

SCHOOL BOARDS IN TRANSITION:  
AN EXAMINATION OF BOARD MEMBER INDUCTION

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of  
BRIDGET EVELYN LEWIS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is without question that my experience as an educator has been enhanced as a result of my work in the doctoral program at Washington State University. It is not any one aspect of this program that influenced me; it is the cumulative effect of the academic influence, the collaborative nature of the cohort model, and perhaps most importantly, the influence of the people with whom I was able to experience this process with. The collegial nature and expertise shared among my colleagues in each class added value to the journey.

As a result of my administrative journey, I have become intrigued by this context whereby lay citizens, through elected seats on a school board, are charged with providing leadership, along with the superintendent, to an educational system. Through my learning in the WSU Superintendent Certification program we began to explore how these two leadership entities blend together to accomplish significant work. It was in the “real world,” where I began to see the complexities of the work with school boards and one of those complexities was the effect of transition on the capacity of a school board to function effectively. As I began to contemplate what strategies might alleviate some of the effects of transition as a result of board member turnover, a focus on induction practices through the real experiences of current board members became the intention of my study.

It is with full gratitude that I thank my current superintendent and participatory board members for the generosity displayed in time and thought related to their experiences related to induction. And last, I am incredibly grateful to the influence of all three of my committee members for their support and guidance throughout the process. I am indebted to Dr. Gail Furman for her quiet, strong, and skillful way of sharing her expertise and the supportive and thoughtful nature of her teaching. The ever evasive enthusiasm and positive attitude of Dr. Gene Sharratt was an impactful complement to the expertise he shared that he has accumulated over many, many years of working with school boards. And a special thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Paul Pitre for his guidance, support, and patience.

SCHOOL BOARDS IN TRANSITION:  
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Abstract

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The overall purpose of this study was to examine and inform the process of school board member induction in a local school district using action research methodology. This study was conducted in a large, urban school district, where in addition to adding two new school board members within a two year span, recently a third new member was selected. Data were collected through interviews with experienced board members and the most recently appointed board member. Additionally, the perspective of the superintendent was included through the role of co-researcher. This study was guided by these research questions: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process? (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new members? (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process, contributing to the development of a new team and readying the new member to function in their new role? (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board? and (e) What improvements can be made to the induction process used in this district?

As a result of collaborative analysis sessions with the superintendent, a number of conclusions and recommendations were generated. First, when a school board experiences

transition, the process of inducting the new member or members is critically and can be leveraged as a board development practice. The second is that the superintendent/board relationship is not only a multi-faceted and essential association, the relationship among board members can also be complex, and when a new board member joins the leadership team, it has an effect on the entire team. Third, the role of board member requires specific technical knowledge in addition to process knowledge. Last, the process of induction is complex and should be seen as an on-going professional learning experience for the entire team versus a one-stop isolated training episode that focuses only on the new board member. Each of these conclusions led to recommendations for future inductions.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. My husband, Pete, is an inspiration to me, and I am a better person for having him in my life. I learn daily from his incredible leadership capacity and his expertise in the educational field. Without his unconditional love and support, this endeavor would not have been possible for me. Our children, Scott, Sara, Travis, and Casey, have not only inspired me by their youthful engagement with the world, their educational experiences motivate me to continue to strive to contribute to the lives of young people, and I am so grateful for their influence on my life and for the energy they give me. My siblings, parents, and grandparents have always supported and believed in, not only the pursuit of education, but in me, and have always encouraged me to be the best I can be. For their inspiration, I am forever grateful.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This is a report of an action research study conducted in a large, urban school district during the 2008-2009 school year. As in most school districts, governance and policy decisions are made by a locally elected school board working in concert with a superintendent hired by the board. Recently, this district has experienced more transition in board membership than in the past. As a result of higher than normal turnover of board members, the district has started to focus on improving the induction process for board members.

The purpose of this action research study was to (a) examine the induction experience for both new board members and veteran board members, and (b) to improve the induction process by using the findings of the study to develop recommendations that could inform the induction process for future board members.

My interest in this topic and thus the context of this study comes from a variety of sources. I am employed as an Executive Director in the district in which this study takes place. Although I do not report directly to the school board, most of the work of the Teaching and Learning Department, within which I am an administrator, is dependent on approval from the school board and influenced by the strategic direction set by the school board.

#### Background

Setting district policy is one of the primary responsibilities of local school boards. Policymaking is only one element of the broad range of responsibilities that school boards of large, urban school systems undertake. Local school boards serve a diverse group of stakeholders with vastly different needs and expectations. The current model of school district governance in the United States consists of a school board and a superintendent. This governance structure for

local school districts was originated over 200 years ago in Massachusetts and is the model used in most school districts today (Carol et al., 1986; Danzberger, 1994). The local school board concept has evolved through a variety of structural shifts and reform initiatives. While there have been criticisms of the school board's ability to impact student achievement, it does appear that school boards continue to be seen as valuable and generally have public support (Land, 2002).

### *Role in Student Achievement*

According to the Washington State School Directors Association (2008), "School boards have always recognized the improvement of student achievement as central to their role in governing our public schools" (p. 1). However, it is with a new level of commitment that many school boards, and their superintendents, are taking on the challenge of increasing student achievement. This increased pressure is described by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Tietal (2009):

American schools are under increasing pressure to produce better results than they have ever produced. No Child Left Behind has set a goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014, and legislation is not the only source of pressure. A high school diploma is no longer a reliable ticket to a decent living. In an era of computers and instant access to information, problem solving, teamwork, and communication skills are essential for personal and national success. Most schools are falling short of the 100 percent proficiency goal, and international assessments show us that American schools are at best in the middle of the pack among our peers in level of achievement. (p. 2)

These authors add "The challenge is that we are asking schools to do something they have never done before—educate all students to high levels—and we don't know how to do that in every classroom for every child" (p. 2). As a result of this new achievement challenge set before school districts, the work of the superintendent and the school board needs to take on a new focus. As

stated previously, the local school board, consisting of elected and/or appointed citizens, is the primary policy making entity of the public school district. According to Henderson, Henry, Saks, and Wright (2001), “The leadership of the board and superintendent, within their respective roles, can bring life, enhance the focus and motivation of the administration and staff, and provide an emphasis on student achievement” (p. 12).

Given the complexity and challenges of school boards’ work and the urgency to increase student achievement, school governance is gradually being examined more carefully. Authors Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009) see a “direct link between successful board members, successful educational organizations, and successful students who will be prepared for the challenges of an increasingly complex, multicultural, and technological world” (p. xi). Beatty, Neisser, Trent, and Heubert (2001) note that “The education reform movement has made the needs of students at risk for academic failure a key focus” (p. 38). Historically, school boards have been slow to embrace the role of impacting student achievement, believing the charge of raising student achievement would be best left up to the educational professionals with whom they work (Lashway, 2002). In today’s educational environment, there is a need for everyone to participate in the effort. Knowing that it is the public school districts that will educate, or not, the vast majority of our population, McAdams (2006) says that making school districts “high-performing organizations is the nation’s highest domestic priority and why the board members who govern them are in a position to be the nation’s most important school reformers” (p. 7). Given the potential impact to the reform effort, support for school boards with respect to their board development, and in particular board member induction, could be a worthy cause.

Educators in the setting of this study are beginning to address the achievement gap that exists between differing socioeconomic and ethnic groups. The demands of society and the

federal accountability system, through the No Child Left Behind Act, have shifted the focus in education. Previously educators were committed to impact only a portion of our students with a challenging and complete education. Now this obligation extends to a commitment to provide a rigorous and high-level education for our full citizenry. The new federal accountability pushes school districts to examine achievement in a multitude of demographic categories. Achievement gains must be demonstrated in all areas and for all populations of students. This priority was established and made public beginning with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and now has been reinvigorated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. As a result, increasing student achievement for each and every child has come to the forefront of the goals and mission of the setting for this study. Given this considerable challenge and the critical role school boards play in public education, these boards could be seen as one conduit to meeting the goals of the reform effort. Viadero (2007) notes research performed by Mary L. Delagardelle, the deputy executive director of the Iowa Association of School Boards, which indicates that the beliefs, actions, and decisions of board members have become a critical contributor to districts making progress toward their strategic intent around achievement.

### *School Board Training*

Although school boards play a significant role in district governance and their work has an impact on student achievement, there is a sparsity of literature directly addressing school boards in the United States (Viadero, 2008). New school board member induction is one topic that has received little focus in the literature.

It appears that in some states, with the increased focus on student achievement and accountability, there is a heightened awareness and interest in board development. In Texas, for example, the legislature has mandated a training course for all school board members, which



includes 3 hours of team-building. “The purpose of this training requirement is to prepare board members and the superintendent to work as a leadership team to improve the academic performance of all district students” (Region4 Educated Solutions, 2008, p. 1).

Doug Eadie (2005) speaks to the need for board development and quality orientation programs:

Many school boards in the United States fall short of realizing their full governing potential in practice, depriving their districts of sorely needed leadership and their members of the satisfaction that participation in serious governing work can provide. The basic reason for their failure to perform at peak capacity as governing bodies, in my experience, is that these boards are seriously underdeveloped and undermanaged as organizations. (p. 5)

Eadie has interviewed hundreds of board members and often asks what the school board does to be sure a new board member can begin serving at full capacity right away. He has often found the answer to be “nothing in particular” (p. 31). Many times the board member orientation that does exist is light on governing and heavy on information about the district and its budget. Eadie goes on to say that while that is important information, “what they need more than anything else if they are to succeed at the governing business is a thorough orientation on the board itself: its role, detailed governing processes, and structure” (p. 31).

#### *School Board Member Turnover*

Frederick Hess (2002) administered a survey which collected reflections of school board members to describe a portrait of U.S. school boards. The average length of time in office for respondents was 6.7 years. The study found that 41% of the sample held a board seat for 2 to 5 years. There are roughly 15,000 school boards nationally and 95,000 board members serve on

those boards. This survey found a majority of board members to be white men and 55% to be 50 years of age or older. Forty-six percent have business or professional backgrounds, the most common work backgrounds for board members. Given that there are few pre-requisites to pursuing a position on the school board, there is full and equal access to such positions. School board members are either appointed or elected to their positions depending on the specific circumstances of the timing of the member vacancy.

One potential complication that arises in the school board governance model is turnover and lack of stability in board membership. In the state of Washington most school board terms are 4 years before a person is required to run for re-election. If a person is appointed due to the early departure of a board member, but then not elected when required to run for the position or chooses not to run for election, the term may be even shorter.

In Iowa, almost half of the board members leaving their positions in 1999 had served one term or less. In 2001, the tenure of departing school board members was again one term or less (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2003). Turnover of school board members can be complicated by the turnover in the superintendent position as well. Waters (2007) found that “the positive correlations that appear between the length of the superintendent service and student achievement confirm the value of leadership stability” (p. 20). The combination of school board member turnover and superintendent turnover may put the superintendent/school board leadership team in a constant state of transition. These transitions have potential, it seems, to create vulnerability in the leadership capacity of this group. It is also possible that the distraction of transition could put the capacity of the school board to carry out a strategic plan in jeopardy:

To perform effectively, boards must have the determination and independence to act based on what they know to be model behavior: they must build

partnerships with their superintendents, actively use information as a support, and above all, work diligently for their own development as boards. (Smoley, 1999, p. 15)

High turnover of leadership, both at the school and district level, has been shown to impede the progress in the efforts to increase achievement. The impediment is linked to a lack of clear and stable direction, policy, goals, and the distribution of resources (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 1995).

However, there is little research on school boards and induction of new board members. Alsbury (2003) used the Dissatisfaction Theory (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970) to look into turnover among board members and superintendents and found that when there were vacated board seats, a superintendent turnover was soon to follow. He then studied 176 elections that occurred in Washington State between 1993-2001 and didn't see any strong connection between changes in board members and a drop in student achievement as measured on state exams. On the other hand, when school board seats changed frequently as a result of political reasons, student performance did appear to drop after a few years. The lack of stability, cohesiveness, and continuity did seem to impact students. Alsbury (2003) found that when boards were more solid and had lower turnover, test scores rose.

However, there are conflicting opinions on whether or not a school board impacts student learning. Some scholars believe that school boards are far enough removed from the workings of the schools they govern that there is little potential influence on student achievement (Whitson 1998; Wirt & Kirst, 1992). Nevertheless, state school board associations are very interested in supporting school board work in a way that influences and sustains the achievement efforts.

Empirical evidence is still being sought to determine if a link exists between school board stability and student achievement gains (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Wirt & Kirst, 1992).

### *School Board Member Transition and Induction*

Board members are placed in a position to make important and vital decisions, sometimes immediately upon taking office. These immediate decisions potentially impact district policy, fiscal status, or something as significant as hiring a new superintendent for the district. However, there is little research around the induction and professional learning needs of new board members or the impact of transition on the governance team. In the study referred to earlier, over 2000 school board members in the state of Illinois responded to a survey question about induction practices (Illinois Association of School Boards [IASB], 2004). Only 16% of the participants responded that they had “discussed at length” the topic of orientation. This survey revealed the majority of the respondents (84%) reported they either touched on the topic briefly or had no discussion at all regarding how to prepare a new board member for service.

Many state school board associations have acknowledged and are committed to board development, in general, and specifically training for new board members is noted as an important role of these state organizations and even identified as an essential part of a board’s activities (IASB, 2009). Given a school board’s potential impact on student achievement and the critical role it plays in the leadership and governance of a school district, the value and importance of a solid, thoughtful induction practice may be something worth considering. It is possible a district’s work on improving student achievement could be negatively affected by transitions in the superintendent/school board team.

As new board members begin their journey of leadership and service to the school district, the superintendent and existing board members may play a role in how the new board

member initially thinks about his/her role and the importance of their leadership to student achievement. A study conducted in 2000, by the Iowa Association of School Boards, found that “school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts” (p. 4). The induction process could be viewed as the first opportunity to begin developing the new board members’ knowledge and disposition in regard to achievement for all students.

