



**“How School Boards Can Help Improve Student Achievement.”**

Transcript from Online Chat which took place November 18, 2009  
between 3:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m., EST

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** Welcome to the first *Harvard Education Letter* chat. My name is Jeffrey Perkins and I will be the moderator of the chat this afternoon. We will conclude this chat at 3:30pm EST. A transcript of the chat will be available tomorrow on the *Harvard Education Letter* website.

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** First I would like to introduce Nancy Walser. Nancy is the assistant editor of the *Harvard Education Letter*, as well as the author of the new book from Harvard Education Press, *The Essential School Board Book*.

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** Today Nancy will be discussing the role that school boards can play in increasing student achievement, as well as how high functioning boards go about their work. Please submit your questions and/or comments for Nancy at any time using the chat box at the bottom of your screen. Your questions will come to me and I will send them along to Nancy as they are received.

**Nancy Walser:** Hi everybody!

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** So, first off Nancy, a question from Cheryl that we received before the chat.

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** Cheryl writes: "My school board never gets around to talking about student achievement. We want to but something always comes up that takes us off the topic. What do other boards do about this?"

**Nancy Walser:** This is a very common frustration for many school boards these days. Some boards in my book solve it by sitting down with their superintendent at least once a year to set a limited number of goals for student achievement. They agree on how to measure progress toward these goals and actually plan to have presentations about progress. They plan these meetings sometimes six months in advance. So if something else comes up, they have "booked" time to discuss student achievement.

**David:** Hi Nancy. Quick question...How did you pick the boards to profile in your book?

**Nancy Walser:** I talked to many people who work with boards including board associations in each state, government officials and organizations that recognize effective boards. I asked them to identify boards that had established reputations for helping to raise student achievement in their districts. I got about 100 recommendations. From that, I tried to select a variety of elected and appointed boards from urban, rural and suburban areas.

**George:** Good afternoon Nancy. How did your presentation go at the recent state conference?

**Nancy Walser:** Hi George. Actually I am going to present tomorrow to the joint conference of superintendents and school committee members down on the Cape. I'm working on a jazzy PowerPoint.

**Lisa:** I have a question...we have a member on our board who is well-meaning, but who is only concerned about one or two issues. This member dominates the meetings and so we don't get to other things that I believe are more fundamental to student achievement. What can I do?

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** While Nancy is answering the question, welcome to anyone just joining the chat. A full transcript of the chat will be available tomorrow. Please submit your questions or comments and Nancy will answer them as they come in.

**Nancy Walser:** This is probably one of the hardest things for boards to deal with. If your board has established goals with the superintendent, members can remind each other that these are what they have agreed to focus on. Another thing you can do is ask your board to review your rules and policies. There should be a "policy on new policies" so that new policies can't be created on the spur of the moment, but have to go through a process. If they don't get a majority vote, then they don't go forward.

**Caroline:** How has the climate in which school boards operate changed since NCLB?

**Nancy Walser:** The climate is putting a lot more pressure on school boards to focus on student achievement and to show progress. This is another reason why having specific goals and devoting more meeting time toward reviewing progress has become important. It's also a reason why boards and superintendents have to work together well, both behind the scenes and in front of the camera.

**Chris:** Hi Nancy. Thanks for chatting with us today. I have a question for you. Our superintendent is a good manager, but our board never feels like we get enough information about what's going on in the schools in our district. We don't want to micromanage, but it's important for us to show our constituents that we are not just a rubber stamp for his recommendations. How do we handle this issue?

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** If you're just joining us, welcome to the chat with Nancy Walser. Please send us a comment or question and we'll send it along for Nancy to answer.

**Nancy Walser:** It's important for boards to feel like they are getting enough information to make good decisions. In the interviews I did for my book, I found that most superintendents recognize this and use multiple ways of communicating with the chair, if not all the members of the board. But there's a balance. Some boards run into problems because one or two members want so much information that the staff is being derailed from other projects. In that case, one rule of thumb is that if an information request would require a lot of staff time, then the board should take a vote on whether it's important enough.

**Caroline:** Just to follow up, do you think the pressure to increase achievement is going to move more districts away from elected boards and toward appointed boards? Wouldn't appointed boards be able to work better together? I guess I'm a little bit of a skeptic on whether elected boards are up to the task.

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** We're nearing the end of our chat today. Please submit your questions now and we'll post your answers along with the transcript, tomorrow morning.

**Nancy Walser:** There are pros and cons to both structures, but a central premise of my book is that practices are more important than structures. I have examples of both types of boards in my book, and interestingly enough, both types of boards have settled on similar practices to focus on student achievement.

**Jack:** Hi Nancy. How can I tell if my school board is doing a good job?

**Nancy Walser:** Do they keep the focus on the "big picture" or nit pick? Do they have thoughtful goals that come out of real data on student needs? Do they follow up and make sure the goals are met, or if not, have they sought to understand why? Are meetings focused on student achievement or trivia? And, most importantly, is there evidence that achievement and other student indicators are improving?

**Jeffrey Perkins, Moderator** Thanks everyone for joining us today. This concludes our chat.