



F O C U S O N ISSUES

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Winter 2006

School districts embrace Oregon experiment:

Will governance changes boost student achievement?

Eighteen boards in Oregon will spend the next few years participating in a ground-breaking project with OSBA's Leadership staff that focuses on changing governance and management to improve student achievement. Bridges to Achievement is a new approach intended to radically shift thinking about board governance and help boards make changes that permeate the entire system: administration, teachers, and communities, and students.

In a nutshell, the Bridges to Achievement project is a "holistic" approach that "unpacks" each school board's leadership, examines the contents to see what works and what doesn't work for each group,

and helps boards apply elements of leadership research to improve their performance, using "experiential" training instead of the "talking heads" approach.

The immediate goal is helping boards help themselves become the most effective leadership force they can be. In the longer term, the ripple effects of highly effective governance pouring through districts, schools and communities are intended to make measurable improvements in student achievement. There's not a school district in Oregon that doesn't want to see all kids learn to the outer edges of their abilities – and that fueled Bridges to Achievement participants' willingness to commit to a project that is likely to continue beyond the three years they signed on for.

Although it may seem contradictory, Greg McKenzie, OSBA director of Leadership Services, believes that boards who employ the lessons of Bridges will actually find themselves with more time.

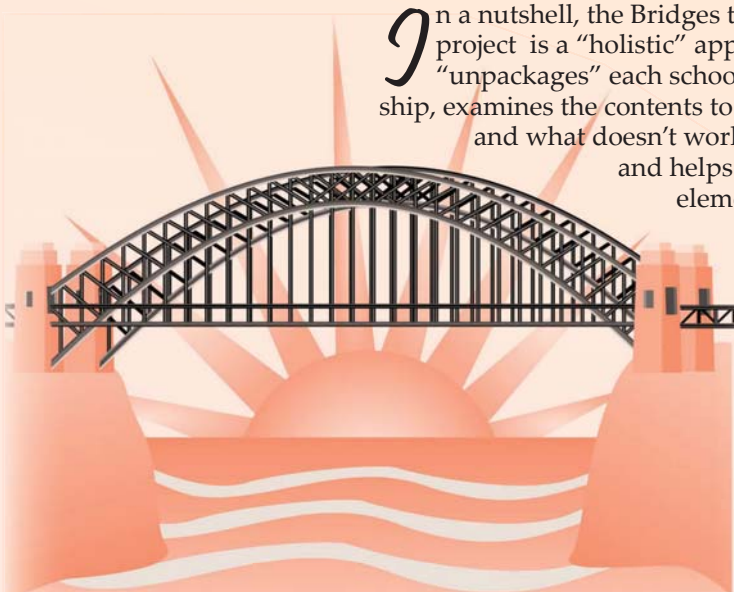
"When boards fully understand and use the leadership elements of the Bridges project, they will become more efficient," McKenzie said.

And, should "leadership" seem too idealistic and vague a goal, McKenzie makes an important point: "When we talk about leadership, we mean a board collectively, not



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Bridges to Achievement





Bridges to Achievement— from page 1

as individuals. Obviously, no one can turn each individual on a board into an Abraham Lincoln. We're talking about boards as a cohesive unit that do not micromanage the day-to-day affairs of the district but understand and fulfill their real role: to lead the district, lead within the community, and make data-driven policy decisions that improve student achievement."

The imaginations of McKenzie and other OSBA directors and members were fired by the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry conducted by the Iowa

Association of School Boards in the late '90s, which compared board characteristics

istics of three under-achieving and three high-achieving districts. That study led to a second, larger Iowa Lighthouse study, that continues through 2007.

With Betsy Miller-Jones, a leadership specialist hired by OSBA in 2004, McKenzie designed the Bridges to Achievement to broadly address leadership issues to make school governance more effective.

"We both had experienced, over and over, the effect of boards learning pieces of leadership skills here and there — usually when we were called in a crisis," said Miller-Jones. "And we talked about what boards might accomplish if they could address their own leadership issues all together."

"With a 'complete package', we believed boards could make huge advances in their effectiveness," said Miller-Jones. "So with the directive from the OSBA board to focus on student achievement and the findings of the Lighthouse study and our research on leadership over six months, the Bridges to Achievement project took shape."