As the United States continues to move toward a culture of higher accountability and high stakes assessment, there is a shift in understanding of board responsibilities. It was not long ago that school boards and superintendents were seen more as managers than leaders, when their primary duties were budgets, discipline, transportation issues, and dealing with collective bargaining groups. School boards were almost solely focused on financial, legal, and parent/student issues, leaving achievement concerns for the educators (Resnick, 1999). Today school boards need to examine how their role and responsibilities may influence the academic achievement of their students. “Across the United States, local school board members and state school board associations are seizing the initiative to raise student achievement” (Bracey & Resnick, 1998). With the ever-increasing focus on raising student achievement and the imperative to provide equal access to education for all students, this new level of accountability increases the importance of preparing a school board to be an effective team. Preparation may also minimize disruptions by reducing board turnover, even though turnover and change are natural occurrences.

McAdams (2006) speaks to the inevitableness of transition and change:

One of life’s great truths is that all of us are transitional. Superintendents come and go; so do board members and civic and community leaders. Periods of stability mask transitions

going on under the surface, just as periods of instability mask how little change is taking place in classrooms and schools. Change is constant, but it does alter course and speed, especially when leadership changes. (p. 140)

McAdams then goes on to address the impact transition has on “deep system change and the creation of a performance culture” (p. 140). This author states that rebuilding stability after transition can require at least 10 years and concludes his thought with the statement, “Rapid board and superintendent turnover is the enemy of sustainable change” (p. 140).

School districts could benefit from being intentional in how they support the school board team in times of transition. In *The Harvard Business Essentials Series* (2003), a book written for organizations experiencing change or transition, change is noted as “almost always” disruptive and sometimes traumatic (p. 3). The book suggests that companies are more successful if people anticipate the change and leverage the transition for the betterment of the organization. A thorough, well-established induction process may be one strategy for doing this and is the strategy that is addressed through this action research study. The inevitability of transition makes the establishment and implementation of an induction process a key consideration for school districts.

#### Action Research

Stringer (2007) says “Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p.1). This type of research allows the participants and the researcher to work collaboratively to examine a problem and strategize around solutions. Given the complexity of our work in education today, action research can be a valuable tool for finding creative, productive solutions to problems. “The method produces highly relevant research results, because it is grounded in

practical action, aimed at solving an immediate situation while carefully informing theory” (Baskerville, 1999). Action research is a qualitative research paradigm that is increasing in popularity in educational research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In 1944, an MIT professor, Kurt Lewin, first used the term *action research*. In a paper called “Action Research and Minority Problems,” he describes action research as using “a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action.”

Similarly, Stringer (2007) emphasizes the cyclic nature of action research using the frame of “look, think, act” (p. 8). The collaborative approach to action research, according to Stringer (2007), can be responsible for building capacity of the system to build stronger relationships that carryover into the system long after the research is done. Solutions generated through the action research process are more sustainable and generate “momentum” in the organization.

Herr and Anderson (2005) state, “In the field of education, action research has enjoyed widespread success both as an individual route to professional development and as a collaborative route to professional and institutional change” (p. 17). Stringer (2007) describes action research as a method that is conducive to the “formation of community” (p. 27). This focus around community is a factor in the success of action research in education, because educators are motivated by practical work that engages them and gives them energy around their profession.

Given the intense focus on continuous improvement in the education field, educators can be highly motivated to participate in action research efforts in the hope of generating creative solutions that lead to improved learning for all students. Increased accountability in education has not only heightened our need for focused, structured inquiry, but also created a sense of

urgency. The nature of action research makes it a viable and instrumental tool to enable educators to collaborate on a systematic approach to solving problems. Through action research, educators can become solvers of problems, creative thinkers, and investors of best practices.

Stringer (2007) frames action research around a set of social values. Action research should be democratic, equitable, liberating, and enhancing. As a democratic process, action research must be considerate and inclusive of the whole. The benefit of the research must be evident for all involved. It is additionally important that the research be equitable in that value is equitably distributed without one group more valued than another. Action research establishes a frame for participants to experience research that is problem solving, collaborative, and reflective. Baskerville (1999) suggests that action research generates highly relevant results. Again, given the context of the current work in education, the overall focus of educational equity, a focus on high achievement and the sense of urgency, action research has a place in the field of education and in this study. Moreover, action research could be elemental to improving the academic achievement related issues and concerns educational organizations face in the new era of academic standards.

In this study, action research was used to address the topic of school board member induction. The use of action research methods had to be approached carefully and strategically, as there were political implications for all involved. For example, school board member interviews could potentially surface tensions between board members and the superintendent. However, the potential benefits were worth the risk as action research. As Stringer (2007) states action research “enhances the lives of all those who participate” (p. 20). The potential benefits were worth the risk knowing that the gains could be extraordinary as the board and superintendent discover “together” practices that enable them to be more successful in their roles



and function more effectively as a group. The district used for the setting of this research has undergone multiple transitions in the last few years. Because of the nature of this study, the current state of transition in this district, and the potential contributions to the practice of induction, action research was selected for this study.

Change in board membership, is a phenomenon that will continue to occur. Some districts are plagued with more transition than others. However, it is inevitable that boards will experience member turnover, and thus transition. Although board each board members has an individual responsibility to the district and the community, each board member also is a part of a team that can act only as a collective unit as they work to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Applying action research methodology in this study provided the opportunity for both school board members and the superintendent to identify their needs when experiencing transition. Additionally, action research provided the governance team with clarity around expectations for how the board moves toward their own continuous improvement when in the state of transition. The collaborative nature of the action research methodology provided for joint ownership in the process of examining induction practices in this district.

### The Study

The purpose of this action research study was to (a) examine the induction experience for both new board members and veteran board members, and (b) to improve the induction process by using the findings of the study to develop recommendations that could inform the induction process for future board members. This study involved my collaboration with the superintendent to examine her perspective of the evolving induction of a new board member and the development of the leadership team. In addition, the perspectives of school board members experiencing the transition were a primary source of data during this study. Research questions

considered in this study are as follows: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process? (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new members? (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process, contributing to the development of a new team and readying the new member to function in their new role? (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board? and (e) What improvements can be made to the induction process used in this district?

### *Problem*

The focus of this action research study is in response to a problem somewhat new to this district. This district has, historically, experienced little turnover in board membership with long-standing board members fulfilling the role of school board member. However, recently, with several new members joining the board in the last 2 years, the process of induction is now a relevant problem for the district to examine.

As a result of this study, conclusions and recommendations that could influence a coherent, consistent, and collaborative induction and board development plan were generated. Given the current state of transition in this district, the knowledge and learning that occurred through the research process added value to the work of the school board and the superintendent. The collaborative nature of this research project supported the collaborative nature of superintendent/school board relations. Collaboration between the superintendent and the school board is a necessity for smooth organizational operations. (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009).

### *Setting*

This study took place in a large urban setting. The school district, with an enrollment of approximately 29,000 students and over 50 schools, recently hired a new female superintendent who has worked in the district in a variety of roles. As a result, the superintendent was able to share a historical perspective, contextual knowledge of the district, and its vision throughout the study. The district serves both high and low areas of socioeconomic status. The overall district free and reduced-price lunch rate is 51%; the highest rate at any individual school is over 90%, while the lowest is less than 10%.

The school board is comprised of 5 individuals, currently one female and four male. Two school board members have held their positions for less than 2 years and another 3 years. The longest standing member has held his position for 12 years. This fall, one member retired her position on the board after being a school board member for 13 years. In order to fill the vacant board seat, the remaining four board members held interviews and appointed a new board member who began service in October of 2008. While this board has not experienced a large turnover in membership previously, it currently is in a state of transition. From 1997 to 2004, there was only one change in membership. In addition, there were two members who served terms of substantial length, 21 years and 27 years. These two members served for 8 years together and the last of these two board members retired from board service in 2005. Since 2005 a series of transitions consisting of four new board members on this 5-person school board has brought about a need for the district to examine induction.

### *Data*

Data were collected through a series of collaborations with the superintendent. The superintendent and I were co-researchers as we examined the process and evolution of the induction/board development experience. Glesne (2006) points out that in the action research

process, researchers work with others as agents of change and the researcher is described by Stringer (2007) as a facilitator rather than a director. This collaborative approach to research can be a basis for establishing motivation and engagement in the process. As mentioned previously, these collaborative sessions were framed around the guiding research questions: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process? (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new members? (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process, contributing to the development of a new team and readying the new member to function in their new role? (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board? and (e) What improvements can be made to the induction process used in this district?

During our collaborative planning and analysis sessions, the superintendent and I reflected on induction through the district's needs as identified by the superintendent, both based on current board configuration as well as the previous experience of the superintendent. Notes were taken during these collaborative sessions and then analyzed. The analysis was streamed through the filter of research questions mentioned above.

In addition, data were collected through three 40-60 minute interviews conducted with school board members. The interviewees were selected as a result of their time of service on the board. One member is newly appointed and had been on the school board for 5 months at the time of the study. This member was chosen because the induction process was occurring at the same time as the study and it seemed this would allow for a strong, contextual perspective of the current needs with respect to induction in this district. The other two interviewees have served on the board for 2 and 12 years. These board members were chosen because their perspectives

would come from varied term lengths. These individuals are all at different stages of board development and experienced induction at different times with different district conditions and superintendents. The questions for the interview were created in collaboration with the superintendent. The interviews were transcribed and the analysis of these interviews was performed using the same filters as the collaborative sessions with the superintendent. The third source of data came from observations at school board meetings and small group meetings of board members. Board meetings were observed to focus on the questions, actions, dialogue, and style the board demonstrated to build my understanding of the personality and nature of the board. Field notes from these observations created depth in the collaborative sessions with the superintendent. The data from the collaborative sessions with the superintendent, the interview responses, and field were triangulated to look for themes and were used to make recommendations for an induction process that could influence the next transition in the superintendent/board leadership team.

### *Ethics*

Ethics is an important consideration in all research. In action research, given that it is done in the context of one's own environment and participants are often those that we interact with on a regular basis, ethics needs careful consideration. Stringer (2007) suggests one strategy to ensure no harm comes as a result of the study is to be very upfront and clear with participants from the beginning. By informing them of the purpose, aims, and use of results in writing, what is called informed consent, there are no surprises. Because of the nature of this study and the political nature of school boards and superintendent/school board relations, the original communication with board members regarding the study was handled by the superintendent. The school board was interested in participating and willing to be interviewed for the study.

Board members were informed of the purpose of the study, potential outcomes of the study, nature of the study, and confidentiality concerns when I met with them to interview them. Confidentiality was a critical and complicated part of this study, as the school board is a small group of participants and the district is somewhat unique in its size and description. I worked collaboratively with the superintendent to ensure that there was adequate communication with board members, both prior to the interviews and then again as I performed the interviews.

Although there are ethical dilemmas in action research and potential complications when studies are done within the context of the “real work,” there were motivating factors for participating in this study. The potential benefits of the research study for board members and the superintendent made this a viable project. The district as a whole supported this study.

### *Positionality*

Careful thinking about my positionality within the organization was important in contributing to the trustworthiness of the study and to the ethics of the study. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) state, “. . . being an action researcher requires not only reflecting on the research question but also reflecting deeply about how our positionality becomes a lens through which we view reality” (p. 10).

My role in the district is a new one. This is a district that prides itself on “growing their own” for leadership positions. However, I am new to the district and do not have the same historical context that many of my colleagues do. I am an “outsider” for a couple of reasons. Not only am I brand new to the district, I also am not a member of the board/superintendent team, nor am I a member of the “cabinet.” The “cabinet” includes the assistant superintendents in three areas: teaching and learning, finance, and human resources. The cabinet works closely with the superintendent to support the work between the superintendent, the board, and the district. As a

result, I had a position in this study that was limiting to some degree but also provided me with an additional lens with which I could bring a perspective from my work in other districts and with other school boards.

However, my role as Executive Director of Instructional Programs is to facilitate the curriculum and assessment work of the district. This includes all content areas and all levels of our K-12 system. With the increased focus of school boards and greater accountability around student achievement, many curriculum and assessment initiatives will come to the board for approval from my department. Thus, how I interact with the board is an important aspect of the success of programs and initiatives generated through the Teaching and Learning Department. A school board equipped with the knowledge and training necessary to function effectively is imperative to the support necessary for the Teaching and Learning Department to carry out its achievement goals and fulfill the mission of the district. Without a strong knowledge base including such things as district initiatives and vision, role clarity, and team protocols, new board members can lead to a dysfunctional team that could have difficulty making decisions.

I also bring training and experience as a superintendent to this study. In April of 2008, I completed my 2-year certification program for superintendent of schools. During this certification program, I served a 1-year internship with an existing superintendent and spent the second year fulfilling the role of superintendent for a school district through an interim position. During that interim year, I worked with three board presidents and eight different school board members. In January of that academic year, 3 weeks after three new board members were sworn in and a new president took on that leadership role with the board, this “new board” began interviewing candidates for the permanent superintendent position and hired the new superintendent. All three new members were citizens with no background in the field of

education or previous experience as a board member. In addition, this hiring would be the first hiring responsibility that any of the three had ever done, in any context. Because of my experience in the education and in the superintendent role, combined with my lived experience through significant transition, I consider myself an “insider” to these issues.

### *The Stages of Action Research*

Stringer’s (2007) look, think, act cycle of action research afforded us the opportunity to gather data and have the collaborative conversation necessary to examine board transition through the induction process. Given that much of our work in education is done through the frame and emphasis on community-building, action research is a powerful tool to consider as it is applied in ways that promote community building. (Stringer, 2007) The cyclical nature of action research encouraged a thoughtful approach and allowed for relationship building throughout the process.

