Given the right conditions all students can learn, just not all at the same pace or in the same way. Maximizing all students’ learning potential requires committed attention throughout the education system, from the classroom to the principal’s office to the district boardroom. But while much has been written about what makes an effective teacher or school administrator, the roles, responsibilities, and best practices necessary for school boards to contribute to the academic success of students have not received the attention they deserve.

*Improving School Board Effectiveness* addresses this problem head-on, with personal experience as well as comprehensive, in-depth research. The all-star team of contributors that Thomas Alsbury and Phil Gore have brought together has created a must-read for anyone interested in the complex challenges school boards face, especially regarding the question of how board members can contribute to the central goal of improving student outcomes. Reading this book, past board members can review their experiences and perhaps gain a new perspective on the issues they were called on to address. Current members can examine their roles in the light of the most recent analysis of what makes an effective school board, and, critically, of how to get from where they are now to where they would like to be. And prospective candidates can gain valuable insight into the problems and opportunities that lie ahead.

The relevance of this book extends beyond the boardroom as well. District superintendents, their cabinet members, and other district administrators will find useful information and practical guidance in every chapter as they seek to work more collaboratively with their school boards. Indeed, anyone with an interest in school governance can profit from its pages. But as its title indicates, the focus of *Improving School Board Effectiveness* remains squarely on local school boards and
how their members can use current research into proven and promising practices to influence student achievement in their district.

Best practices based on quality research in the area of school board leadership have historically been difficult to find, assess, and apply. Now, the contributors to this book have provided this much-needed information. More specifically, the collection provides both guidance and opportunities for “internal dialogues” and self-reflection regarding a school board’s policy role versus its operational role; and the book does so engagingly—not with generic “solutions” but with focused questions and detailed self-assessment tools. I think that’s an important distinction because, as I remind my audiences and the leadership of the schools and districts that I work with: “Every school district has its own DNA. One size does not fit all.”

Because a single formula for success does not—and could not—exist, the book wisely presents itself as a guidebook, not as a “how-to” maintenance manual. Every preK–12 district in America needs a vertically aligned vision and top-down support—from the boardroom to the classroom—to realize the shared goal of more effective instruction that results in higher achievement and greater learning for all students.

Two recent publications have clearly documented the school board’s important role in implementing this vision. The first is Shober and Hartney’s Does School Board Leadership Matter?, a research study conducted under the sponsorship of the Fordham Foundation. It states:

A district’s success in “beating the odds” academically is related to board members’ focus on the improvement of academics. Unfortunately, not all board members have this focus; some prefer a gentler approach: developing the “whole child,” not placing unreasonable academic expectations on schools, and celebrating the work of educators in the face of external accountability pressures. Nothing is wrong with those other priorities—but they ought not displace the primary goal of presidents, governors, employers, myriad education reformers, and a great many parents in twenty-first-century America: boosting children’s learning.¹

The importance of a school board’s role in improving student performance was also a central finding in a publication based on the International Center for Lead-
ership in Education’s extensive long-term association with many of the nation’s most rapidly improving schools. This work details the importance of a systemwide approach in schools that have made substantial increases in student achievement. Central findings include:

- **It takes a system, not just a teacher**: Research supports what most of us see as common sense: what goes on between the teacher and each student is central to high-level learning. Effective teaching is not the end goal, but a means to the end: improved student achievement.

- **All teaching is more effective when effectively supported.** Achieving the goal of improving instruction requires a supportive and aligned system. Stated another way, although effective teaching is essential, it is not sufficient to maximize learning and achievement for all students. An organization-wide commitment is at the heart of improving student learning.2

To accomplish these objectives, a district needs an aligned system comprised of three major elements. The first is teaching, which is closest to the students and therefore the most critical of the three. Next is instructional leadership from school and other administrators who directly support the classroom teachers. And finally, there is a need for organizational leadership that is aligned with but more operational than the instructional leadership. Organizational leadership must be directly linked to those at the highest level of authority, and, importantly, it must be supported by the district’s school board.

The school board, in turn, needs to create policies and practices that focus its mission on student learning while supporting the educational system at every level. *Improving School Board Effectiveness* lays out strategies for school boards to help their districts in this critical mission. In particular, current and prospective board members can use the valuable advice of the various chapter authors to think about how to achieve the following goals:

- Creating a culture of high academic expectations and positive relationships. *What are the implications for school board members?*

- Establishing a shared vision and communicating it to all constituent groups. *What should the school board’s role be?*
• Aligning organizational structures and systems to the vision.
  *How can the school board help align district structures/systems to the vision and monitor the results?*

• Aligning teacher/leader selection, support, and evaluation.
  *What influences on staffing issues should school board members exert and share?*

• Supporting decision making with relevant data systems.
  *How can data enhance the work and responsibilities of the school board?*

This book offers practical tools and proven practices aimed at realizing these goals, as well as opportunities for board members—individually and collaboratively—to reflect on their attitudes, assess their strengths, and define the issues they need to address.

Thank you to Thomas Alsbury and Phil Gore for compiling this very worthwhile and instructive book. And to all school board members, thank you for your ongoing commitment to our schools and our children.

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