The 10 K-12 districts in the Bridg-

es project have more than 25,000 students. They were selected last year from among 30 applicants for their geographic distribution, willingness to participate, and student populations of about 500-7,000, with two or three districts in each region. They fall into four regional teams that each include a community college and an education service district.

Laying the groundwork

Phase 1: Assessment

Project participants committed to studying board and student performance and staff and community attitudes during the assessment phase of the project, now under way. The goal is to build a profile using such tools as data evaluation, a board self-evaluation, a communications audit by OSBA, a staff survey, a student focus group, and a community-engagement session. To date, each board in the Bridges project has completed or will soon complete the board self-evaluation, which will

Real change will take five to seven years or more, but we'll see changes at the board level almost immediately.

*— Tom Alsbury,
Iowa State University*

Sailing beyond the Iowa Lighthouse: *How OSBA's Bridges project came to be*

"Bridges to Achievement grew out of an OSBA board goal in 2004 to focus on improving student achievement," said OSBA Executive Director Kevin McCann.

That fall, Mary Delagardelle introduced the Iowa Lighthouse Project to Oregon school boards during the annual OSBA convention. A light clicked on for Greg McKenzie, OSBA's Leadership Services director, who began pondering how to link the Lighthouse findings to board governance changes.

At about the same time, OSBA was confronting the failure of a concentrated five-year effort, the School Funding Project, to get the legislature and Oregon voters behind a tax-reform plan that could ensure stable

and adequate school funding. By the end of 2005, OSBA's leaders had shifted gears from an all-out struggle for tax reform to improving school governance and educational quality, involving communities, and demonstrating schools' successes to build public support over time.

"We've seen enough research to know that a board/superintendent team that believes student achievement is the most crucial thing it does is key to success," said McCann.

The first of that research came from the original Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry project conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards in 1998-2000. Iowa's goal was to identify links between what school boards do and the achievement of students in schools. So it set out to compare

school board/superintendent teams in districts where schools generated unusually high achievement over several years to those of schools that consistently generated unusually low levels of achievement. Delagardelle, director of leadership development for IASB, served as the project director.

"There was a belief that boards are so far from the classroom that they can be anything and it won't matter," Delagardelle said. But the project found that was not the case. In fact, the Lighthouse study found it made a huge difference whether the boards themselves subscribed to that belief.

"Low-achieving districts were saying, 'We need better kids,'" Delagardelle told OSBA convention attendees. "The boards exhibited a helpless, complacent attitude.

help them examine how their board functions. Communication audits are under way, and some districts have scheduled community engagement activities.

Phase 2: Plan for change

Participants will begin developing a plan for change, guided by what their leadership teams believe is needed based on the Phase 1 assessments; the plans will include community colleges and ESDs.

Phase 3: Review

Participants will review and adjust their plans. As results become available, they'll study the effects of Bridges-based change on state assessment tests and college entrance exams, attendance and dropout rates, and disciplinary reports.

At the same time, OSBA will be tracking progress and guiding changes that can be applied in other districts.

Throughout all the phases of the project, participants will study and discuss recommended readings on

leadership (a Recommended Reading list is available online at bridges.osba.org) and strive to apply the 10 Elements of Success as they see fit within their own board-leadership-change project.

McKenzie and Miller-Jones spent six months combing books and studies on leadership to compile the elements of success (page 5) that Bridges participants can apply to improve their leadership teams' ability to work together.

As board membership changes over time, McKenzie hopes that boards will have seen the value of the project and will continue to emphasize leadership and its potential for improving student achievement.

"One of our objectives is the development of sustainable change in district leadership that will survive the tenure of any single administrator or board team," McKenzie said.

OSBA will track and measure the effects of governance changes on student achievement in Bridges districts over several years, compiling project data for project participants and for

other districts. The Bridges project is likely to change the way OSBA Leadership conducts future training.

Bill Auty, a former State of Oregon Department of Education researcher, will help districts develop data-measurement tools and help OSBA quantify Bridges data. (See Page 6.)

