.526
Nozeros GD	8	-3.00	2.00	-.250	1.752
Percentage Difference	25	-20.00	20.00	-.400	8.406
Valid N (listwise)	7				

Likewise, analysis of Table 4 represents all of the districts that did send at least one individual to a training in SY 2014. The first row is the overall mean grade (A-F) of these districts, 3.63 is more than midway between the grades C and B. The second line is the mean grade difference between the SY's 2013 and 2014, -.03 indicates that the overall mean grade slightly decreased the second year in 2014. This decrease is less than the decrease for the districts that sent none to training in the previous table. The row entitled Percentage 2014 represents the overall mean grade percentage (76.3) for districts that did send individuals to at least one SY 2014 training. This mean grade percentage is higher than the percentage from the previous table where none were sent to training. The mean grade percentage difference between SY's 2013 to 2014 when districts that received no grade change between these two years were removed, actually decreased the second year by -1.05%, a tenth of a letter grade decrease (-.10); a smaller decrease than the previous table. The next to last row is the mean grade percentage from SY's 2013 to 2014 for districts that did send individuals to training; note

this percentage -.32 is less of a decrease than the districts that did not send individuals to training, as listed in the previous table.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Training Group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
coded 2014 a=5	182	2	5	3.63	.911
Grade Difference	182	-1	2	-.030	.575
High Low Perform	133	1.00	2.00	1.819	.386
Percentage 2013	182	60.00	90.00	76.648	8.161
Percentage 2014	182	60.00	90.00	76.318	9.113
Recode GD	182	-3.00	6.00	-.098	1.724
Nozeros GD percent	57	-10.00	20.00	-1.052	10.296
Nozeros GD	57	-1.00	2.00	-.105	1.029
PercentageDifference	182	-10.00	20.00	-.329	5.748
Valid N (listwise)	38				

Overall, there is a trend in all variables that indicate that grades went down in general in school districts from 2013 to 2014. However, when compared to districts who did not send anyone to training, those districts who went to training had a higher grade mean in 2014 (3.63 for training as compared to 3.48 for no training), saw their grades go down less on average (-.03 for training as compared -.08 for no training), had a higher average grade percentage when A's were coded as 90, B's as 80, C's as 70, D's as 60, and F's as 50 (76.318% for training as compared to 74.8% for no training), dropped less on average grade percentage (-.329% for training group, -.4% for non-training group), dropped less on average when only those districts who had grade changes from 2013-2014 were taken into account (-.105 for training as compared to -.250 for no training), and dropped less on average grade percentage when only those districts who had grade changes from 2013-2014 were taken into account (-1.052% for training as compared -1.25% for

no training). Districts that sent school board members to training were more higher performing districts as measured by state letter-grade systems than those districts that opted against sending school board members to ASB trainings.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, researchers expected and indeed found that the more districts sent more individuals to board trainings, the higher the overall average of the district's grades were. Results of this study appear to indicate that for increasing amounts of members that school districts send, there may be a direct relationship associated with having a positive affect on district effectiveness, in regards to overall academic achievement performance. However, due to the specificity and limitations of this particular study, it may not be reliably generalized to other states across the nation without independent analysis, which researchers highly recommend. Future research should also examine other non-state sponsored board trainings as well as private, charter, and special districts from every state to better understand the relationships and compare to the findings of this study. This work is important and could lead to major changes in the way board are trained and prepared. Since ultimately, school boards carry with them the prodigious responsibility of making decisions that impact future generations, why would professionally developing governing boards not be one of the highest priorities today?

Implications for Practice

It is unrealistic to devote time and resources in attempting to change the minimal legal requirements for becoming a public school board member. Laws impacting local control of schools are difficult to pass and changes in state constitutions can be close to impossible. If

qualifications for school board members cannot be increased, a case can be made that energies must be dedicated to the training and professional development side of the equation.

Although research in the area of school board effectiveness is in an early stage, this study supports the need to develop school board policies and practice targeting ongoing board professional development. This training should be research based and focus on the skills, knowledge, and dispositions which support systems continuous improvement.

Possible programs which should be explored include a national certification program for school board members which would embrace intensive training in policy governance. Carver and Carver (2006) book, *Reinventing Your Board*, states that policy boards should spend a majority of their time learning how to make informed, visionary and creative decisions. Unfortunately, without engaging in training workshops provided by a state school boards association, many board members spend their time micro-managing instead of macro leading.

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