The “look” stage of the cycle occurred as board members were being interviewed, board meetings observed, and initial collaborative sessions were held with the superintendent. During the think phase, co-researchers had a chance to analyze and interpret the data. The experiences of the superintendent and the school board members in their transition were also examined. This was an active time of engagement that provided us the opportunity to examine the data with focus and intent around the research questions as we looked to discover themes.

The “look and think” cycles provided a solid framework. The co-researcher and I examined the problem and gained clarity of purpose through the first two stages of the action research process. Due to the timing of this study and the nature and political complexities present in this setting, this report does not capture the “act” phase of the research cycle. The outcomes of this study, however, are intended to be valuable for both the superintendent and the school board



members when the next transition becomes a reality. The conclusions and recommendations will be shared with the superintendent and the superintendent will share the results with the school board.

### Organization of Dissertation

This study is presented in four chapters. The first chapter provided an overview for the research study in addition to my positionality in the study and ethical considerations. Chapter 2 consists of the literature review that informed the study including focus in the following areas: (a) impact of educational reform on school governance, (b) roles and responsibilities of school board members, (c) roles and responsibilities of superintendents, (d) superintendent/school board relationships, (e) the complexities of the roles and confusion around those roles, and (f) effective school boards. Following the review of literature, the third chapter includes a detailed narrative of the study. This narrative describes the setting, the data collection methods, the process of collaboration as crafted through the lens of Stringer's (2007) "look, think, act" frame. And last, in Chapter 4, conclusions, recommendations, and reflections are shared. This chapter describes how this study will be used in the district, the next steps of the "act" stage, and the implications this study has had on me personally.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In this literature review, I will discuss the impact of educational reform efforts have had on the focus of local governance of school districts. Next I will examine the roles and responsibilities of both school board members and superintendents. An important component contributing to how a school board interacts with the school system is its relationship with the superintendent. As well, the manner in which the superintendent and school board work together to fulfill these varied, complex and sometimes overlapping roles plays an important role. Thus literature on superintendent/school board relationships is examined next. Finally, I will examine both the dilemma of role confusion and the characteristics and components of effective, well-functioning school boards. The experience of a board member when new to their position on the school board is the starting point for the development of these important components and the “stage setting” opportunity for a successful governance team.

#### Impact of Educational Reform on School Governance

The National School Board Association, in their publication *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000), speak to the challenge of the work of the school board in light of the current needs in education. According to Gemberling et al. (2000), “The board is responsible for putting in place the proper keystones for students to learn and achieve at the highest level possible. Board members’ primary agenda is raising achievement and involving the community in the attainment of that goal” (p. iii). This guidebook, built as a resource for school board members and superintendents, establishes a framework based on the concept “excellence in the classroom begins with excellence in the boardroom” (Gemberling,

2000, p. iii). While Land (2002) points out, there isn't a significant amount of research on the connection of school boards and student achievement, researchers have suggested that board members can influence their school district's achievement by developing a strong relationship with their superintendent, by operating with a clarity around their roles and responsibilities, and by making constructive decisions around policy that supports academic achievement (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Clemmer, 1991; Land, 2002).

With the increased pressure of high-stakes testing, state and federal accountability standards, the scrutiny of the work of school districts is high. School boards are vulnerable to disparagement and are often found in defensive mode when student achievement gains do not measure up with the expectations. "Boards of education are a fixture of school governance, but they are not immune to criticism" (Smoley, 1999, p. 1). A school board is a part of the community within which it serves. The challenges facing education today are ones the board cannot solve alone. Thus, now, more than ever, school boards must communicate with their communities and function responsibly, in order that they can elicit the community's support in accomplishing the district's goals (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009).

#### Roles and Responsibilities of School Board Members

To the casual onlooker and even those more intimately involved in the work of the school district, the work of a school board can be somewhat ambiguous and complex. Although it is possible to interpret the role as a list of duties to perform, much has been written about the school board and its responsibilities. Board member induction might be the first opportunity a citizen has to learn about the scope of the role and significance of the responsibilities. The roles and responsibilities are described differently by different sources and are many in number. They are sorted here in the literature review in the following categories: (a) purpose/vision, (b) select

and hire the superintendent, (c) resource and fiscal management, (d) community advocacy, (e) policy management, and finally, (f) evaluation and monitoring of the progress of programs, superintendent, and district goals. The first of these, purpose and vision, is an overarching role that provides the backbone for how a school board fulfills their other roles and responsibilities (Smoley, 1999).

### *Purpose/Vision*

Smoley (1999) explained that at the core, a board has six primary responsibilities, one of them being that “it guides the accomplishment of the school district’s purposes, particularly focused on the education of the district’s children; it guides fundamental change in goals, programs, and structures” (p. 4). The role of the school board is described by Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009) as a “strategic role” (p. 13). In this respect, the school board is expected to maintain a big picture view of the work of the school district. “A school board at its best is a visionary, strategic change agent” (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009, p. 13). The purpose of the school board, according to Rogers (2003), is narrowed to, among a few other things, setting the mission and goals for the school district.

It is the purpose and vision that the board identifies and communicates to others that become the guiding force for the work that takes place in the other roles. In addition, Smoley (1999) expresses the school board is responsible for screening and supporting key projects identified to improve programs and operations. A district with a clearer and more focused mission is more likely to pursue programs and initiatives that will accomplish the established goals.

### *Selecting and Hiring the Superintendent*

This aspect of the school board's role is seldom overlooked. Smoley (1999) used the terms "chooses, directs, and evaluates" (p. 4) to describe their role with the superintendent while the WSSDA (2007) in their newly revised publication titled, "Serving on Your Local School Board: A Guide to Effective Leadership," described this responsibility of the school board as "designating the chief executive" (p. 2). Given the public nature of selecting a superintendent for a school district and the school board's strong tie to community involvement, this level of responsibility is one decision that is most easily identifiable by the public at large.

### *Resource and Fiscal Management*

An ever-increasing demanding role the school board plays is that of making decisions related to the management of resources, both fiscal and non-fiscal. Approval and adoption of an annual budget and other financial responsibilities is a critical role. The planning and deployment of these resources is a responsibility that requires school board members to work together and prioritize their goals in collaboration with the superintendent (Smoley, 1999; WSSDA, 2007).

Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) deepened the fiscal role by describing the process as maintaining fiscal responsibility and fiscal autonomy. The authors also state that the school board has authority to appropriate local funds necessary to support the board-approved budget, thus determining the application of locally approved support as well as the state and federal dollars.

### *Community Advocacy*

School board members are predominantly publicly elected citizens chosen through an election process to serve in their role. The only time a school board member takes a board seat without an election is if a seat becomes available prior to the official ending of that term. In that

case, a citizen may be appointed by the school board to fill that seat until the term officially expires. In the state of Washington, the citizen must run for election if they choose to maintain their position on the school board once their appointed term has expired.

As would be the case for any elected official, there is an expectation that these individuals would represent the communities which elected them. Smoley (1999) described this expectation as “serving as a bridge between the district and community, both in reflecting community desires and in promoting understanding and support; it leads the coalescing of disparate community views; it builds and maintains partnerships and collaborative relationships with other organizations” (p. 4).

Resnick and Bryant (2008) took the concept of the role of the school board representing community to a deeper level of discussion related to democracy and specifics of how a board can be an active supporter of the continuation and development of public involvement in our school systems. These authors wrote:

Local school boards are a key mechanism in the mutually dependent relationship between education and democracy, a relationship that is played out through civic engagement. That is, beyond representing the community as elected officials, members of local school boards, as we shall see, can actually increase democratic participation by inviting citizens from the community to become more involved in the schools and empowering citizens to participate in the decision-making process. Through that engagement citizens’ support for education can be strengthened. (p. 2)

The bridge metaphor developed by Smoley (1999) begins to frame this community advocacy role for the school board as a more active role and less of a passive one. A role where

opportunities are sought out by school board members to involve community members versus one that waits for the community members to come to them.

In addition, Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) extended this role to one of advocacy. These authors suggest board members serve as “advocates for all children, teachers, and other staff by adopting ‘kids first’ goals, policies, and budget” (p. 14) and WSSDA (2007) described the boards’ role in this area as advocacy for the local citizenry.

### *Policy Management*

The role of the school board as it relates to policy management is one that encompasses both the development and the management of district policy. Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009) recognized this role and note the need for balance between the strategic elements of establishing policy and the tactical elements required to actually create a policy and have it aligned with contract language, time constraints, legal mandates, etc.

According to Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009), “when there is a perceived need for a policy addition or modification, either board members or tactical staff (usually the superintendent) can initiate a back-and-forth discussion to draft a new policy for board approval” (p. 27). A caution though is expressed by these authors as well: “However, a board should still exercise its strategic role of setting and approving policy for the organization by maintaining editorial control of the draft” (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009, p. 27). They noted that only the school board, by a majority vote, can approve the policy. McAdams (2006) described policies as documents approved by the board that “outline goals, standards, or principles to guide or prescribe actions and constrain behavior by district employees, students, and others who interact with the district” (p. 99). McAdams went on to build perspective by stating that “boards act when they vote” and policy decisions are one of many aspects of a district’s work that are acted on by

the voting procedure of the school board (p. 99). Boards also vote on curricular decisions, waivers, and other organizational matters not necessarily tied to policy.

In addition, McAdams (2006) sorted policies into two categories. This author delineated these two needs for policies by noting that sometimes stability and sustainability are the focus and other times when policies are needed to support the impetus for change. When operating procedures need to be maintained and stabilized in a changing environment, routine operations are necessary. However, when policies are necessary to compel change efforts, reform policies are essential. It is important for a school board to consider their mission and goals when designing policy and consider a theory of action to maximize the impact of policies in how they can help districts accomplish their vision (McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999).

Generally, where reform policy work is done, political pressures can intensify. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) described policy development and the implementation of policy in public education as having a political context. This is especially true when a policy is changing a well-known, well-institutionalized component of a district's operation. The communication around the development and implementation of such educational policies generated at the local level can be enhanced through such collaboration with the superintendent and other practitioners and strengthened when the vision and goals of the board are articulated in advance (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

### *Evaluation and Progress Monitoring*

The school board is responsible for monitoring a variety of elements included in the operation of a school district. The superintendent is the one employee whose evaluation of performance is the board's complete responsibility. (Smoley, 1999; WSSDA 2007). However, the scope of their evaluating and monitoring responsibilities goes well beyond the



superintendent. The school board must ensure they are monitoring the district's progress toward identified goals and that the district's policies are effective and supportive toward those ends (Smoley, 1999).

Programs are also under scrutiny for performance and impact on the achievement of identified goals of the district. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) add responsibility of fiscal, legal, staff and programmatic accountability to the list of things a school board must monitor. Responsibility for monitoring district facilities is added to the board's responsibilities by WSSDA (2007) as well which, of course, is tied back to the fiscal planning and monitoring duty as facilities play an important role in the implementation of school programs and there must be forethought about the needs and decisions made with respect to bonds and levies that would support facility needs in the district.

In addition, school boards are responsible to monitor policy implementation and follow through as policies become practice. WSSDA (2007) states that concerns of policy implementation often arise in the area of student issues when they reach the board appeal level. These issues generally center on discipline, attendance, admissions, placement, graduation, and transportation. In addition, adjudication and investigation as a result of hearing appeals from staff on issues involving the implementation of board policy also falls under the jurisdiction of a school board (WSSDA, 2007).

Lastly, Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) included the school board themselves as one entity to evaluate and monitor. Their suggestion was that if school boards take their role seriously in impacting the education of children, it would be important to continue to monitor their effectiveness as a governance structure. This self-assessment process can be an insightful

activity that builds the capacity of the board to work together and support one another in the growth process of learning the skills necessary to function effectively (Smoley, 1999).

Given that a new board member may be unfamiliar with the varied roles their position encompasses and knowing that board members may not have had any previous board experience of any sort, induction might play a role in establishing the parameters. The development of parameters of the varied roles school board members through induction can support the understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and the school board, and most importantly, the differences between the two. Although the school board and the superintendent both work in service of the school district and work in conjunction to accomplish the goals of the district, their roles and responsibilities are independent of one another.

#### Roles and Responsibilities of Superintendents

During the 1820s, the position of a public school superintendent emerged and by the 1900s all major cities had school superintendents (Workman, 2003). While the school board, in its governance role, provides the district with direction and clear goals to assist in the acquisition of the mission, a superintendent is responsible for implementing the school board generated direction and providing the leadership to the district to carry out those goals. According to the WSSDA (2007), “The superintendent provides continuity of leadership by establishing good practices in the district” (p. 13). Clarity of the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and the differences between these roles and those of the school board can be enhanced through the induction process.

#### *Manager*

WSSDA (2007) also identified the superintendent’s role as the manager who administers and operates, they are the person who decides the “how,” they provide information and

recommendations to the board, and implement policy, supervise hiring process and practices, supervises and evaluates personnel, formulates the budget, reports on progress of district to the board and acts in the best interest of the public.

In addition, the superintendent, according to Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009), serves as the “formal bridge between strategic and tactical roles by working intimately with the board and administration” (p. 20). The responsibility is to ensure that tactical plans are created and carried out to support the strategic charges of the board and superintendents are held accountable for this follow-through. Van Clay and Soldwedel also suggested that the superintendent does not set the strategic charges; however, they can, and often do, provide information and recommendations to the board which assist them in their decision-making around strategy.

According to Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) taking care of day-to-day management and administrative tasks, including student discipline and personnel issues fall under the scope of superintendent responsibilities. Managing business and financial matters, reporting to the school board and community on district spending and student achievement, facilitation of bids and contracts, facilities, transportation, etc. are all things a superintendent is expected to supervise. In addition, a superintendent must also take responsibility for all personnel matters (hiring, assigning, evaluating, developing, firing, etc.). The role of superintendent is also described by Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) as the one who serves as chief executive officer to the board of education, including developing, recommending and administering policies and the annual budget. Hence, an undeniable relationship of duties is established through this role of the superintendent. The induction process is the beginning place for the establishment of a joint understanding of the complex and connected duties of these two important leadership entities, the superintendent and school board.

