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Foreword

As Executive Director of NSBA (1996–2012) I had the great privilege of working for and with literally thousands of school board members from across this great nation. Together with the 50 state school board associations NSBA led the charge to focus school board governance on just one issue . . . raising student achievement. And by student achievement we did not mean a state test (the obsession with state accountability was driven by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002); we meant the broader development of the whole child, where academic achievement was a critical part of the overall educational development of the student.

In 1997–99 a team of state association and national leaders (board members and staff) came together to develop what became known as the *Key Work of School Boards*. Authors Hirsh and Foster reference that governance framework because, although it did not state explicitly that professional learning was important, it implied it. In hindsight we probably should have made the connection stronger, but we did not know Stephanie Hirsh and Anne Foster then!

The *Key Work* has eight parts. It begins with the board and superintendent reaching out to the various internal and external communities and creating a **vision** for the district. To translate the vision into actual plans one must have clear **standards** or goals. Deciding how to **assess** the standards (i.e., what measures are put in place to assess progress) drives the **accountability** system. Once the goals and measures are in place, the board/superintendent team must **align** the resources to ensure that all of the players can achieve the goals. To give an example, if a standard is that every child is reading at third-grade level by the end of third grade, what human, financial, professional development, technology, curriculum resources are needed for preK through third-grade faculty and staff in order to achieve the goal? (See? It took an example to get to the professional development part!) Certainly the **climate** within the school district is integral to creating a wonderful environment for teaching and learning. Boards are responsible for seeing not only that schools are safe and nurturing for all kids, but that

teachers and staff are respected and given the professional development needed to truly transform learning. Doing this alone, using only the inside staff and resources in the district will never produce the results we need. Developing **collaborative partnerships**, working with businesses, boys' and girls' organizations, the arts community, other social service agencies, religious groups, and very importantly, higher education (especially community colleges) not only greatly expands the resource and expertise base, it is critically important to public education's mission. Schools can and must be the center of community, supported by and serving the broader public. Finally the board must evaluate every year, are we better, are we **continuously improving** on the measures, what must we do to eradicate the achievement gaps between middle-class White children and poorer minority children . . . a gap that board members are very much aware of and care deeply about. There you have it . . . a simple framework, but not an easy road map. The *Key Work* has driven NSBA's board development, conference and meeting programming, publications, and online learning for over a decade.

This *School Board Guide to Leading Successful Schools* reinforces many of the underpinnings inherent in the *Key Work*, while emphasizing the role of professional development for faculty and staff.

The times demand it. The status of public education demands it. Our students deserve it.

The critics of public education often put all of the players in a box labeled "defenders of the status quo." They are wrong. Board members told NSBA in the 2010 demographic study (*School Boards Circa 2010, Governance in the Accountability Era*) that "improving student learning across the board" and "closing the achievement gap among subgroups" were two of the three most urgent issues facing their districts (funding being the top concern). Sixty-five percent of board members agreed with the statement "the current state of student achievement is unacceptable. We must make dramatic and rapid improvements in student learning." But they also understand that the goal of a great education goes beyond a narrow interpretation of student achievement (i.e. the state test). Eighty-five percent agreed with the statement "defining success only in terms of student achievement is narrow and short-sighted. We need to emphasize the development of the whole child." But perhaps one of the more gratifying results of the study was the clear commitment of board members and superintendents to professional development. When asked, "How important do you think each approach is for improving student learning?" (and the list of options ranged from "increasing school choice, aggressively recruiting non-traditional teachers to reducing class size, supporting the creation of new charter schools" to the

more traditional “frequent use of assessment data to guide decisions, improving the quality of school/district leadership and professional development”) the board members’ number one choice was professional development. Eighty-six percent said it was extremely important or very important. Using data to drive decisions was the board members’ second choice.

In my experience and from looking at the data from the study above, it is clear that school board members are as driven as any other adults in our schools to want to improve public education. We need to celebrate the incredible successes in many of our school districts but we must also acknowledge that we have a ways to go to achieve our ultimate goal . . . to have the world’s best education system; to graduate innovators, job developers, and leaders of all sectors of our economy; to nurture aspiring artists and engineers; to connect middle and high schoolers to relevant learning so they see the reason to stay in school; to transform learning so that we are taking advantage of the technology advances that are readily available (and often affordable!); to provide science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs so that young people are not only gaining the skills needed for higher paying jobs, but are becoming the leaders in fields so needed to lead the U.S. economy. These are our ultimate goals for public education.

