

Study: The effects of school board makeup on student performance

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School boards are one of the foundations of the American educational system, yet little research exists on their effects on student performance. A University of Kansas professor has published a study showing that when a school board's sociological makeup includes both strong internal and external ties, those relationships can be reflected in educational outcomes.

Argun Saatcioglu, associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies, co-authored a study with Gokce Sargut of Governors State University examining the [social capital](#) of school boards. They found that boards with strong internal ties—those with members who work well together and respect one another—are good, but they are even better for their schools when they have strong, diverse ties outside of their own school system. The study was published in the journal *Sociological Inquiry*.

The researchers decided to examine school boards because of their ubiquity in American education and a lack of data-driven research about their effects. There is debate about what makes for an effective school board, but it is largely based on ideology and anecdotal evidence.

"I think we live in an age when a lot of educational governance practices are questioned," Saatcioglu said. "School boards are subject to that as well. The more I read on school boards, the more I realized there is such a profound need to better understand them."

Saatcioglu, who also is a courtesy professor for the Department of Sociology, and Sargut examined a representative sample of Pennsylvania school boards through a sociological lens, using brokerage (external ties) and closure (internal ties). Information on internal ties was gathered with questions regarding openness, honesty, trust, respect, integrity, team spirit and confidence. External ties were gauged by questions in which respondents rated the frequency of their interactions with 12 categories of external factors, such as city officials, state legislators, community leaders, parent groups and universities.

The researchers also gathered demographic data on districts, including percentage of students from low-income families, below the poverty line, in special education, numbers of English language learners and college graduates, and controlled for those factors.

School boards that displayed high social capital, made up of substantial positive internal and external relationships, were also in districts that had the best eighth-grade reading and math scores. They were lowest in districts with the lowest brokerage and closure.

"It's common sense that for a group to be successful, its members must get along and be respectful of each other, but that in and of itself can be counterproductive and perhaps even stifle innovation and progress," Saatcioglu said. "Performance is highest if the group is cohesive with diverse external ties."

The researchers studied the scores of districts for several years and found that scores improved over time in districts with high brokerage and closure. Saatcioglu said that is most likely due to boards with strong internal and external ties putting sound policy in place and giving them time to take effect. Effective boards likely realize decisions they make do not directly affect students immediately but can have an influence on schools as a whole. For example, a board can put policy in place that will

affect superintendents, whose actions will affect principals, who in turn affect teachers who ultimately affect students.

"The distance between a board and school performance is such a long journey," Saatcioglu said. "The effect is small and should be small, but it's meaningfully modest."

The analysis showed that when a school board scored one standard deviation higher in both brokerage and closure, about 100 students performed better in math and reading two years later. This translates to 50,000 students across the state, which has 500 districts. If the effect persisted for a couple of years, the performance gains may affect well over 100,000 students.

The findings suggest that boards with high social capital learn from their external ties and work well together to align their curriculum to correspond with standardized measurements, best utilize their teachers' skills, help them develop professionally and more effectively allocate resources. Boards with high capital are also likely getting and keeping better superintendents, Saatcioglu said.

Saatcioglu said he'd eventually like to expand the research to include a nationwide sampling of school districts and include more urban districts, which can tend to have boards with weaker internal ties. He would also like to gather data on board members' tenure to see whether there is a relationship between how long board members have served and their social capital. The initial findings do have several important implications, however. They show that while it is good for a school board to be cohesive and have strong internal ties, that is not necessarily enough. Diverse external ties are important, and school boards should also keep a realistic view of their effects on student outcomes and not jump on educational bandwagons or blindly accept "educational buzzwords" or trends that arise.

Put simply, school boards that work well together and also have strong ties to external individuals and groups that influence education will most likely have the highest-performing students, Saatcioglu and Sargut wrote.

"Closure is likely to improve outcomes because it helps achieve and reinforce harmony, efficiency and unity of purpose," they wrote.

"Brokerage is likely to be instrumental by exposing the board to new ideas and information, reducing uncertainty, fostering creativity and mustering political and financial support from external actors."

Provided by University of Kansas

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