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The Board of Trustees' Professional Development and Effects on Student Achievement

by

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## INTRODUCTION

With the pressure for school districts to perform well on state assessments (Brown, Jones & Scheunermann, 2012) and the school boards blamed for the problems within a school district (Fridley, 2006), the inquiry of how to increase student achievement continues to be a forerunner in the circles of educators, parents, business and community members. Can professional development for board members increase student achievement?

### *Statement of the Problem*

Since the publication of a *Nation at Risk* and the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and *Race to the Top*, public schools have been charged with improving their schools and student academic performance. The pressure for school districts to perform well on the states' tests has increased substantially and has become the driving force for most school leaders (Brown, Jones & Scheunermann, 2012). Many of the problems of school districts, especially student achievement, have been blamed specifically on the school board (Fridley, 2006).

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to develop an understanding of the perceptions of a superintendent, school board president and school board secretary on professional development and its impact of student achievement.

### *Research Question*

The following question guided the research study:

1. What are the perceptions of a superintendent, school board president and school board secretary on professional development and its impact of student achievement?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research utilized the grounded theory approach where data is accumulated, analyzed and a theory evolves from the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 3) defined grounded theory as one that the situation coincides with the research or

By “fit” we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by “work” we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior in the study.

Grounded theory is tantamount to a reflective evolving hypothesis. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 208) articulated it as

...grounded theory is both required by and contributes to the further development of an emergent design; it is as the theory is adjusted that next steps become defined and the study can continue. Grounded theory is capable of and requires continuous expansion and refinement; when the possibility for such expansion ceases the possibility for further study also ceases.

The interviews along with the transcribing and coding conducted reflect this research data; consequently, recognized as grounded theory (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### ***Introduction***

The review of literature will examine the history of the superintendent position, the creation of the board of trustees, superintendents' and board members' responsibilities, the relevance of professional development, and the value of agreeable board-superintendent relationships. These subjects are the basis for the research question.

### **History**

#### ***History of the Superintendent***

The school board existed prior to the onset of the superintendent (Moody, 2011) but due to the increased numbers of students and the elevated difficulties of governing school districts,

the position of superintendent was conceived (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh & Sybouts, 1996). These positions originated in 1837 in Louisville, Kentucky and Buffalo, New York (Sharp & Walter, 1997).

### ***History of the School Board***

Originally in the United States, the school boards consisted of local townspeople (Owen and Ovando, 2000). The power of local schools was steadily changed from the religions sector and private businesses having control, to the public and civil entities (Knezevich, 1984). The driving force behind the design of our board of trustees was to keep the schools in close proximity to their people, not out of the development of a master plan (Moody, 2011).

## **Roles**

### ***Superintendent Leadership Role***

The sole person with the qualification and the means to access the power of the school board, all of the district's staff, local and state government officials, parental groups and teacher associations is the superintendent (Bird, 2010). Characteristics of an effective leader include possessing strong ethics, faith in positive growth and steadfastness as well as comprehending change and improving relationships (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003) and know how to cooperate and create (Fullan, 2002). For the purpose of this research study, the responsibilities of Texas superintendents include the following:

Assuming administrative responsibility and leadership for the planning, operation, supervision, and evaluation of the education programs, services, and facilities of the district. They are also responsible for the annual performance appraisal of the district's staff, managing the day-to-day operations of the district, preparing and submitting to the board of trustees a proposed budget, recommendations and overseeing for policies to be adopted and overseeing the implementation of adopted policies. He or she shall also be providing leadership for the attainment of student achievement, organizing the district's central administration and performing any other duties assigned by action of the board of trustees (TEC § 11.201).