Tom Alsbury, a school-reform researcher who retired from 20 years as a school principal in Naselle, Wash., served as lead researcher for the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry. Now a professor at Iowa State University, Alsbury will serve as an evaluator for Bridges charged with program improvement and objective assessment. He will also direct interviewers visiting Bridges participants to interview, observe, and collect documents; working with them, he'll analyze the information and prepare annual reports.

"This study goes further than most," said Alsbury. "We'll be studying board knowledge: 'Did you learn?' Then 'Has board disposition changed? Do you talk about, plan

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"In the high-achieving districts, the boards believed that all kids can learn, that great changes are possible. They didn't make excuses."

Delagardelle said one of the goals was to let Iowa's study serve as a "lighthouse" to guide other school boards in their efforts to improve student achievement. McKenzie was impressed by the results of the original Lighthouse Inquiry and what Iowa was continuing to do with Lighthouse II, which will continue through 2007.

Craig Smith, a Eugene lawyer who was vice president of OSBA at the time, was an early proponent of Oregon conducting a version of the Iowa Lighthouse project. He and many others in Oregon were intrigued by the potential for this new approach to student achievement. When the OSBA board embarked on its own leadership project, it decided to take the Lighthouse study further, providing learning experiences for

boards, tracking and assessing board leadership changes that affect student achievement, and helping others use the findings.

Oregon's project joins national partners

OSBA has not been alone in its enthusiasm for targeting and improving governance to boost student achievement. The Lighthouse Inquiry and its subsequent project generated a lot of buzz around the country. Several states banded together to form the Lighthouse Multi-State Project.

The group includes leadership specialists, executive directors, communications and policy people from Iowa and Oregon as well as Illinois, Missouri, Colorado, Idaho, California, Kentucky and Wisconsin.

Their goal is to monitor student achievement in each of the states and identify what works and what



doesn't, then spread Lighthouse lessons to other states. That will take three to five years, or longer. Along the way, they will meet to learn from one another about what works in each state.

"It's an energizing experience," said McKenzie. "The members of the group truly believe that we can make a difference in the effectiveness of board governance and eventually improve student achievement across the nation."

for, and work on student achievement? What do you care about and measure? And, third, 'What do you do differently now?'"

"Bridges will be a filter-down system that moves from boards to superintendents to principals to teachers to students and community. Real change will take five to seven years or more, but we'll see changes at the board level almost immediately. After a year or so, changes will be apparent at the superintendent level. Then we'll begin seeing results from changes in behaviors," said Alsbury.

When it comes to tracking student achievement, Bridges will use cohort tracking to measure, for instance, writing among third graders, writing among the same group at fifth grade, and again at eighth grade, correcting for in- and outflow of students.

OSBA is seeking funding to help pay for the long-term assessments that will be necessary.

ESDs and community colleges share goals

One goal of the Bridges project is to develop boards that see themselves as part of a public-education system that hums along like a well-oiled machine. That is one thing that differs about Bridges to Achievement compared to the Lighthouse project: Bridges involves "complete" educational systems – school districts, the ESDs that serve them, and community colleges.

"We want boards to learn to make the most of the resources that already exist – or can exist if they start talking and thinking together," said McKenzie. "Bridges will help that process along by offering participants opportunities to partner in ways that they haven't before."

ESDs offer many resources that could be used to better advantage, said McKenzie, and community colleges share many of the concerns of

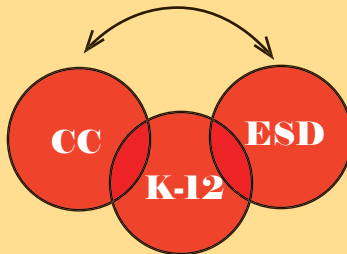
K-12s.

Gretchen Schuette, president of Chemeketa Community College, former K-12 superintendent, and member of the State Board of Higher Education said, "To me, this project means improving achievement by more closely connecting the work of Chemeketa Community College with that of school districts in our region. Working together, we can clarify expectations for students, share our goals and collaborate on implementation plans that promote student success – we must work together so intended learning outcomes are held in common and best practices are shared."

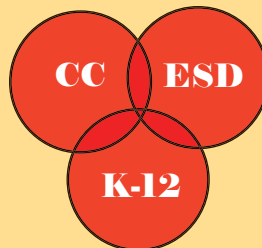


GOAL: Stronger links between K-12, ESD and community college boards

Currently the link between ESD boards and community college boards is virtually nonexistent.