### *Instructional Leader*

The current reform efforts have changed the role of the superintendent. With the increase in accountability through the No Child Left Behind Act, the superintendent's role has clearly been prioritized with respect to academic standards, achievement accountability, collaboration, connection, communication, child advocacy, and community-building (Usdan, McCloud, Podmostco, & Cuban, 2001; Workman, 2003). This means while the superintendent is responsible for providing the continuous leadership to ensure that the board policies and responsibilities of the board/superintendent team are addressed each day, it is also necessary to oversee the educational program including such things as curriculum, instruction, co-curricula, textbook adoption, and field trips.

Leadership also emerges with the expectation that the superintendent will develop and support district-wide teams of teachers and other staff working to improve teaching and learning, and supporting local school councils of staff, parents, and students (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). When the Education Commission of the States published a policy framework for the roles and responsibilities of school board members and superintendents in 2002, the report stated a general role for the superintendent as one in which they are to work with the school board to “build a unity of purpose focused on high achievement for all children” and in partnership with the board establish a vision for the district (p. 3).

While these two general roles seem drastically different and encompass a large number of duties that may seem diverse in many ways, Kowalski (2005) noted the following about the role of superintendent:

Having to lead in this context of competing philosophical position and political interests is a primary reason why the position of school district superintendent frequently is

portrayed as a difficult assignment. Even so, thousands of practitioners have been highly successful and view this role as being challenging, gratifying, and personally rewarding.

(p. 2)

Hawkins (2006) found that while the role of the superintendent seems to be constantly redefined and evolves depending on his or her circumstance, there is a context for all superintendents that can be described by “change, collaboration, and financial leadership” (p. iv). It is the similarity in superintendent roles to the school board’s roles that often causes confusion between the roles of these two important entities. Board member induction can be a place to begin instilling knowledge of the difference in the roles of superintendent and board member.

#### Role Confusion

In 2002, the Education Commission of the States published a policy framework for the roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents. In this publication, it is recommended that state policies be established for clear guidelines around the roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents. This report, generated from several national and state-level studies, notes that a lack of full understanding of these expectations often leads to “political battles between school boards and superintendents” (p. 1).

While aspiring superintendents typically learn many operational strategies and spend time on leadership skill building in their training programs, they rarely learn how to work with school boards (Johnston, Townsend, & Garcy, 2007). Defining roles and responsibilities for school board members and for superintendents is deemed important by these presenters and certainly not to be left up to chance. Yet, while in some ways there can be a delineation between the roles of superintendent and school board, there is also no question that a “blurring” occurs due to the overlap of those roles and areas of responsibilities and it is this “blurring” that can foster a

dilemma for school districts as they deal with the conflict that often surfaces (Black, 2008; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; McAdams, 1999; Wong, 1995). According to Goodman & Zimmerman, “When board members and superintendents are unclear about who is responsible for which duties, conflict, inefficiency, and frustration are inevitable” (p. 14). In a report based on the work of a 36-member National Advisory Committee on School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance and Teamwork for High Student Achievement, Goodman and Zimmerman claim that it would be helpful if state law delineated the roles of the board, the superintendent, and the board/superintendent team.

Johnston, Townsend, & Garcy (2007) note that superintendents expect school boards to make decisions and in having this expectation for boards, it is the superintendent’s responsibility to provide information to the school board with back up materials and detailed presentations so school boards are in a position to make well-informed decisions. So while the information, and often the recommendation is coming from the superintendent, it is in fact, the school board with final decision-making power.

Although the earlier descriptions of school board roles and responsibilities and those of the superintendent may leave the impression that school boards and the administration have clear information about the role of the school board, a lack of clarity often exists and as a result there is often misunderstanding among board members about the implementation of their role. This often happens for two reasons: (a) the community and often the state have expectations different than the primary responsibilities of the board; and (b) board members, for a variety of reasons, focus on the less essential aspects of their role or on activities that are outside of their designated role (Smoley, 1999).

The negative effect of role confusion can be felt by those working in the district in a number of ways. According to Sell (2006) one of three things can happen: (a) the board becomes a “rubber stamp” approving policy recommendations of the superintendent and district without critical dialogue or evaluation; (b) the board becomes a group of “firefighters” who race from problem to problem, applying quick-fixes without examining or solving the larger picture, long-term problems the district faces and last, (c) a common ailment evidenced by boards without clear role definition is that of “micromanagement” resulting from a desire to be over-involved. Each of these occurrences can potentially minimize the strides districts can make toward progress; hence, board member induction could be a mechanism to gain clarity of roles early in the relationship between the school board and the superintendent.

#### Superintendent/School Board Relationships

Defining roles for the governance responsibility of the school board and the superintendent’s role in student achievement and operational accountability can be one avenue for generating a new relationship between the superintendent and school board. Dawson and Quinn (2004) profiled three school districts that used defined roles to enhance the relationship of the board and superintendent and found that a positive superintendent/school board relationship can impact student achievement. Dawson and Quinn noted that the ability of each board member to change their focus from daily operations to long-term student achievement gains can be a turning point. In these profiled districts, boards and superintendents have relied on outside help to make this shift and have also increased their success by building “strong, proactive relations with the communities they serve” (p. 2). This community emphasis is a joint goal that may augment the opportunities for school boards and superintendents to develop their relationship.

By partnering together to support community involvement and events, a sense of collaboration and common work can be enhanced.

Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) concluded that the school board and superintendent need to work together to connect the district with the needs of the community. Goldman and Zimmerman (2000) also noted that a quality working relationship between effective leaders and school boards is a “key cornerstone of the foundation for high student achievement. In a study of 141 Texas superintendents during the 2004-2005 school year serving districts ranging from 200 students to 30,000 students, Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) identified the importance of a good relationship between the superintendent and the board, especially the board president. These quality relationships were also connected with superintendent tenure. Relationships can take time to develop and the more frequent the turnover within members of the superintendent/school board leadership team the more fragile those relationships may be. Efforts that get at the heart of raising achievement also may take time to implement and demonstrate impact, thus a strong superintendent/board relationship, supported by strong induction practices and board development, may be a contributing component to a district’s ability to accomplish its goals.

While there is much written about the importance of the relationship between the superintendent and the school board, it is also important to note that when this relationship is not productive, there is a cost. Hiring and firing of superintendents can be fiscally costly and distracting to the work of the district, taking time and resources from other pertinent issues and initiatives (Sell, 2006). Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) used their Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy to describe the political exchanges in a school district. Again in 1994, Iannaccone and Lutz used this Dissatisfaction Theory to describe activity over a long period of time as



community dissatisfaction can eventually lead to changes in school policy, superintendents, and eventually a change in board membership due to the political fall-out (Alsbury, 2003). The type of highly political relationship that exists between community and school board member also exists between superintendent and school board member.

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) suggested that the interplay between the superintendent and the school board is the most crucial factor in running a school system. Studies have consistently and clearly articulated that a poor relationship between these two most critical leadership entities deters from school improvement efforts (Danzberger et al., 1992; Peterson & Short, 2001).

One board member plays a unique role as the board president. This board member works closely with the superintendent to create agendas among other responsibilities. While this activity could seem insignificant, agendas and minutes have been used to examine school board behavior (Carpenter, 1987; Lutz, 1977; Nowalski & First, 1989; Ziegler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974). “Empirical findings suggest that a relational dynamic of the superintendent and board president based on respect and trust is essential for effective school governance and progress toward educational reforms” (Peterson & Short, 2001, p. 552). Eadie (2008) suggested that “board-savvy superintendents” bring a positive attitude to their working relationship with the board president. Eadie recommended that a “board-savvy superintendent” will also recognize the better they know the board president the more likely they are to be successful in supporting a “productive partnership” (p. 52).

Eadie (2007) used a marriage metaphor to describe the relationship between a school board and superintendent. While he did believe there is a part for each partner to play, it is his suggestion that the superintendent accept the primary responsibility for the nurturing and

sustaining of this vital relationship. With board members being part-time volunteers to the school district and the community, it makes sense that the superintendent plays the key role in the establishment of a quality partnership. It is important that the superintendent take the lead in initiating and nurturing these very important relationships. Similar to the early signs of a marriage in trouble, a board/superintendent relationship may also be at risk with just the slightest of problems. Attention to the early signs may ward off the relationship deteriorating and coming to an abrupt end.

The relationship between the board and superintendent is seen as an impetus for the necessary work of our nation. The responsibility of the education of our citizenry is an ominous task. As we work together toward this common good, it seems obvious that together we could accomplish more than what could be accomplished separate. However, working together as a team has proven difficult for many boards and superintendents (Fulbright & Goodman, 1999). These authors state that boards and superintendents that take on the mission of being a team and have an attitude of “teamness” are able to focus on what matters most, student achievement.

Communication, trust, and clarity of role definitions are noted by studies as influencing the relationship between superintendents and school boards (Basom, Young, & Adams, 1999; Flores, 2001; Solomon & Preis, 2006). It is difficult to speak to the relationship between the superintendent and the board without considering the impact on the leadership team. The effective, stable school district is one where these two entities, superintendent and school board, work together (Domenach, 2005). As Danzberger (1998) reported, “How well the schools are governed and professionally led will determine the future of the public schools” (p. 193). This is a powerful statement about the ultimate impact a strong relationship between the superintendent and school board can have on the improvement efforts of a district by leveraging the public

support and the focus on achievement goals instead of allowing the distractions of a poor relationship to deter the work.

It is through the induction experience that the superintendent and school board member may have the first opportunity to begin this important relationship. Forming a strong foundation for the relationship and a positive, collaborative frame for the relationship could be a result of a thorough new board member induction.

## Effective School Boards

### *The Team Concept*

While much of the literature speaks to the establishment of superintendent/school board “leadership teams” (California School Board Association (CSBA); 2007; Larson & Radar, 2006; McAdams, 2006; Smoley, 1999; Townsend et al., 2000) many who agree that a district needs a strong reform board-superintendent team, caution that the team is still divided into two distinct entities with different roles. Boards that provide leadership for reform through vision, goals, policy, and astute politics; and superintendents empowered to manage for excellence. The induction process is the first experience a new board member has in board development and the acknowledgement that they are part of a complex governance structure.

This leadership team is also often referred to as a “governance team” (CSBA, 2007). As has been noted previously, role clarity is a must for a school board to accomplish its goals and support the district in achieving their goals. The National School Board Association (2006) went a step farther than identifying the separation of roles between superintendents and school board members. This organization outlined responsibilities that these two partners should jointly own. As a result of naming such things as “to support board actions and decisions, to institute a process for long-range and strategic planning that will position the school district for success, to

serve as liaisons to the community” for example, common ground is established and a centralized force of collaboration begins to surface in addition to the strong separation of roles so often described (The National School Board Association , 2006, p. 2). Smoley (1999) agreed that strengthening the partnership of the superintendent and the school board is accomplished by developing a clear idea of how the partnership should work and gain clarity about the “mutual obligations” of each partner (p. 86).

The California School Boards Association (2007) believed that the governance team, superintendent and school board must have a “unity of purpose” and communicate a common vision through their work. Their expectation that school boards and superintendents should take collective responsibility for the board’s performance also supported the frame of the team concept and how it can enhance the work of the district. As stated previously, the induction process is the first opportunity to establishing this common vision and understanding of the team concept.

### *Self-Reflection/Assessment*

Smoley (1999) began a School Board Effectiveness Project in 1993. Through 45 school board members across the state of Delaware, he was able to get board members to describe specific situations when they believed their board operated effectively. As a result of the 111 vignettes collected, Smoley identified six actions of effective school boards. The significance of the actions are not necessarily only in the actions themselves, but in how the board measures whether the actions contribute to their effectiveness. Functioning as a group and having shared goals for the school board were actions that board members felt were indicators of their effectiveness. In addition, school board members described having a “shared respect and trust” and a sense of cohesiveness (Smoley, 1999, p. 29).

Van Clary and Soldwedel (2009) believe that school boards who are willing to reflect on their performance are boards who will engage in the dialogue necessary to improve their practice and be intentional about how the work is done. A rubric can be used to measure a board's progress toward a high functioning team. This reflection and concrete method of measuring their growth can be an incentive and a practice that encourages the behaviors that contribute to productive function. (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009).

The POLE (Profile of Leadership Effectiveness) survey was created based on extensive research in the business world and service organizations. The survey is crafted to assess, through a variety of questions to board members, the effectiveness of boards based on the following characteristics of school boards: (a) willingness to change and openness to new ideas, (b) clear and shared mission, (c) effective and engaged leadership, (d) effective collaboration and communication practices, (e) an effective board environment, (f) high standards and expectations, (g) fiscal leadership, (h) informed, and last (i) trained board members. This is an assessment tool used by the YMCA for their board development progress monitoring. This model could have implications for school board and deserves further consideration.

#### *Code of Conduct*

In Smoley's (1999) study, board members felt that some agreement on operating protocols would enhance their work. Board members felt that knowing what was expected of them and what "rules of engagement" assisted them in operating from a positive, productive frame. In addition, this study found the following actions necessary for board members to collaboratively function as an effective school board: (a) negotiating the sometimes blurry line

between exercising authority and supporting the superintendent, (b) nurturing the relationship with the community through clear communication, and (c) ensuring the consideration of all points of view.

In 2003, the YMCA organization participated in research connected to the effectiveness of leadership of their boards. This research, completed by CML Research, LLC, and Xcelle, Inc. strongly suggests that “organizations control their effectiveness” (p. 4). While noting that a clear and mutual mission is the centralizing force for all organizations, the research identified organizational trust as one key factor to board effectiveness. Trust is based on the confidence that those with whom we interact will act with benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Mishra, 1996; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Trust allows the leadership team to avoid some of the pitfalls of ineffective governance such as micromanagement on the part of the board or a lack of support for the superintendent (EPLC, 2004).