### ***School Board Role***

The *Center for Public Education* (2011) illustrated eight practices of competent school board members. These include clearly defining the goals for their commitment to raising student achievement, sharing the belief that all children can learn, focusing on policies that increase student achievement, collaborating with the staff and community in setting and achieving goals, utilizing and monitoring the district's data, aligning and sustaining sources with the district improvement plan, working as a team and partaking in professional development. The school board's responsibilities as stated by the Texas Education Code in section 11.151:

Seek to establish working relationships with other public entities to make effective use of community resources, to serve the needs of public school students in the community, adopt a vision statement and comprehensive goals for the district and the superintendent and monitor progress toward those goals. The board will also seek to establish performance goals for the district concerning and ensure that the superintendent is accountable for achieving performance results, recognizes performance accomplishments and takes action as necessary to meet performance goals. They will also adopt a policy to establish a district- and campus-level planning and decision-making process, publish an annual educational performance report as required, adopt an annual budget for the district, adopt a tax rate each fiscal year as required under, monitor district finances to ensure that the superintendent is properly maintaining the district's financial procedures and records, ensure that district fiscal accounts are audited annually and publish an end-of-year financial report for distribution to the community. In addition, the board will conduct elections as required by law, by rule, adopt a process through which district personnel, students or the parents or guardians of students, and members of the public may obtain a hearing from the district administrators and the board regarding a complaint, make decisions relating to terminating the employment of district employees employed under a contract to which Chapter 21 applies, including terminating or not renewing an employment contract to which that chapter applies and carry out other powers and duties as provided by this code or other law.

### **Professional Development**

Superintendents and board members are in agreement that important components to a successful board of trustees include training and evaluation (Rice, 2010). This training is the foundation for an effective board and can provide insights, basic awareness with board policies and procedures as well as a decrease in the learning curve (Zion, 2008). In particular, for new

board members, it is of utmost importance that they understand their roles and duties to avoid over-stepping boundaries, challenging team building activities, and personal agendas (Rice, 2010). Since board members serve terms of two to four years, turnover is unavoidable; consequently, the need of training for the newly elected board members is a necessity (Zion, 2008). Without this training, according to *The Center for Public Education* (2011), the result may be an ineffective school board.

For the superintendent and the board to work together from the inception of their relationship, professional development is a necessity must. For example, the superintendent's contract should represent the vision of the school board and superintendent's future relationship and professional development may aid in developing these (Feuerstein, 2008). Historically, proponents of training for boards have proven records such as Doug Miller, who worked for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for 25 years. He fought policy makers on the issue of implementing professional development and because of this, student achievement increased in Missouri over the course of the past five years (Hirsh, 2010). More states are increasing accountability for professional development among board members. New York State has added opportunities for professional development because of newly mandated fiscal training for school boards and the training targets self-reflection of principles, approaches and refining the processes for responsible group decision making (Kamler, 2009).

### **School Board-Superintendent Relationships**

Most successful districts have in place that the superintendent and the school board work towards the same goals and sustaining the students' best interests first in the decision making process (Santiago-Marullo, 2010). According to *The Center for Public Education* (2011) districts indicative of a strong board-superintendent relationship had better student achievement than

those that did not. A team of eight should move in the direction of the same goals within the boundaries of their roles and a specific, agreed upon definition of the relationship between the board and the superintendent must exist; otherwise, a lack of cohesiveness may develop which can lead to dysfunction of this relationship (Johnson, 2012). With the continuous change in school boards and limited terms trustees can serve, board-superintendent relations are apt to be strained; therefore, this affects the decision making process and policy development (Kamler, 2009). This further illustrates the importance of creating and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship among the superintendent and all of the board members within boundaries of their roles and responsibilities.

Some suggested behaviors for developing a good relationship between the superintendent and the board of trustees include allowing opportunities for the members of the board to receive positive press, displaying respect toward board members at all times, especially in the public eye, sharing all written communications with every board member, ensuring board members' votes prior to making recommendations on important issues, and assuming a vote against a recommendation is based on principle (McAdams, 2009). Some others include avoiding the utilization of a standing committee when making decisions for operational areas, putting into effect productive board training, immediately clearing up constituent complaints, encouraging business, civic and community leaders interests in the district, and maintaining constant superintendent and school board communications (McAdams, 2009). The study *Is Discord Detrimental? Using Institutional Variation to Identify the Impact of Public Governing Board Conflict on Outcomes* (2012) Grisson researched intra-board conflict. Using the private sector, it drew upon small work teams such as city councils, municipal boards or county boards to establish probabilities about the relationship between results and one viewpoint of board

dynamics. School board members and superintendents in California were surveyed and the findings revealed that interpersonal dynamics should be incorporated into boards' decision-making process to increase board effectiveness.