Stronger board leadership at the K-12 level will build better relationships with ESD and community college boards.



BRIDGES TO ACHIEVEMENT TEAMS

Southern Oregon

Central Point School District
Eagle Point School District
Southern Oregon Education Service District
Rogue Community College

High Desert

Culver School District
Redmond School District
High Desert Education Service District
Central Oregon Community College

Umatilla-Morrow

Echo School District
Morrow County School District
Pilot Rock School District
Umatilla-Morrow Education Service District
Blue Mountain Community College

Willamette

Dayton School District
Dallas School District
North Marion School District
Willamette Education Service District
Chemeketa Community College

Several criteria were used in the selection of project participants including district size, location, evidence of commitment and readiness, demographics, diversity and geographic location.

10 Elements of SUCCESS



The Technical Elements

The technical elements of the “10 Elements of Success” may already exist for boards on some level. If they do, they may need only a few “tweaks” to function better. If they don’t, there is a considerable body of research and practical knowledge available to help boards apply them. Boards may have sufficient knowledge about the technical elements but need help implementing them.

Vision-directed planning –

Boards engage communities and staff in the development of a shared vision of student achievement that is focused on student learning. The vision is the foundation of the mission and goals that direct board policy-making, planning, resource allocation and activities.

Community engagement –

All members of the community are stakeholders in the success of their schools. Community engagement creates and sustains meaningful conversations, systems connections, and feedback loops with all groups. Successful community engagement results in collaboration and new types and levels of community participation in schools.

Effective leadership –

Board leadership establishes focus, direction and expectations for student achievement. Across education systems, boards use collaborative leadership models and practices guided by shared student-achievement goals. Boards align authority and responsibility so that decisions can be made close to where they need to be implemented in the system.

Accountability –

Boards have high expectations for achievement for all students and hold themselves and their schools accountable for results. Boards align policy, resource allocation, staffing, curriculum, professional development, and other activities to ensure student achievement. Accountability includes recognizing successes and providing support where improvement is needed.

Using data for continuous improvement –

Continuous improvement is the opposite of complacency. Boards seek and use data from various sources and in various formats to identify areas for improvement, set priorities, and monitor improvement.

The Adaptive Elements

Adaptive elements are complex; they relate to areas where a gap exists between a board’s goals and reality. Little research or knowledge may be available to help. Adaptive work may require some difficult new learning.

Cultural responsiveness –

Boards understand the many facets of cultural diversity and effectively engage their entire community and build on its strengths.

Climate –

Boards expect that all students can learn at high levels, which creates a climate conducive to student achievement. Board policy-making and activities are directed toward student achievement. The board models professional relationships and mutual respect.

Learning organizations –

A learning organization supports reflection, discovery, learning, improvement and success by employees at all levels. Boards encourage professional development that nurtures the leadership capabilities of all staff.

Systems thinking –

Systems thinking allows boards to break out of the box of single-district thinking and view education across systems and levels, i.e., K-12, ESD, community college, and university). Boards that practice systems thinking open the door for local, state and national partnerships; coordinated programs; and shared resource models that can improve student achievement.

Innovation and creativity –

Innovation and creativity lead to new kinds of thinking and better ways of meeting student needs. Innovation and creativity flourish when boards align vision throughout the organization; engage in collaborative partnerships; and encourage dialogue, new ideas and differing perspectives.





The board's role: Know what to ask!

Using annual statewide test scores to monitor student achievement in a district is kind of like taking your temperature once a year.

Tom Ruhl, a graduate school professor at Portland's Lewis & Clark College, is developing a broader diagnostic kit to help boards "check the temperature" of student achievement.

School boards spend too much time on facility and budget decisions, Ruhl said. One priority – increasing student achievement through district-wide efforts – shouldn't be allowed to get lost in day-to-day business.

Boards need to be able to explain to the community in detail about what is affecting achievement in their district.

– Tom Ruhl, Lewis and Clark College

Ruhl's experience as superintendent of the former Sauvie Island School District in Multnomah County showed him firsthand the power that individual school boards have to change the course of their districts. He was hired by one board to build a high school in Sauvie Island; the next board reversed direction and decided to merge the district with a neighboring district.