The California School Boards Association (2007) identified operating openly and with integrity as important for the success of a governance team. They added to this the skill of governing in a dignified and professional manner expanding the expectation for civility and respect to everyone, not just each other.

The Education Policy and Leadership Center in their Report on K-12 Governance (2004) found that 89% of Pennsylvania school board members and identified collaboration with the superintendent and management team and mutual respect and respect for school district employees as “very important” to operate effectively as a board. Eighty percent felt open communications were “very important” and effective

decision making processes and informed issue-related discussion were noted by 68% and 65%, respectively (Education Policy and Leadership Center , 2004, p. 15).

### *Strategically Focused*

A board expecting to act strategically can be a complicated expectation. Smoley (1999) describes a school board who acts strategically as one who maintains student learning as the heart of the work and plans, systematically, with the long term needs in mind. The delicate balance of focus is described as keeping a perspective of both internal and external constituents and “all the while balancing the reality and politics” (p. 71). In addition, according to Smoley (1999) school boards that are strategically focused continually compare their plans with results, monitor the actualization of the plan, and “organize responsibilities and authority between superintendent and board to adjust for strengths and weaknesses” (p. 71).

The CSBA (2007) also believed that a school board should focus their energies strategically on learning and achievement for all students. “For a school board, the gold standard for board leadership comes from leading from a strategic role through a collaborative approach ...” (Van Clay & Soldwedel, 2009, p. 126.)

### *Signs of Trouble*

Van Clay & Soldwedel (2009) identified 10 signs that board is in trouble. These ten signals are (a) engaging in partisan voting, (b) not supporting a majority board decision, (c) responding to community discontent without data or process, (d) conducting your own research, (e) applying expert advice literally without consulting staff, (e) applying expert advice literally without consulting staff, (f) ignoring the impact of culture on change, (g) not supporting district policies, (h) failing to foster a three-way partnership with the superintendent and union leaders,

(h) hiring a superintendent on a split vote, and (i) failing to personally detach from board decisions. As Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) reported:

Throughout the history of American public education, our schools have successfully met and overcome challenges just as weighty and complex as those now facing them. Effective, collaborative, and courageous board/superintendent leadership teams are needed today to carry on and enhance what past leaders have accomplished. (p. 6)

Common criticisms of local school boards identify micromanagement, a lack of operational knowledge on issues, self-serving or issue driven agendas, and a lack of training and self-assessment. Danzberger (1994) states that board members often struggle with decision-making and will either make impromptu decisions based on political favor or not make any decisions for change due to their need to maintain the status-quo. Board member induction, strategically developed, could be instrumental in proactively developing skills to ward off temptations of mismanagement.

#### Summary

In summary, it is evident that school boards are, at least currently, a major contributor to the governance system we have in place to support the work of our school districts. Recognizing the rise of importance in supporting and increasing the academic achievement of all students to the top of our priority list in the public educational system; it is worthy to pay attention to the governance model and maximizing its effectiveness for leverage in attaining our intentions in the area of achievement. Board member induction deserves attention as a tactic in the development of an overall effective governance team.



A school board plays a significant, and sometimes complex, set of roles in fulfilling the obligation of their position. The strong connection board's roles have with those of the superintendent impact how these roles and the relationship superintendents have with their school boards interact. These are factors to consider as we examine the effectiveness of school boards. It is with the understanding of the governance roles and responsibilities school board members and the superintendent, the relationship dynamics between these two entities, and characteristics of effective school boards that we inform our thinking about induction of new board members.

If the school board and superintendent are going to be in a position to govern, lead, and make decisions in the best interest of students, their effectiveness as a team must be a priority. Instability in board membership puts the functionality of that team at risk by introducing a new team member. There is much research needed to examine the impact of school boards on student achievement and ways to maximize the impact of the governance model that exists in our public school system.

This action research study contributes to the literature related to educational leadership by examining the experience of school board members when in a state of transition and how the induction process can be strengthened. Smoley (1999) suggests that some criticism is aimed at boards as a result of a lack of training. The YMCA, in their CEO-On Boarding Guide (2009), states that the leadership given to a new CEO is one of the most important services that can be provided and note that whether a CEO will be leading a turn around or sustaining a high performing organization an induction process will support their transition to the organization. The benefit to the CEO throughout the process of induction could be replicated in a similar process for a new board member. Given the complexities of roles that exist and the danger of

ineffective governance combined with the school board seats being filled predominantly with lay citizens with no background training on educational issues or initiatives, this study examines the transition process and intended to find strategies to be purposeful in the induction of new board members as a first step to training and thus, set the school board, superintendent, and school district up for success.

## Chapter 3

### REPORT OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this action research study was to (a) examine the induction experience for both new board members and veteran board members, and (b) to improve the induction process by using the findings of the study to develop recommendations that could inform the induction process for future board members. This action research study intends to address the delivery of an intentional process of orientation of new school board members when a district experiences transition as a result of board member turnover.

#### *Setting of the Study*

The setting of the study was a large, urban school district. This district is a P-12 public school system with an enrollment of over 29,000 students. The district has a strong commitment to increasing achievement of all students and eliminating the achievement gap which currently exists. The strategic plan for this district identifies the mission “to develop the skills and talents of all students through rigorous learning experiences, relevant real-life applications, and supportive relationships.” The primary goal is stated as “All students succeed at each grade level and graduate from high school well prepared for a variety of post-secondary pursuits in our democratic society.” There has been a heavy emphasis on teaching and learning in this district that places an instructional backdrop for much of the decision-making and strategizing.

The district purports a mission anchored in the instructional core with a thread of social justice running through all initiatives. The federal Adequate Yearly Progress mandate has put the district in “improvement status.” This status could result in sanctions if improvement efforts do not substantiate themselves in positive assessment results. Coupling with this “district

improvement” status is a graduation rate of less than 60%. As a result, the board of directors and the district staff are highly focused on activities and program offerings that will support students in the continuous improvement effort.

The district is currently in a state of transition with respect to the governance team. A long-term board member resigned her seat on the school board in the middle of her term of service. As a result, the school board went through an interview process to select a new board member. This new board member was then appointed to the school board in October, 2008. This same board member applied for candidacy this June and will run for office in the November election. In addition, three other board members are have joined the board in the past 3 years. The leadership team has also experienced transition with regard to the superintendent position as this year is the second year of service for the current superintendent.

#### *The Action Research Study*

Given the current state of transition of board membership and the increased need for processes around the induction of new board members, this school district became a natural setting for an action research study. Because my role in the district requires frequent interaction with the board around curricular and assessment initiatives, I attend board meetings regularly and in large part, the work of the department within which I work is dependent on support from the board with regard to both policy and resource allocation. When I joined this district in July, 2008, I discovered in my orientation to the district that there were multiple board members relatively new to their role. In September, when the long-standing board member announced retirement, I began to investigate the status of transition for this school board and discovered that this new member would be the fourth, out of five members, to join the school board since 2005.

This discovery, combined with my experience with transition of board members in a district where I previously worked, became the motivation for the context of this study.

In consideration of action research as a methodology for this study, I influenced by Herr and Anderson (2005) as they express “action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem” (p. 4). To that end, I approached the superintendent to seek her approval for and collaboration on, this research project. Having the collaboration of the superintendent in the role of co-researcher promoted a mutual interest and, at the same time, a different depth of perspective based on her significant encounters with the board of directors through her role as superintendent. Recognizing, through the literature review, the importance of the superintendent/board relationship, it seemed vital to include both parties in this research study. As Herr and Anderson (2005) suggested, “It is a widely held belief that people tend to support what they have helped to create” (p. 70). Orientation or induction of school board members has the potential to impact all members of the governance team, school board members and superintendent. The action research methodology allowed for collaboration among both stakeholder groups and the method itself became a vehicle for shedding light on the current experience of transition with this board.

#### *Why Transition and Induction*

In the fall of 2007, I was a student in a doctoral level qualitative research class. During that class, I conducted a case study in a small, rural school district to investigate board members’ perspective of the team elements necessary for a school board to function collaboratively. This case study began building my sense of the importance of board members being reflective of their practice and the value in them participating in the self-improvement process. Subsequently, in the winter of 2007, I experienced the departure of three of the participating board members, all of

whom had been interviewed for that case study. As a result of this turnover, I was responsible for the induction of three new board members and shared the lived experience of the transition process over the next five months while I fulfilled the role of superintendent.

Recognizing the inevitability of transition as a result of changes in board membership, my interest in the overall capacity of a school board to establish and support the goals of the district by working collaboratively with a superintendent and how the orientation process could be leveraged as a foundational beginning ensued. In addition, recognizing the level of significance of the role, work, and influence of the governance team and wanting to minimize the loss of momentum while experiencing such transition, my desire to narrow the focus of research to the process used to induct new board members when they are first appointed or elected developed.

#### *Influence of Literature on the Study*

In addition, the literature review informed this action research study in multiple ways. First, my initial quest was to study induction only through the perspective of the superintendent. However, in reviewing the literature on the roles of school board members and superintendents and noting the complexity in both the distinction and overlap of these roles, it became clear that excluding the perspective and influence of the board members could minimize the value of the findings and the outcomes. In addition, the research emerging around the role of the board president influenced my choice of interviewees. The perspective of the board president was gained through identifying the president as one of the interviewees. The literature on the characteristics of effective boards and the emerging notion of team also supported the need to include both perspectives.

The content of interview questions was influenced by the literature speaking to the complexity and importance of the superintendent and board relationship. It was our reflection on the relationship aspect that encouraged the superintendent and I to generate questions that dealt with the board members' perspective on what that relationship should be. In addition, the literature was used to support and enhance the collaborative sessions with the superintendent. The co-researcher and I reflected on the literature about superintendent and school board relationships, the complexity of roles, and effective governance teams together. We also had common book readings as we both explored Eugene Smoley's book, *Effective School Boards: Strategies for Improving Board Performance*, *The School Board Fieldbook: Leading With Vision* by Van Clay and Soldwedel, and the book by Henderson, Henry, Saks, Wright, titled *Team Leadership for Student Achievement: The Roles of the School Board and Superintendent*. These common readings as well as readings we each did separately provided us with a base of knowledge to combine with our practical experiences as we worked in partnership to analyze the data and think about recommendation implications.

#### *Co-researcher's Role*

At the beginning of the research study, given that superintendents play a significant role in the induction of new board members, the superintendent was identified as a co-researcher. The superintendent and I collaborated throughout the process building the purpose, developing interview questions, examining data, and collaborating on the recommendations.

Because of the direct relationship with the school board, the superintendent was the one who discussed the nature of the study with the board prior to us beginning the study. The board was supportive of the study and the focus on the induction process. Given that the board is an obvious stakeholder in the process of induction, the opportunity for the superintendent to discuss

the focus and nature of the study with the board was integral to the launch of the study. I then made direct contact with board members to gain permission for interviews, scheduled the interviews, and conducted the interviews.

### *The Scope of Action Research*

While action research is referred to by Stringer (2007) as a “look, think, act” cycle, this research study, due to time limitations and circumstances related to the transitional state of the setting, will only report on the “look” and “think” stages. The “look” stage involves design and data collection and provides an opportunity for researchers to think carefully about the problem to investigate, design the study, determine the sources of data, and collect that data. The “think” stage is where data were analyzed and coded to identify the integral characteristics of the problem and identifying the necessary components of the induction process to be used in recommendations.

The “act” stage, typically launched as a result of making recommendations, was not completed as we will have to wait for the transitional stage, a new board member, to apply the recommendations and begin the spiral of influence on the process again. Outcomes and recommendations were shared with the superintendent in an attempt to plan for future transitions. The “act” stage will have a full ending once the school board faces the next transition and can go through the induction process using the recommendations provided.

### The “Look” Stage

The “look” stage began informally, with my experience in the previous district; however, it predominantly took form as I began observing during school board meetings and work sessions upon arriving as a new employee in this district during the summer of 2008. The newest member of the school board was appointed and began service in October, 2008. Following conversations



with the superintendent about the potential focus of this study and inquiring if she would be willing to participate as co-researcher, participation was agreed upon. Once the structure of the study had been established I applied for IRB approval and began the formal collaborations with my co-researcher by spending multiple collaborative sessions together getting her perspective on her experience in the induction process, presently and in the past. These collaborative sessions were framed with guiding questions related to the following (a) what is the influence of existing board members on the induction process, (b) what is the influence of the superintendent on the induction process, (c) what is the potential impact of an induction experience as either a distracter or a value-added experience for the functional operations of the school board, and (d) what can we learn that will inform our practice of induction. These filters or guiding questions were generated from the research questions posed by this study: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process? (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new members? (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process, contributing to the development of a new team and readying the new member to function in their new role? (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board? and (e) What improvements can be made to the induction process used in this district?

I met with my co-researcher on four different occasions during the "look" stage. During these sessions I took notes as we discussed a variety of aspects of her experience with the new board member, the impacts she was seeing on the board as a whole, and what she had seen in past experiences with induction in the district. Following each session, I would take the notes and analyze them for themes, points of focus, and new questions generated from our thinking.

Then in the next collaborative session, we would discuss the data and how those thoughts might influence the work on the induction process.

Throughout the first two collaborative sessions one focus of our conversation was determining what we needed to ask board members and which board members we should interview to provide a perspective that would inform our “think” stage. As we talked through the superintendent’s perspective, something would often cause us to wonder what a board member would think about that particular focus point. It was through these reflections the interview questions were finalized (see Appendix A). We made the decision to interview three board members. We chose the participants based on two things: (a) board members with different years of experience on the board, and (b) the president of the board due to some variation of responsibilities. Table 1 describes the board members interviewed.