In Minnesota, the majority of superintendents reported viewed their relationship with their board of trustees very positively (Nelson, 2010). These positive school board relations were linked to important job factors, such as high job satisfaction, equitableness of the board's superintendent's evaluation and the overall support for the superintendent. In addition, the two policies for the behavior of the board deemed extremely vital were partitioning the board's policy from the superintendent's administrative responsibilities and making decisions in the interests of all students and the district (Nelson, 2010).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***Introduction***

Naturalistic inquiry was chosen as the methodology for this study. The naturalistic study design emerges as the study progresses; hence, the context becomes more descriptive, authentic and in-depth (Erlandson, et al., 1993).

### ***Research Design***

For the proposed research, the case study design was utilized. A thorough naturalistic study, inclusive of case studies, has the potential to coming closer to a detailed explanation than other research strategies (Erlandson et al., 1993). Qualitative research allows exploration into a topic, where themes and questions may emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This case study examined the perceptions of a superintendent, school board president and school board secretary on professional development and its impact of student achievement. The interview data provided thick description and was analyzed for themes.

### *Instrumentation*

The dominant instrument of choice for naturalistic inquiry is the human being (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative study allows the researcher to formulate themes and go beyond any pre-determined categories and utilize a “value free” approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The research method of this qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to be in control of the interview yet both the interviewer and the interviewee are free to venture onto new leads (Bernard, 2005).

The researcher explained the purpose of the research and emphasized that the anonymity of each of the respondents would be respected and uncompromised. Next, the consent to participate in research was explained and both the researcher and respondents signed the consent to research form. Prior to recording the interview, permission was asked along with the assurance that the recordings would be destroyed after the completion of the transcriptions and each respondent agreed.

### *Participants*

A public school superintendent, the board of trustees' president and the board of trustees' secretary, the participants, were inclusive in this purposeful sample (Erlandson et al., 1993). To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used to identify participants. The researcher chose participants employed by the same district to gain perspectives from various views of the same board of trustees. Lincoln and Guba recommend the researcher have a purpose when choosing a sample population (1985). This school district is located in south central Texas, comprised of approximately 22,500 students, 24.8% African-American, 51.5% Hispanic, 18.3% white, 4% American Indian, 1.8 % Asian, 3% Pacific Islander, and 2.9% more than one race (T.E.A, 2012).

The participants were interviewed about their perceptions on professional development and its impact on student achievement.

The superintendent of Alpha district, 29 total years' experience in education, and 15 as a superintendent in four other districts and has held his current position for the past six years. The school board president, a former teacher and administrator, has held his board position for the past four years, the first two as a member, the third as vice-president and the current one as president. The board of trustees' secretary has held her present-day position for the past two years.

### ***Transcribing and Coding***

The date, time range and the location of each interview was recorded on a small audio recorder and in the researcher's notes. After the completion of each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed in their entirety in a Microsoft Word document. The word document included columns containing the pseudonyms, the interviewer's and participants' questions and responses, and themes, if any, for each response. To simplify this large amount of data coding was used (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Each transcript was coded first for key words and phrases including educational leadership, professional development, board conflict, board unity, and trust, among others, using inductive analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Following the first draft of coding, a second review for further analysis was completed (Reissman, 1993) where additional interpretation of the data arose.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis began with the reading of the literature and continued until the project's conclusion. Naturalistic inquiry when analyzing the data, "The design of naturalistic inquiry

cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 225) continues throughout the research process.

### **TRUSTWORTHINESS AND CREDIBILITY**

To ensure that qualitative research is trustworthy and credible, it must consist of transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was the main strategy applied to establish trustworthiness. As the study progressed, steps were taken to “...validate each against at least one other source and/or second method” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 283).

#### ***Transferability***

According to Lincoln and Guba (1995) transferability pertains to the “...the degree of transferability is a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts, what we shall call ‘fittingness.’ Fittingness is defined as the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts” (p. 124). The respondents were interviewed separately; hence, if interviewed again with the same or similar questions; theoretically, the same information should be dispensed.