Directing the power within boards to promote broad student achievement is a major goal of Bridges participants, Ruhl said.

Over the next three years, board members and administrators in the pilot sites will focus on specific leadership and organizational practices that business and educational research identify as contributing to continued improvement (the 10 Elements of Success).

"We'll create a curriculum that will help district leaders develop strengths from the 10 areas," Ruhl said. "With a greater understanding of collaborative leadership and effective data analysis, for example, board

members can better understand their role in collaborating with teachers and administrators to create programs that increase learning. Boards need to be knowledgeable about all the issues surrounding achievement to know what questions to ask staff, for example. Then they can ask and answer questions such as, 'How do we hold all members of the district accountable?' 'How do we hold parents and our business community accountable for improved student learning?'"

Consistent two-way communication with the community is vital, he says, especially when much of the information available to the community comes through established media sources such as local newspapers.

"That's just not enough information," he said.

"It's like going to the doctor and having him say you are 'sick'. You need

more information. Likewise, communities need more information about their schools. Boards need to be able to explain to the community in detail about what is affecting achievement in their districts."

"It is important that all school boards become more confident leaders in the community," Ruhl said. "Through the Bridges to Achievement project, we want to advise boards so they can expand the concept of collaborative leadership and become positive agents for promoting achievement."

Tom Ruhl is director of administrative licensure at Lewis & Clark and serves on the Bridges to Achievement project's advisory committee.

The Bridges advisory committee consists of key education professionals who are helping set the project's direction and developing tools and resources to help boards and administrative staff expand leadership skills.

School data expert weighs in on numbers

Bill Auty has 20 years' experience making sense of the numbers for Corvallis SD and the ODE. Now he's developing tools and materials to help districts interpret all the data.

When it comes to gathering, analyzing, reporting and using student test data, Bill Auty has done it all – as a school district administrator and on a statewide and national level.

Auty now works with the Oregon School Boards Association, applying his number-crunching expertise to the Bridges to Achievement project. He was recruited for his extensive experience helping school entities make sense of the sometimes-overwhelming amount of data available and determining how to best use the information to drive decision-making. He'll develop a standard set of tools, resources and training materials that districts across the state can use to make decisions that improve student achievement.

A simple example could be districts using state test data to identify areas in which students are weak and deciding to adopt a new textbook or program. The district can use future test data to determine whether students are improving or the district needs to explore other solutions.

During his 14 years at the Corvallis School District, Auty was dedicated fulltime to downloading and analyzing state test data, preparing reports for teachers on each student, and helping the district apply the data effectively. In 2001, he began work-

ing with ODE, where he eventually became the assistant superintendent in charge of assessment and accountability. His role was to simplify the process that schools use to access and analyze state test data. The goal – similar to what he is doing for OSBA – was to help districts get the data they needed, understand what the numbers meant, and apply the results in a useful way.

Knowing how to use data effectively is more critical than ever, according to Auty. There is growing public pressure to increase transparency in student test scores and achievement. At the same time, districts have fewer resources to devote to data assessment.

While schools have made progress, he said, expectations are rising even faster. “We have more data available, but the demand – from ourselves and the public – is going beyond people’s capacity to use that data. We have all these numbers, but not enough time to gather them, analyze them, and put them in front of people in a useful way.”

As part of his project for the Bridges to Achievement project, Auty surveyed the pilot districts about how they currently use data in their decision-making. He found various levels of expertise and various data-employing practices.

One of the best practices Auty has seen was districts seeking partners capable of filling gaps in their own expertise. Morrow County School District leverages the technical resources of the education service district. The ESD downloads individual student state test data into its “Mastery in Motion” program, which can be combined with classroom data to give teachers detailed reports about how each student is doing.

“One superintendent told me that data use within the district varied, based on the individual expertise of the principals. Some would be able to download the data and do the analysis, then provide that to the teachers, but others wouldn’t. There wasn’t a systematic expectation across the district,” Auty said.

Auty met with school administrators recently to share the results of his survey and get their feedback. From

now until June, he will work with each of the project districts to develop a standard set of reports, tools and training materials that everyone can (and should) use to get the data they need and analyze it.