Table 1

Board Member Participation

Board member	Length of school board service	Experience in board prior board service
1	5 months	City Planning Commission
2	2 years, 2 months	None
3	12 years	Yes (non K-12)

Our selection of board members to interview was based on the belief that the newest member is currently living the experience of induction, and with the experience being so fresh, there might be valuable insight and input on the supports provided and the perspective of needs for a new board member. This newest board member has some background on a planning commission. Participation on this commission has some parallel duties to those of the school board with the largest exceptions being the fiscal responsibility and the educational context. The

planning commission did not have financial responsibilities. The second board member interviewed, we believed, may have a different view of the role of board member. This board member's knowledge of the scope of the work, the responsibilities, the politics, and the challenges of working as a unit are different due to having the opportunity to go through a full year of board operations more than once. At the same time, this board member is still close enough to a personal experience with induction that their thinking might provide a different perspective than our longer standing participant. Finally, the last board member has the most experience of all members on the board. This experience alongside his role of acting president would offer yet again another perspective. Longevity provides this member with a level of experience that might enable him to have different reflections of the impact of transition on the governance team and enhance our thinking about the role and importance of induction. It was decided to only interview three board members instead of all five in order to keep their perspectives "representative" and not "comprehensive." This was because board members are sensitive to when they are representing themselves and when they are representing the board. In this study, board members were representing their own, individual point of view and not the view of the board as a whole.

In addition, the superintendent and I collaborated on the questions to be used when interviewing board members (see Appendix B). The interviews were scheduled in February and I interviewed each of these three board members individually. The co-researcher did not participate in the actual interviews. The board members were very receptive to the idea of being interviewed and participating in the study willingly. They were eager to share their thoughts about transition and provided invaluable perspective that would have been lost without their input to the study. Prior to each interview I explained the nature of the study and answered their

questions (see Appendix A) and each participant signed a consent form (see Appendix C). The interviews ranged from 40-60 minutes, were tape recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read and analyzed looking for perceptive themes that would influence the recommendations to the induction process. I also listened to the audio files of the transcripts multiple times following the analysis in order to substantiate our conclusions and listen for any insights we might have overlooked.

During the “look” stage I also met with Phil Gore, the Director of Leadership Development Services for the WSSDA. He is responsible for coordinating the new board member training preconference offered at the state-wide fall WSSDA Conference. In my time with Phil, I asked him his impression of the support his state-wide organization provides districts as they go through transitions in board memberships. As a result of the time we spent together, I was invited to attend the session of orientation for new board members offered at this state-wide conference. This allowed me to see the type of information the organization was providing to board members and allowed me to hear questions that new board members were asking during this training session. It also gave me a common base of experience when this training was discussed in the interviews with some of the board members who also attended the same training.

During my collaboration time with the superintendent I was able to understand prior practice of induction or at least the expectations for such in this particular district. To better understand the historical background of this district in relation to board member turnover, I investigated the turnover of board members dating back to early 1900s. This data allowed me to build my understanding of the shifting needs for a process of induction and why the district may not have paid much attention to the experience previously. With such stability in school board

membership, the process of induction was much less of a focus in the past than it has been in the last 4 years due to the significant increase in board member turnover recently.

In addition, I examined the current state of induction practices in the district by looking for the district policy and procedures (see Appendix C and D). The district involved in this study does have a district policy and procedure with respect to orientation, or induction, for new board members. Policy 1260, written and issued in 1983 outlines a variety of areas and a minimum of topics for inclusion in the induction. It also names the superintendent and president of the board as the facilitators of the process. This policy has not ever been updated. The corresponding procedure, which provides more specific steps of the process, was originally issued in 1985 but updated in 1993. It identifies activities and coordinators for those activities as well as provides a list of materials a new board member should receive.

Another objective during the “look” stage was to investigate what study or work had been done with non-profit boards outside of education. I learned a great deal from Greg Lobdell, Director of Research with the Center of Educational Excellence with respect to the work this organization has performed for the YMCA organization in support of their executive level governance. The Center of Educational Excellence got involved with the YMCA to provide support to the YMCA in the form of data and assessment tools to measure their board effectiveness. In September I met with Mr. Lobdell and he shared his work with YMCA around board development and specifically, with regard to transitions when a new CEO comes to the organization. They have operationalized a process called “onboarding.” This process is an organizational response to a high turnover of leadership; nearly 400 out of 4000 CEOs are new every year.

Since there has been more work done on teacher induction than board member induction, I contacted Mindy Myer, the Project Director for the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP) to inquire about the work done to create standards for teacher induction. This is a project funded by the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation in order to develop a set of standards for induction of new teachers for Washington State. This work was done amid high collaboration from a variety of stakeholders and resulted in a strong set of standards founded in research. While these standards are specific to teachers and not board members, the structural framework with respect to the setting standards on a collection of beliefs allowed me to think about board member induction through a similar lens. They have published these standards in a document called *Effective Support for New Teachers in Washington State: Standards for Beginning Teacher Induction* (2008). I was hoping the research around teacher induction would guide our thinking around board member induction, but what I found was that the teacher induction research is very specific to the skills and knowledge necessary for a teacher to be successful. However, this thoughtful work with respect to induction for teachers provided a solid frame for my co-researcher and I to think about the elements to consider in board member induction and how we might be able to clearly delineate the important components of induction for board members based on what skills and knowledge they needed to be successful in their role and what common problems arise in the operation of a school board.

### The “Think” Stage

The “think” stage of the study again provided opportunity for me to collaborate with the superintendent as co-researcher to reflect on the input of the three board members and the manner in which their thinking triangulated with the superintendent’s perspective and experience. Our next sessions together were framed around the analysis I had done with the

interview data. I shared the accumulated data broken down into areas of our focus as well as linked the data to our previous collaborative sessions where we spoke about the role and influence of the superintendent on the induction process.

The broad categories used to analyze the data became themes to influence our conclusions and recommendations. What follows is a discussion of the data collected, from board members and the co-researcher, through the various themes which emerged during the “look” and “think” stages. These themes are (a) reflections of the general role of a board member, (b) why induction is an important process to pay attention to, (c) what new board members can do for themselves in the induction process, (d) existing board members’ influence the induction process, (e) the superintendent’s influence at times of transition, and (f) the superintendent/board relationship and the articulation of what a well-functioning board might look like.

#### *Role of the Board Member in Induction*

The literature review demonstrated that there is often role confusion and that there is complexity around the roles of school board members and the superintendent. We decided to ask our participants how they saw their role as a board member. In order for us to inform the process that we are using to train new board members it seemed important to establish clarity around the perspective of the role for which we are preparing them. Without the answer to this question as a baseline, we may not be preparing them for the appropriate responsibilities. There were a variety of responses gathered through the interview process. One member felt their most important role was to bring “a distinctly different perspective, a distinctly different set of life experiences and abilities and viewpoints...,” while another emphasized a board member’s role as the superintendent’s employer and noted the hiring and evaluating of the superintendent as primary

functions. Setting policy and being a voice for the community was expressed by two of the board members.

One board member, in particular, had a broad perspective of the role, stating that it “changes depending on the situation.” This board member stated items such as developing policy, contributing to the “collective wisdom” of the board, legislative involvement around K-12 issues, being a community representative and then noted the technical aspect of hiring a superintendent for the district. Even in that, this board member contributed a different perspective than the others had on hiring. This board member contended there was responsibility on the part of the board to ensure the district is a quality district because the “state of the district” would influence the quality of candidates attracted when the time came for hiring a new superintendent.

### *Importance of Induction*

“Boards make important decisions on a regular basis” was a comment made by the superintendent when I asked why we should be intentional about the induction process. A board member said “I think transition is always important to a board because of all of the work you do.” and then added “I don’t think there would be a time when it isn’t significant.” The timing of the election or selection of new board members does not always lend itself for a slow, methodical induction process. The closure of a school can be one of the most traumatic events a school board deals with. One board member experienced this very decision at her first board meeting. At the very next meeting the current superintendent announced his retirement would be coming in a few months. While it may be impossible to prepare board members for such extreme situations, it does indicate the need for induction and the importance of being intentional in the design of the induction process. Appreciation and knowledge-building of the historical



background knowledge of a district was seen as an important element. Taking the time to build some historical perspective related to issues was seen as a way to assist on making good decisions. A board member noted that even if a change of direction was necessary for the district, the historical baseline would strengthen the decision making process and the communication of the decision to stakeholders. One interviewee described it this way: “The better the orientation, the better the decision-making will be, the more comfortable the new board member will be in listening to the staff.”

One board member described the risk for a new member not being properly prepared. Early impressions can sometimes be lasting and credibility could be lost early if the new board member isn’t prepared and “steps on someone’s toes.” This could happen with another board member, the superintendent, staff, or a community member. Vulnerability seemed to surface as a descriptor of a new board member and the necessity of a process to minimize that vulnerability.

The size of the board came up over and over again. With only five members, potential vulnerability as a result of transition was mentioned multiple times. “A board functions as a team and every group is only as fast as their slowest member.” If you happen to have two new members, then “that leaves three while the other two gain speed.” Another board member used the term “muted” to describe a new, unprepared board member and noted that it isn’t healthy to have one out of five “muted.” “A twenty-percent loss is too expensive” was another comment. This participant felt that due to the small number of voices on a school board, anything that could be done to bring the new member up to speed as quickly as possible should be done. A “strong, healthy induction process would eliminate” the risk and the “incredible distractions” that could occur “while you are regaining focus.” Each participant indicated a high importance and urgency to the manner in which we orient new board members.

A board member can run for a seat or pursue an appointment for any reason they choose and, in addition, has very few requirements placed on him or her in order to qualify as a candidate. Proof of residency within the school district boundaries is one of the only requirements. A concern was raised by one interviewee when a candidate was described as running on the “pissed-off ticket.” This same board member noted that another candidate ran because they felt “no one should run unopposed.” That particular candidate lost the election by a very narrow 48 to 52 percent margin. Given that the work of the school board and district, as described by the superintendent, is “complex and detailed, with a high degree of accountability from all levels, local, state, and federal, such high stakes issues as graduation requirements, the drop-out crisis, fiscal implications, hiring, and closing schools.” The expectations for a potential board member have been ramped up as the need for a broad range of knowledge and skills is necessary for a school board member to thrive.

### *Self-Induction*

Each board member expressed a different approach to how they viewed their own responsibility in the induction process and shared what they had done prior to taking office to prepare themselves. One mentioned reading previous board meeting minutes to build an understanding of what kinds of presentations had been given and what kind of issues had been discussed. Attendance at the WSSDA training was described as minimally helpful but was seen as an event a board member could digest on their own accord and draw their own meaning from based on their previous experience or lack of it.

One member initiated questions of the existing members when he was first elected to the school board. He asked each member, individually, what the expectations of him as a board member were. In addition, this board member initiated questions of the superintendent around

“how to get things done.” Seeking out existing board members provided for some added support as board members experienced their new role.

Each board member described their experiences professionally and as a volunteer in the public school system as preparation. One member had served on a variety of boards through his own professional experiences; one described their experience in a management role in the medical field helpful in understanding some of fiscal and personnel issues. Volunteering in a variety of settings was used by one as preparation for the role. School level volunteerism, district-wide committees, and, in particular, work on the citizens committee for the bond and levy were noted as very helpful activities to gain knowledge about the district. However, it was noted that no matter how much volunteer time you have committed, it isn't enough to prepare you for the role of a board member when you are responsible for such a broad range of areas. All participants reported that they felt an enormous responsibility for the type and amount of knowledge necessary to successfully fulfill their board member roles.

#### *Existing Board Members' Role in Induction*

One board member's induction experience was a single meeting with a board member that covered just the “very basics” and expressed that this wasn't enough interaction from existing board members. One member described the experience as hitting the “ground with your feet in motion” and sometimes a board is aware of experiences in the district and might assume you have enough information as a result of your prior volunteer work. It was more common for existing board members to call newly elected or appointed board members, sometimes taking them out to lunch or coffee for conversation. These encounters were all informal and not designed intentionally. There is a recognition that it is important for existing board members to be “welcoming” and communicate that they are willing to help whenever there is need. One

member describes the role as “very important” and noted that the board could influence this aspect of the induction process. A split or fractured board may influence differently than a well-functioning board. A participant cautioned that there could be political implications if the new board member is a “single-issue” candidate with a view different than the remainder of the board. Or, if a new board member’s seat resulted from the election victory of a well-liked incumbent board member there could be some difficulties in how existing board members support the new board member.

In general, there was much support for the board to take an active role in the process. “It is our job to make sure they understand the scope of the job and what it is as well as what it isn’t, and establish the relationship.” The responsibility “belongs to the board, not the district.” The president reflected that it was his responsibility to make sure the appropriate support was being provided and that the needs of the new board member were met. The president of the board explained that they had taken the new member aside and described the difference in roles of the superintendent and the board and where the gray area exists. This same board member stated that when they started, board members continued to check in with them when new situations came up, even after the member was “in rhythm” and that was found to be helpful.

There was some caution that an overly focused or intentional orientation might be seen as counterproductive to the need for a variety of perspectives on the board. This participant contended that the induction might end up being a mechanism to minimize the variations among board members. The board member to board member orientation could be seen as a strategy to build conformity on participant felt. If “diversity of thought” is an important component, as one participant shared, it could be at risk if there is too much influence from existing board members.

### *Superintendent's Role in Induction*

The superintendent described the role of the superintendent in the induction process by first noting that a district is typically in one of two conditions or some variation/combination of the two: (a) a stable direction for the district has been established and is currently receiving support by stakeholders or (b) there are challenges in the district and a change of direction or shift in focus is impending. In either case, the superintendent plays a role. If the direction of the district is well-established then it is important to assimilate the new board member to the existing culture and the foundational reasons the direction has been chosen and supported. There may be a historical perspective and a body of previous work that the district feels strongly about taking forward. While on the other hand, if there are changes ahead, the superintendent can help orient the new board member to the challenges and the prior district experiences that may be influencing the forthcoming changes. This proactive framing of the condition of the district may, in the superintendent's view, minimize frustrations and misunderstandings later.