#### ***Dependability***

If a study was repeated with similar factors, the findings would be replicated is called dependability or consistency (Erlandson et al., 1993). A dependability audit provides a way to determine the dependability of the research and includes an “audit trail” that may consist of documentation such as notes, journals, critical incidents, etc., and this is done throughout the investigation (Erlandson et al., 1993). Such an audit was conducted by the researcher in the form of notes and additional documents. Feedback was elicited from a confrere from the university.

### ***Confirmability***

The researcher's purpose is to remain objective to during the course of the investigation which is assured because of the methodology that can be demonstrated and that the biases of the researcher are minimized as much as possible since it is not realistic that one can be completely objective (Erlandson et al., 1993). Because the goal of the researcher is to establish confirmability, a confirmability audit should be done with a person independent of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993). This audit was done when the processes of the research were viewed and feedback conveyed by a colleague. The recordings of the respondents were transcribed, and then coded by the researcher.

### **Significance and Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of a superintendent, school board president and school board secretary on professional development and its impact on student achievement. Qualitative research "...crosses the humanities and the social and physical sciences ...is many things at the same time ...they are committed to the naturalistic perspective, and to the human experience" (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 4); thereupon, allowed the researcher to embrace the emergence of discoveries. The combination of the different perspectives of a superintendent, school board president and school board secretary from the same district exalts the results of this research in this field of study.

## **RESULTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study amassed an understanding of how professional development for board members can increase student achievement from a South Central Texas School district from the

perspectives of the board of trustees' primary players, the superintendent, the president of the school board and the board's secretary.

### **PARTICIPANTS IN STUDY**

This qualitative study included participants from the same south central Texas school district: a public school superintendent, the board of trustees' president and the board of trustees' secretary. They were chosen by the researcher to gain perspectives from their varying roles among the same board of trustees. The participants' experiences in education deviate and ranges from two years to 35 years. The demographics consisted of an African-American male, a Hispanic male and a Hispanic female with ages ranging from 30 to 66.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

#### **Mr. Salinger**

The first to be interviewed was Mr. Salinger, the school board president. Formerly a teacher and administrator with over thirty years experience, has held his board position for the past four years, the first two as a member, the third as vice-president and the current one as president. Mr. Salinger provided valuable discernment because of his roles as an educator, board member and role as board president. When asked if he would describe himself as an educational leader, he responded:

When I decided to run for the board I felt that one of my biggest assets would be I was an ex-educator. I knew what was going on in the schools. I knew the operations of the education process, and I felt that it was being a plus to lead. Being a board member and the board president that I am one step ahead of what's going on with the information because I think I know the processes being that I am an ex-educator, and I am glad I did what I did because I think it's been a plus for the school district.

The location of the interview was a local restaurant chosen by the respondent.

**Mrs. Perigo**

Mrs. Perigo, the board of trustees' secretary, was the second person to be interviewed and has held this position for the past year. While employed previously by the district, she held a similar job in the superintendent's office for a period of one year. Mrs. Perigo provided the unique perspective of the board's secretary and insights others have not been privy to due to the nature of her position. When asked about her perspective on the vision of the board of trustees she responded:

With seven board members, they all have different opinions, so Dr. Millberger and the administration, since they know what's best, because they know the administrative functions that go with it and the ramifications for it and offer their support. I feel that it is student success, getting grades up, you know, preparing them for college, moving on, graduation rates, and all of that. I think ultimately, that is what they want.

The interview was held at a restaurant mutually convenient for both parties.

**Dr. Milberger**

Dr. Milberger, superintendent of schools, was the last to be interviewed. He has 29 total years' experience in education, 15 in the position as superintendent in four other districts and has been in the current district for the past six years. As the leader of the district, the information departed from him was of exceeding value. When asked about the importance of professional development for the board of trustees, Dr. Milberger shared the following:

Well, the importance of professional development is to provide the board with the

necessary tools to function as a team of eight or as individual board members. But it can be only as good as the individual allows and what the individual is willing to follow through with.

This interview took place in the office of the superintendent.

## FINDINGS

Utilizing the code analysis process, three interrelated themes emerged with regard to board members' professional development and the effect on student achievement. These included board members' roles, the positive affect of professional development and personal agendas of school board members.