The *way* we teach is as important as *what* we teach. STEM taught poorly turns off young people. The shortage of young women studying in the STEM fields is, I believe, indicative of poor teaching as much as it is aptitude or attitude on the part of girls and women. There are innovations everywhere attempting to incorporate project-based learning so that young people are *engaged* in learning. We are making progress on the high school graduation rates; in fact the 2012 data shows marked improvement (78.5%, which is a 5% improvement over 2011, with African Americans gaining 6.5%; Hispanics, 5%; and a 1% improvement for White students). But given what we know happens to high school dropouts **any** statistic that is less than 100% is a wake-up call. High school dropout studies have historically shown that students drop out for a variety of reasons, but boredom and not seeing learning as relevant to their lives are the ghosts that haunt us. So, preparing teachers to use new and creative strategies for learning, preparing them to teach a wide diversity of students whose talents, capacities, and interests are wide ranging, is challenging and has never been more important.

Indeed, every time I hear a member of Congress or a state legislator talk about education, and their ideas for reform, I want to take them aside and invite them to come with me to some schools I know, both examples

of greatness and schools of which I am ashamed. I can honestly say that some of their solutions (e.g., make all schools charter schools, give vouchers to parents for private schools, offer online learning instead of “traditional schools,” lengthen the school year [although done right this could be a creative solution], pay teachers more, pay teachers less, deunionize them, unionize them) would prove to be inadequate for the task. But give creative teachers, school district leaders, and board members the challenge and the resources to create real change and you will often find solutions that work and are sustainable.

And just as often, a part of the solution, a part of what really turns around a district (witness Montgomery County, Maryland, which won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2011) is professional development.

Targeted, strategic, measurable professional learning. And it must be ongoing, and it must be tied to the person’s performance. Without good professional development, whether you are the superintendent, a principal, a teacher, a staff member, a school board member, the chances for overall districtwide improvement are nil.

A School Board Guide to Leading Successful Schools: Focusing on Learning has great ideas, and provides real learning tools. Through the state school boards associations, through NSBA, and through board members’ online connections, additional learning opportunities exist. But this guide gives a sound and thoughtful set of strategies for a very important aspect of system improvement . . . making sure the professionals in the system have the greatest shot for their own teaching and learning.

Professional development tied to student learning and success is a win-win for the nation. Congratulations to Stephanie Hirsh and Anne Foster for taking their expertise, wisdom, and experience as school board members and professional learners to create this very useful tool.

Dr. Anne L Bryant
NSBA Executive Director Emerita

Preface

The authors of this book, Dr. Stephanie Hirsh and Anne Foster, come to the project as executive directors of two national organizations, Learning Forward and Parents for Public Schools, respectively. Prior to holding these positions, they served together for a number of years on the Richardson (Texas) Independent School District Board of Trustees.

Stephanie's first foray into politics included a full-fledged campaign with campaign managers, fundraising events, candidate forums, and more. She was elected, and then the learning began. As a professional educator and as deputy executive director of Learning Forward (formerly National Staff Development Council), she brought with her a profound understanding of professional learning as it impacts student achievement. Her passion and knowledge informed her fellow school board members and ultimately helped create a framework for professional learning as a pillar of success for the school system.

Anne came to the school board a couple of years after Stephanie. She brought with her a background in business as well as experience as an active school volunteer. She had served as PTA president at two schools and later started an advocacy organization, Realtors Supporting Richardson Schools. Elected to the school board during a time of changing demographics and increased academic standards, she challenged the public to remain steadfast in its support of the community's public schools. She was elected president of the board in her second year and served in that capacity for 7 years.

Stephanie and Anne would both say that they served with exceptionally dedicated fellow school board members and with professional educators who were second to none. It was a critical time in the school system's history, and over several years, the system was able to show increased student achievement across a highly diverse student population.

Stephanie and Anne remained connected over the years following their school board service. Several years later, Stephanie became executive director of Learning Forward. At about the same time, she had the opportunity

to recommend Anne for her current position as executive director of Parents for Public Schools. In these positions, they again had the chance to work together as professionals focused on related issues. Stephanie approached Anne about writing a book that would draw on their shared experiences to ensure that future school board members would recognize the relationship and importance of professional learning to their service. Anne and Stephanie would ground their message in reality by using their experiences both as school board members and as executive directors of nonprofits working with school boards. They agreed that their own experiences have shown that school board members who cultivate a deep knowledge of effective professional learning add value to each decision they make and accelerate the impact of their efforts across the entire school system.

Stephanie and Anne deeply valued their experiences as school board members—the opportunity to serve their community, to learn from their colleagues, and to interact with committed school board members and educators across the country. They gained tremendously from their school board service and in particular from their day-to-day interactions with educators. They were inspired, challenged, humbled, and educated by both fellow school board members and professional educators.

This book focuses on using professional learning to promote higher levels of learning and performance among educators and students. Anne and Stephanie hope this book and the many resources included in it will help you with this goal. Through their many experiences, they have found that we all have one thing in common—we want the best for our educators and our students. This is the authors' enduring commitment.

Learning Forward is *the* association for professional learning. It is committed to furthering student achievement by ensuring that every educator experiences effective professional learning every day. Parents for Public Schools is a national organization with community-based chapters. It works to strengthen public schools by engaging, educating, and mobilizing parents.