The board members interviewed expressed a strong ownership of the induction process. It was mutually felt that the process should be entertained by the board itself, although; board members felt it important for the superintendent to recognize that there is a change taking place and identify the need for added support while going through the transition. In addition, the superintendent's role was seen by board members as "critical" and "the bridge" to the district information and the knowledge necessary for a board member to assume their duties. Specifically, acquainting the new board member with the organizational structure, the "players" involved, and the basic content knowledge of the educational district was seen as important.

It was also acknowledged as part of the superintendent's role to stay tuned in and assess the on-going needs of the new member. Although a superintendent can be very busy, a key role

of the superintendent that emerged is keeping track of the transitional process and providing added support elements as needed. Board members felt the superintendent could assist by simply recognizing and acknowledging that a new member might change the team dynamics and that working together might look different or be “rocky” for awhile. In addition to providing district information, board members also expressed sharing the long-range scope of duties across a year was a way a superintendent should support the process.

### *Superintendent/Board Relationships and a Well-Functioning Board*

The symbiotic relationship between the school board and the superintendent and how the governance team works together was described through the board members’ reflection about induction. This reflection may influence how we think about the role and purpose of the induction process itself and how that process might be leveraged to initiate the building and nurturing of this relationship and team components. The complexity is described by acknowledging that “there will always be that underlying element of hierarchy.” The “tough role” of the superintendent is evident in the depiction of the team recognizing that “there are six members of the team, but five voting members.” This participant seemed to designate a distinction of where the team became two entities instead of one inclusive group of six people.

While one member cautioned that it could be dangerous if a superintendent and school board “become one,” other participants used words such as “collaborative,” “cooperative,” and “mutually supportive” to describe the relationship. One board member described the complexity in that there are really two teams, a team of five and a team of six. The relationship between the two was also described as a relationship that creates checks and balances for the system.

If we are inducting a new member of the “team,” then it may be helpful to not only examine the dynamics of the role of superintendent on that team, but also to revisit the

perspective of what the board believes constitutes the substance of a well-functioning team. A need for the ability and freedom to speak in disagreement was commonly expressed. In addition, the expectation that the disagreements be handled in a respectful, “positive, collegial” manner with “open, honest dialogue” was also noted as a priority. “If I have to win, means you have to lose” was used as an example of an attitude that is counter-productive and how conflict sometimes gets dealt with on a school board. Compromise becomes a factor when recognizing that board members come to the team with different “passions.” “You respect each other’s passion and respect the life experience and intelligence and the package that the other people bring with them.” Coming with an open mind to examine issues might lead to better results as one member noted “the other person might have a better idea than I do.”

The association is described by a board member as a “complicated relationship.” It is a relationship where five people come together from different “frames of reference,” backgrounds, educational levels, personal experiences, and motivations. Even the vision, which the board helps set for the district, might be somewhat different among members. If the vision isn’t different, the methods or strategies by which to get there are often different. While there is some perspective shared in regard to “healthy conflict” and the need for conflict, it is also noted that “the battle is, to try to make it five or make it six, but it only takes three...” as a board member describes the voting approval procedure for any decision.

### *Induction Practices*

One of the general reflections about board member induction is that it may need to look different depending on the individual differences of the new board member or the current state of the district. Board members in the study recognize that people have such diverse educational and professional backgrounds that it is important to respond to what a person brings with them to the

position or what they might be missing when they join the school board. Board members that were interviewed described themselves as “busy people” so it is important to differentiate the orientation in order for the activities to be meaningful, relevant, and not wasteful. It was suggested that the induction process not be “a one size fits all” experience. Yet it was also noted that there are significant fundamental elements to the role of a board member that support the need for all new members getting a certain level of information to serve as a base of knowledge.

There is strong recognition that there is a need for district information to be disseminated. The size of our district is noted as a cause for the volume of new information a board member has to contend with. Again, volunteering is seen as a very different experience than being a board member and no matter how much time a person has put in on committees and other volunteer experiences board members believe “you don’t understand everything that is going on and all the different areas and what has to occur . . . the things that you don’t hear about on a day-to-day basis that have to be done correctly so that you don’t hear about them.” Meetings with various staff people were found to be very helpful when these meetings explained who was responsible for what, how they perform their duties, and what cross over existed between staff members and departments. Introduction to staff members and tours of buildings were other actions that board members felt were helpful in bridging the new member to the district work.

Two other pieces to the puzzle that would be helpful with respect to the knowledge base that were noteworthy was (a) an organizational chart with a list of players and (b) a glossary describing the multitude of terms and acronyms that a new board member encounters. “People talk about everyone on a first-name basis...you don’t have a clue what they were talking about.” Board members describe discomfort in always having to ask for clarification when they could also be somewhat independent if they had the information to use as a reference. In addition, not



knowing all of the terms and acronyms can be “distracting because you want to understand what the conversation is and educate yourself, but if you don’t even know what the letters are . . .” it is difficult.

Another area of concern for new board members was around protocols or conventions. There is the formal “Robert’s Rules of Order” but beyond that there is a system of communications, legal implications with the Open Public Meetings Act, and standards of practice around discussions and decision-making that can be interpreted as unclear and mysterious. A board member described his experience as one filled with questions such as “do we have these kinds of open discussions at the board meeting, do we have these at work sessions, and are these more one-on-one . . . where is the appropriate venue for the appropriate discussion to occur.” Sometimes a board member has to rely on body language or “looks” to determine if a discussion is taking place appropriately. Getting clear about communication in “three primary areas” was seen as an important aspect of induction. These three areas of communication were noted as (a) board to board communication, (b) board member to superintendent communication, and (c) board to staff member communication.

Although, in the past, induction in this district occurred on a more informal basis, the superintendent notices that with the increase in board member turnover results a greater need for an intentional process with some key structures to support the system as it transitions. Modeling of experienced board members and the use of informal conversations and support structures may still have a place, however, the more transitional experiences a school board has over a short period of time, the less impactful those strategies will become. The superintendent felt, specifically, that induction would be an ideal opportunity for clarifying the distinction and

complexity of roles for superintendents and board members as well as a chance to build a perspective on what a well-functioning board looks and feels like.

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this action research study was to (a) examine the induction experience for both new board members and veteran board members, and (b) to improve the induction process by using the findings of the study to develop recommendations that could inform the induction process for future board members. This study intended to address the need for establishing an intentional process of orientation a district could utilize when faced with a transition in board membership. The research questions that guided this study were: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process? (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new members? (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process, contributing to the development of a new team and readying the new member to function in their new role? (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board? and (e) What improvements can be made to the induction process used in this district?

In this final chapter, the conclusions from this study and recommendations for the district's induction process, generated in collaboration with my co-researcher, are shared. The conclusions and recommendations are tightly related and thus are presented in unison. It is these recommendations that will be considered by the district when they experience the next board member transition. Although not included in this study, the "act" stage could begin with the district establishing some structures to the induction process even in advance of the next transition. The newest board member, appointed last October, will run for election this coming fall. In addition, the president, and longest standing member of the board, is also up for re-

election this coming fall. If either, or both, of these two board members are not elected, this governance team will enter the transition cycle again in the very near future. This chapter also includes my personal reflections on this action research study, what I learned throughout the project, and my thoughts about necessary future research.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Four conclusions have emerged from this qualitative, collaborative action research study examining the induction experience of new school board members. The co-researcher and I believe that these conclusions have led to recommendations that will strengthen the core of the induction process for this district. First, and foremost, when a school board experiences transition, the process of inducting the new member or members is critically important and in recognizing it as such, can be leveraged as a board development practice that not only benefits the new member but the entire governance team. The second is that not only is the superintendent/board relationship a multi-faceted and essential association, the board member to board member relationship itself can be complex and when a new board member joins the leadership team, it has an effect on the entire team. Third, the evolving role of a board requires new board member to attain specific technical knowledge, or content knowledge, as well as process knowledge. Last, the process of induction is complex and should be seen as an on-going professional learning experience versus a “one-stop” isolated training episode. Following is a discussion of each of these four conclusions and the recommendations they engender for the next transition in this district and possibly board member induction programs in general. In Table 2 below, you will find a summary of these conclusions and their corresponding recommendations.

### *Induction Process and Support*

The first conclusion is drawn from the belief that the work of school districts is not only challenging and essential; it cannot be done without a well-functioning board. As a result, the development and support of the leadership team, as it goes through transition, should be a top priority. The strategies employed, the knowledge delivered, the process used throughout the experience should be intentional and strategic. The act of inducting a new board member and blending the perspectives of the new board member into the existing set of board perspectives must be acknowledged and identified as a common experience with specific, agreed upon outcomes. Recognizing that important processes do not usually happen quickly or independently, it should not be assumed that effective induction will occur independent of specific action. A plan must be developed and specific action must be taken. The evolutionary nature of the transition experience should be considered in this planning.

Because induction is so important, we recommend that the process of induction be addressed overtly with the board as early as a transition is anticipated. But without a clearly communicated, well-thought out plan for induction anticipating early is not enough. In addition, because the experience is one shared by everyone it will be beneficial to work with the school board to generate their core beliefs about the team's effectiveness, identify what transition might mean to their effort to function as a team, and delineate or revisit the intended plan for induction. These core beliefs would then lead to a set of standards to frame the process of induction. Collaboration is the key the experience of establishing or revisiting these beliefs and standards together could enhance the superintendent/board team. The act of collaboratively creating this induction structure would build ownership and support the notion that they are inclusively responsible for the creation of and maintenance of the team and the induction experience itself.

These core beliefs and standards can then be used to filter strategies of induction and guide the efforts of the team as they move through the transition. This inclusive form of induction might increase the ownership in the transition experience and boost the likelihood of a well-planned, well-executed induction. We also recommend the induction process begin as early as possible with first contacts being made with all candidates even prior to the election. This will provide an opportunity for the effects of an induction program through relationship building and knowledge building to begin. The process is so important, you cannot start early enough. There are times when significant decisions are made immediately upon a board member taking office and as one board member said “you are only as strong as your weakest member.”

#### *Induction as Leverage for Relationship Building*

Second, a conclusion drawn as a result of board member interviews and the literature review, is that the relationship component of this complex, symbiotic leadership team must be a strong consideration in the components of an induction process. The sooner the superintendent/board team can get to the “we” the sooner the board has a chance to function effectively. The potential political ramifications during a time of transition are many: (a) a favorite team member unseated through the election process, (b) a “single-issue” candidate being elected with a strong opinion different than that of the existing board member, and (c) a candidate with an “axe to grind” with a decision the board has made previously. A new board member establishes a new team; therefore, using the induction process to establish the importance of team and begin the team building process makes sense. There is a team of five, but there is also the team of six. How can an induction process begin to develop the essence and foundation of these teams?

Our recommendation is to develop the process of induction that provides for role clarification, even in terms of the responsibilities involved throughout the induction process. The superintendent has a specific and vital role to play in building a bridge to the content knowledge necessary for a new board member. The district initiatives, mission, programs, staff, status of student achievement issues, and the general organizational information, are all data points that should be communicated. Board members felt that a large part of the responsibility should fall on their own shoulders; however, without recognition of the various roles necessary to support the induction process, there may be confusion and a lack of efficacy to the process. We recommend clearly delineating what responsibilities the superintendent has, what induction responsibilities the board has, the board president, and what the new board member should do to support him or herself in the process as well. We suggest that the board president take on specific leadership responsibilities during the transition. These duties might include ensuring the board member is receiving adequate support throughout the induction experience, communicating with the superintendent if unique needs of the new member need to be addressed, and extending, on behalf of the board, the offer of support and guidance. By joining the superintendent in the acclimation of the new member to the induction process and being available for questions, the board president can be a key influencer and supporter of the new board member.

### *Two Layers of Content*

Third, we concluded that there is a set of content elements that should be delivered throughout the induction process. Content can be considered in two layers: (a) core knowledge and (b) process knowledge. The core knowledge consists of baseline information that will enable the new board member to function within the system and make sense of discussions in which they participate. The second layer, process knowledge, encompasses the procedural components

of the governance team as well as building an understanding of the scope of the role and responsibilities the board member can expect to experience over time.

In thinking about these two layers of knowledge and skills necessary to perform the duties of a board member, our recommendation is that we ensure the induction plan includes access to both of these knowledge bases. The content knowledge should include an organizational chart with names and roles for the district. This chart will not only help them get acquainted with staff names and responsibilities, but will also serve as a visual to assist the new board member understand the structures of district administration. In addition, one comment from a participant was that the acronyms and “educational jargon” sometimes gets in the way and becomes distracting. The current board handbook does include a list of acronyms; however, we recommend a review of the list of acronyms, add to that list acronyms by personalizing the list to acronyms that might be unique to the school district, and include where helpful a few sentences of description to terms that will support the new member in learning the contextual use of these acronyms. This content knowledge should also include program names and descriptions. The board has begun to develop a Code of Conduct and an informational document which speaks to the various elements of the governance model. These documents are still in the draft form and it is recommended that the board/superintendent team continues to discuss these drafts and finalized them prior to the next potential transition. It was also discovered that while some of these documents had been initiated, there was no intentional use of these products during the induction experience and our suggestion is that they be emphasized in the delivery of information and support to new board members.



### *“Long-Term” Induction Plan*

The last conclusion is a general, over-arching one that speaks to the process of induction as an evolution over time. This is an experience that will develop through stages and will need to have attention over time in order to ensure that the result is a well-functioning team. In order to support the new board member and the rest of the leadership team, it is important to recognize that the needs of individuals may vary over the course of that time. The work of a school district and thus the work of a school board is cyclical. There are events, decisions, mandated processes, etc. that flow throughout the course of a year. In addition, there may be events or circumstances that occur that are out of the ordinary cycle of events that may require the plan for induction to be altered and responsive to the issue at hand in order to support the new member. So while an induction process should be well thought out and planned, it also needs to be flexible and created with enough flexibility to adapt to the current needs of any situation.