The challenge, he said, is determining how much information districts need and what format will be easiest to absorb.

Some standard tools are already available. For example, a Standard and Poor’s Web site, www.schoolmatters.com/, provides state test data for every school, county and district in the country as well as financial data and community demographics. Another resource is the Survey of Enacted Curriculum, which matches teachers’ curricula with state standards and assessments, www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=235.

“It will be great if we can use some of those tools, because someone has already done the work to organize the data. But we must make sure the project districts and boards agree that these tools are helpful and that this is a useful set of data to present,” Auty said.

Auty expects the result will be a combination of readily available reports and new tools tailored to the districts’ needs. Day-to-day decision-

making should be done by teachers, based on classroom data. School boards, he said, should ensure that teachers use data on an ongoing basis but not review the data or directly manage how it gets used.

“Using data more effectively will result in higher scores and a higher level of satisfaction among the general public that the district is improving in a noticeable way.”



Volume 10

Issue 1

OSBA’s *Focus on Critical Issues* publication was created to address topics affecting Oregon school boards.

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Tips for building your own bridge

Even if your district is not part of the Bridges to Achievement project, you can get the ball rolling toward board-governance improvements.

- **Take time to understand and involve the community.** Decipher underlying values and beliefs so that you’ll be working with – not reacting to – your community.
- **Avoid being data rich and information poor.** Learn to interpret the mounds of data available to analyze student achievement in your district.
- **Let your community know** you’re working to improve board governance and community involvement.
- **Read and discuss.** An extensive Recommended Reading list is at bridges.osba.org. Start with the *Iowa Lighthouse Study*, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*, *Good to Great*, and *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.
- **Take full advantage of resources** already available to you; find ways to partner with neighboring school districts, community colleges, ESDs and local governments.
- **Take time to discuss how your board functions** and re-energize your team to find new ways of working together at maximum effectiveness.
- **Celebrate your successes.** OSBA can help you arrange community-engagement activities, provide board self-evaluations, conduct communications audits, present board training workshops, and facilitate planning and goal-setting.



Why we're excited about Bridges

By Kevin McCann, OSBA Executive Director

We're doing something that has not been done in Oregon (possibly not in the U.S.) – applying research about leadership to tie board work directly to measurable improvements in student achievement. Bridges focuses the attention of boards like lasers on trackable achievement for all students.



Kevin McCann
OSBA Executive Director

OSBA staff is applying research about the direct impact of effective boards on student achievement. Once the ball gets rolling, we expect Bridges to generate benefits in many dimensions. I'm going so far as to suggest that Bridges-related accomplishments will help lay

the groundwork for adequate and stable public school funding.

And how will Bridges to Achievement do this?

Bridges will be built "from the ground up," starting with sharing research that shows how important boards are in establishing high levels of student achievement. Oddly

enough, that's a new way for some boards to see themselves.

While all board members display a praiseworthy desire to serve their communities, too often they don the mantle of service with a heavy sigh and take up where previous boards left off, involving themselves in disciplining students, tinkering with staffing schedules and football coaches, and burying themselves in the details of facilities operation.

Bridges offers boards an opportunity and expert assistance from OSBA staff and others to reinvent themselves, guided by data that tells them what their schools need and limited only by the vision and drive of their leadership team.

The "girders" for Bridges are now in place. OSBA Leadership staff has created a program and a plan. Member school districts, ESDs and community colleges around the state have eagerly signed on.

Will it be difficult for boards to change? Yes, in some ways.

Do they need to be the greatest of leadership or data experts? No.

But boards need to understand enough about the topics they will encounter in Bridges to ask the right questions. They need to be willing to

talk to stakeholders in the community. Mostly, they need to be willing to find new ways to address student achievement.

Communities want leadership from their school boards, and board members want to make a difference in kids' lives. We believe that Bridges to Achievement will play an important role in getting us where we want to be.

Find more on the Bridges to Achievement project:
bridges.osba.org

OSBA has resources you can use now to connect with your community and improve board governance.

- The Recommended Reading list on the *Bridges to Achievement* page includes 20 books and direct links to a number of articles.
- The *Tangible Triumphs* page at www.osba.org will help you boost public support for schools by knowing what messages work in your community.



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