### *Board Members' Roles*

All three of the respondents showed a strong correlation in their perceptions of the board members not understanding their roles and/or not abiding by them. Mr. Salinger explained when one does not understand his or her roles as a board member, they make untrue assumptions:

They understand their role as a board member they're only there officially when we have an official board meeting. Other than that, they forget, we do not have the power. Once we leave that official board meeting, that's it, kay?

Mrs. Perigo explained that when a board member does not adhere to his or her role and allows other factors to influence the team of eight, the result may be a divided board. She explained, "Ultimately, I feel everyone wants to benefit the students. Behaviorally, it is clear that certain individuals have that foggy, it gets foggy and they kind of steer off course. ...so the board becomes divided on certain issues." Dr. Milberger also commented on the board member role confusion:

The vision of the trustees is the over-site of the district. The over-site means to hire a superintendent to manage the district. That's it. ...The role is to set goals, provide mission, visions, and make sure to provide policy and to hire the superintendent.

He elaborated on the consequences of not abiding by their roles by saying, "...When board members do not understand their roles and responsibilities. Right there. That undermines and prevents the district from achieving the goal of excellence in the district.

### *Professional Development*

When asked about the importance of professional development, without hesitation, all three informants answered that they thought it was indispensable. Mr. Salinger made it clear, "Professional development should be a priority for every board member." Mrs. Perigo responded:

Well, it helps them to make better decisions in the board meetings and the direction the district is going to go. ...So ultimately they take it back to their students so it's a good thing that they attend these conferences. ...I think it prepares them to make good decisions.

Dr. Milberger succinctly stated, "Well, the importance of professional development is to provide the board with the necessary tools to function as a team of eight or as individual board members."

### *Personal Agendas*

None of the interview questions asked specifically about board members having personal agendas but each respondent, more than once mentioned them. Mr. Salinger pontificated:

When we start thinking about personal agendas or something, we've lost it, then we don't belong there. ...Communication and personal agendas, and you know, maybe I don't like

all of the board members; I don't see it that way. I'm sorry, we're there and I keep and sometimes I mention that to the board members, remember we are not here for that we are here, not for personal agendas, we are here for the kids.

When asked about obstacles in achieving a cohesive board, Mrs. Perigo responded:

Some of the board wants more control than others, even if they're not in the president's role, or an officer's role for that matter, so it's difficult for our board to get along and at times they have personal agendas and others who keep a clear focus of why they are there. ...The politics.

When Dr. Milberger was asked about what surprised him most about being a superintendent, he didn't complain about the long hours or the daily demands placed upon him, he shared that what surprised him most was board members with personal agendas:

You know, two or three things have surprised me the most, being a superintendent. Number one is the number of board members that come to the board with agendas. And those agendas are something other than policy, hiring superintendents or budget. That surprises me. The other thing is that some board members are in it for personal ally for some kind of gain instead of service.

In its entirety, all three respondents expressed that if the board of trustees received solid professional development with the emphasis on defined school board member roles, and implemented it which includes eliminating personal agendas, the district will have increased student achievement. Dr. Milberger construed:

Even though they have run for school board for other reasons sometimes, these are the responsibilities they have. Policies, mission, budget and if we stick to these things, we will have a successful district. ... So that is important to understand the role is to be over-

site, not to be a manager. Once they have a clear understanding of that, the district will be a good operational district. What you learn in professional development is the most effective and efficient districts are the ones that you never hear about a school board member. That means they are efficient and they are effective districts, yes.

Mr. Salinger elaborated on what surprised him most about being a board member:

I feel my role is to respect every board member, our team of eight, even our superintendent. ... forget the politics, we're not politicians. ... sometimes we forget is that we are there for one purpose and that is for the kids.

Mrs. Perigo expressed her frustration when the board members lose sight of the goal of increasing student achievement:

I'm a parent of students in the district and at times when I see, you know, their focus blurred, it upsets me, it angers me, it discourages from leaving my children there. ... It shouldn't be that way, you know, with their personal agendas, working against one another.

Perhaps Dr. Milberger said it best, "I feel that professional development in understanding their roles and vision and setting goals and what they want the superintendent to do is have as a priority, to increase student achievement."

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