Our recommendation is that once a transition is expected, an action plan be developed to cover the stages of transition that takes into consideration the cycle of responsibilities and decisions the school board will be making. Many citizens who become board members, do so through the electorate process and begin their service in the late fall, early winter. For these inductions, a plan could be implemented in advance that is fairly established and needs little modification. The plan should include a cycle of events with time intervals identifying when certain orientation activities and /or experiences will take place, the content of each event, and who will be responsible for initiating these events. Specifically, this would be the venue to build in specific expectations for the superintendent to check in with the new board member to assess the level of support and identify further training needs, for the identification of what the board president will do and when. In addition, our recommendation is that each transition plan includes

formalized training for all board members and the superintendent to establish a baseline experience to begin the induction experience.

The scope of the action plan should encompass the entire first calendar year of membership for the new board member. The activities should be built around the timing of key, cyclical events that occur during the year or any unique events that might be going on that particular year, such as running a school levy or bond, hiring a superintendent, forecasted budget crisis, etc. Because board members can be appointed at anytime during the year if an existing board member does not fulfill his or her full term, our recommendation that the yearlong strategic induction plan be modified in response to specific needs that might result from the timing of the board appointment. In addition, knowing that we can use this process of induction to build the capacity of the function of the board itself, we recommend that specific, scheduled times when the board will either self-assess their response to the transition and/or the support being given to the new team member should be built into this action plan.

Table 2

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions	Recommendations
1. Induction process is an experience that should be leveraged to maximize positive effects on board development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate the induction process overtly to the school board.</li> <li>• Collaborate with school board members in the design and structure of the process.</li> <li>• Establish a set of common core beliefs to frame the process.</li> <li>• Begin the induction process as soon as possible.</li> </ul>
2. The experience of transition impacts all members of the governance team and can be used to influence the relationships among members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the induction.</li> <li>• Identify specific roles for the board president.</li> </ul>

<p>3. The knowledge necessary for a new board member to function as part of the team includes both content knowledge and process knowledge.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include all areas of content knowledge that a board member needs to know.</li> <li>• Include process knowledge related to rules and regulations pertinent to the role of a school board, how decisions are made, norms and protocols of working together.</li> <li>• Include any operating documents (code of conducts, decision-making models, core beliefs, etc.) in the induction process.</li> </ul>
<p>4. The process of induction can be multifarious and needs to be supported over time and not seen as a “one-stop” event.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a yearlong map of the induction process.</li> <li>• Build in a formal/collective training experience for all board members.</li> <li>• Vary plan dependent on the sequence of experiences the new board member will encounter depending on what time of the year they begin.</li> <li>• Build in scheduled opportunities for the board to self-assess their progress in the induction process.</li> <li>• Build in scheduled times for the superintendent and the board president to check in with the new board member(s) on any additional needs they may have.</li> </ul>

### Reflections

The challenge in front of educators today is greater than ever before. There is a sense of urgency that did not always penetrate our walls. The higher accountability system, the changing needs of our students, the transformation of the economy and the jobs available to our students when leave our system, make it even more critical that school boards are prepared and knowledgeable to meet the challenge. Given that we have a significant responsibility to provide all students with a valuable, effective educational experience and are charged with increasing academic achievement for all students, it is imperative to use every opportunity to gain collective momentum and energy toward that goal. If student achievement were not enough to challenge the local governance team, the problems are greater due to the lack of sufficient funding resulting

in tough decision-making and policy development. It is interesting that while there is a long history of local school board governance, dating back to the New England colonies and the mid-19th century movement of common schools, such little focus has been placed on studying the nature of, complexities of, and effectiveness of the public institution of school boards. A strong partnership between the school board and the district's mission can be a powerful force in moving a district along the path of continuous improvement.

The complexity of the roles that exist with board members and their superintendents, coupled with the importance of the role of the superintendent as the conduit of support for district initiatives and the board with their role of community advocate, provides for a fertile ground. This fertile ground can generate support and vision for a united delivery of the educational experience for our students or it can grow dissention, diversity of vision, and conflict that detracts from the program delivery for kids.

This opportunity to study a microcosm of the board development process allowed me to think through the process of developing a strong governance team through the vantage point of the start of a "new team." Because of my personal experiences in another school district when a large turnover of board members occurred at once, this project became multi-dimensional for me. Not only did I have an opportunity to be reflective about that recent experience and how a different model of induction practice could have been applied in that situation, I have been able to look at this current situation from a seat a little farther away and watch the developments as this board experienced transition. And in that reflection and examination, I have been able to think through how I would engage in the process if in the role of superintendent in the future. This "past, present, future" filter has been a wonderful learning process for me.

Another factor giving great relevance to my study is the potential for future turnover of school board members in the district where this study took place. With the termination of the term for the longest standing board member, combined with the need for the newly appointed board member to run for election, there is the potential that in a few months, not only could the team experience another transition, this school board of a large, urban school district could be comprised of five individuals where the longest-standing member was elected just 4 years ago. This is a significant change from the previous nature of this board when most board members maintained long terms of service.

The limitation of this study came as a result of framing the research using the action research methodology. Action research was a helpful strategy in some aspects because the need for examination of induction is very present in this district. The functionality of this school board impacts the work of the department that I am responsible a great deal. I do believe that the recommendations of this study will be utilized to support the next transition. However, I found the context of action research somewhat limiting due to the sensitive nature of study given the political aspects of school boards and their relationship with the superintendent. In addition, the intensity of the timing of the financial distress across our state, and in our district, made gaining access to the board for further vetting and collaboration impossible.

There is a great need for further study related to the work of the school board. There should be broad-based qualitative studies that begin to get at the heart three important areas: (a) the superintendent/board relationship, (b) role clarification, and (c) the school boards' view of the characteristics of an effective school board. In order to give school board members and superintendents the opportunity to be as candid as possible, these studies should not be action research studies. While there certainly have been some research performed in some of these

areas, the field could benefit greatly from more data to use in building strategies for a productive, cohesive governance team.

One participant described transition as a “distraction if the right person gets elected” and a “disruption if the wrong person gets elected.” This point articulated for me the purpose in studying this topic. There isn’t any way around the experience and the impact to the team while a new board member gets oriented and prepared for service. For me personally, the study sparked my interest in board development in general and inspired me to continue learning. It took me from a practical experience where transition deeply affected my professional efforts, to a research-based approach that afforded me the opportunity to develop a more intentional, strategic response plan to any future experiences I may have in a role of superintendent or “cabinet-level” position. In any role I have had, either personally or professionally, I have always experienced more growth and success when I was part of an active, engaged, productive team. What I have learned is that it is no different at this level of leadership and my passion around the power of a fundamentally strong team is stronger than ever. The next time I am in a position to serve in the capacity of superintendent, board development and, certainly, any transition experienced will be influenced by this study.

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## APPENDIX A

### Board Interview Protocol

#### 1. Introduction:

- I am currently in a doctoral program through Washington State University.
- In working toward completion of my Ed. D. I am conducting an Action Research study.

#### 2. Research:

- *Intent of Research:* The purpose of the study is to examine how board members and superintendents influence the process of induction.
- *Why Induction:* As you know, boards often experience changes in membership. Each time that transition occurs, there is some sort of attention necessary to support the needs during this time of transition. This district has had four new members in the past 4 years. It makes sense to examine how we can best support the board and the district in times of change.
- *Purpose of Interviews:* I am interviewing board members because their perspective on the process of induction is important and because they are one key stakeholder in the induction process. I will interview three board members, each serving on the board for a varying amount of time.
- *Scope of Interviews:* The questions have been cocreated with the superintendent and me. In addition to questions about your experience and thoughts with induction, questions will also touch on why induction might be important and what you value in working together as a board. The interview should take 45-60 minutes.
- *Action Research:* Why Action Research? Action research is a method of qualitative research that allows for study of one's own setting and "real work." One significant difference is action research focuses the study, in the end, on an outcome or product. That means that I will be working with the superintendent to make recommendations to the induction process used in this district the next time we need to orient a new board member.
- *Confidentiality:* Each interview will be recorded. The interviews will be confidential and names will not appear anywhere in the study. Complications however, can exist around confidentiality, to some degree, because Action Research is in one's own setting.

## APPENDIX B

### BOARD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been on the School Board and what influenced your decision to become a board member?
2. Have you ever worked on a board previously? Do you have any K-12 experience other than your own experience as a student or your children's experience in school?
3. Explain how you see your role as a board member and how, if at all that view of the role has changed from before you began service on the board?
4. In thinking about your experience as a new board member, what either was or would have been the most helpful aspects of induction for you?
5. What do you think the existing board members' role is or should be in the induction process?
6. What do you think the Superintendent's role is or should be in the induction process?
7. Did you initiate any strategies for your own induction when you became a new board member?

8. I'm going to ask you to reflect about induction two ways: one is to describe what you think are the "costs" or disadvantages to a lack of induction and the other is to describe the benefits to a thorough induction process...first if you could reflect on the potential impact of a less intentional induction process
  
9. and then how would you see the benefits of a thorough, well-planned induction process for new board members?
  
10. What do you think about the idea of mandatory training for new board members?
  
11. Boards experience some sort of transition anytime there is a new member. What is it about the nature of the work of the school board that makes this transition significant? Or not?
  
12. If you had influence on the induction process, what kind of strategies or elements do you think would be most useful and productive?

Depending on what elements have been addressed or not in previous answers...

\*Describe what you think the board/superintendent team should look like? What are the components of that team? How do you know when the team is functioning at its best?

\* Did you have a mentor? Would a mentor have been helpful to you? Describe your experience with the person who you felt mentored you.

Conclusion:

Thank you . . . .

As I continue work on this project and as I put the responses to the three interviews together, I may have another question or two. Would you be open to me contacting you to get clarification or to ask another question? I would do that via email or phone if that works for you. Thank you!!



## APPENDIX C

### BOARD POLICY

Number: 1260

Date Issued: 11/15/1983

Date Effective: 10/26/1983

Superintendent: xxxxxxx

Policy #1260

Subject: Orientation for Board Candidates and New Board Members

To be effective, a school board member needs to understand his/her responsibilities in relation to several areas of major concern in the school district. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

Board Activities and Requirements

Board/Superintendent/Staff Relations

Budget and Finance

Community Relations

Curriculum

Facilities

Personnel

Policy Development

In order for a new board member to become aware of his or her responsibilities to the community and to the district, the superintendent, in cooperation with the president of the board, shall develop and maintain an orientation procedure for the benefit of board candidates as well as for newly appointed and elected board members.

APPENDIX D

BOARD PROCEDURE

Number: 1260  
Date Issued: 11/23/1993  
Date Effective: 11/10/1993  
Superintendent: xxxxx  
SUPERCEDES  
Number: 1260  
Issued: 1/15/1985

Procedure #1260

Subject: Orientation for Board Candidates and New Board Members

I. BOARD CANDIDATES

Candidates for appointment or election to the board shall be urged to attend public meetings of the board. Public information about the school system shall be made available to them.

II. NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The superintendent and board president will offer an orientation program to newly appointed or elected board members. The program should include the following activities:

A. BOARD ACTIVITIES:	<u>Key Coordinator</u>
1. Conference with the board president and superintendent of schools for an overview of the orientation activities available	Superintendent/ Board President
2. Board/superintendent/staff relations	Superintendent/ Board President
3. WSSDA and NSBA membership and attendance	Board President
4. Disclosure requirements	Associate Superintendent, Management Services
B. STAFF-PROVIDED ACTIVITIES:	
1. Organizational review –to include personnel structure, CAC, affirmative action, etc.	Associate Superintendent, Management Services
2. Instructional program review –to include curriculum information, basic education program, special education programs, and related activities such as enrollment,	Associate Superintendent, Educational Services

KSPS-TV, community schools, etc.

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|--|--|
| 3. Business and support services review –to include budget, finances, business affairs, transportation, food services, support functions, and district facilities. | Associate Superintendent, Management Services  |
| 4. Collective bargaining and labor relations and other administrative support activities.  | Associate Superintendent, Educational Services |
| 5. Community relations program –to include board communications, media conduct, district publications, etc.  | Communications Department                      |
| 6. Site visits –school and facility visits.  | Superintendent/Designee                        |

C. MATERIALS FOR NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Superintendent's Secretary

- Policy and Procedure Manuals
- Organization Charts
- Sample Publications; e.g., School Talk, 81 Times, Directions
- Budget
- Levy Material (when applicable)
- Subscriptions to:
  - American School Board Journal
  - Phi Delta Kappa
- District Emergency Procedures
- District Telephone With Instructions
- Local Travel Claim Forms
- Calendar of Events and Meetings

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM

**WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
CONSENT FORM**

Researcher: Bridget Lewis

Researcher's statement:

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.' I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the experiences of governance teams in transition as new school board members come onto the school board. Both the perspective of board members and the superintendent will be considered. The study will serve to express how board members and the superintendent understand their experiences through transition and how their experiences might inform the practice of induction when the team experiences new members in the future. Specifically, the focus of this research is asking the following research questions: (a) What is the superintendent's role in the induction process and how do they influence the process?, (b) How do existing board members influence the transition and induction of new board members?, (c) When the school board gains a new member and enters into a transition, what activities and/or strategies are integral elements of an induction process that contribute to the development of a new team and allows that new member to function in their new role?, and (d) How does an induction process support the on-going work of the school board?

PROCEDURES

I will ask you to answer several interview questions related to the research questions stated above. The interviews will be approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio-taped. Your responses will be kept confidential and if there are any questions you choose not to answer that is your option.

Bridget Lewis

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Printed name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Subject's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date