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PEAK PERFORMANCE

**Practical Strategies, Resources,
Processes, and Wisdom for Trustees and
their CEOs**
August 2006

Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn

Part 2: Monitoring the Academic End

(Last time: we discussed the initial part of effective Ends monitoring, Reasonable Interpretation. That task falls to the CEO, who has been required by policy to interpret the board's policies and then, over time, show reasonable progress. This part picks up after a time interval following the board's acceptance of the CEO's reasonable interpretation.)

If you are a school board, one of your Ends policies will deal with academic performance. In one sense, this is the easiest policy to monitor, since there are so many "Indicators," or measurement devices, available. But on the other hand, this End, as all of them, deals with human performance, which makes it vulnerable to the inherent deficiencies of all devices aimed at determining how much humans actually know.

The CEO and staff will select the Indicators they believe best will measure how well students are performing, but even so, making sense out of reported results will be one of the board's greatest challenges.

"Making sense out of reported results will be one of the Board's greatest challenges."

Consider these facts:

- You're dealing with people, not widgets;
- In some districts more than others, student mobility is so high that it renders comparison of any set of scores from one year to the next virtually meaningless;
- Unless you have found a way to track the performance of a single student or group of students over time, you are measuring from one year to the next different students at the same grade levels;
- Results from some Indicators may show progress, while results from others may not. How do you judge overall performance when differing assessments go both ways?
- By the time a board sees test results, they can be stale. The lag between when tests are taken and when results typically are available may stretch into months. By that time, you may be teaching a different group of students;
- We know that where tests or assessments make the biggest difference is with the teacher in the classroom, where timely feedback guides daily lessons;
- Test scores may rise or fall, but only slightly. What does that mean? What is the level of significance, either way? (continued on page 3)

UPCOMING ASPEN GROUP EVENTS

PG: "The Way School Boards Were Meant to Do Business"

9/29, 10-5 p.m., Sonnenalp Resort, Vail, CO

A one-day intensive seminar for board members and administrators new to PG.

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“Why is the reasonable interpretation of the Board’s statements in Executive Limitations and End Results so important? The literal interpretation seems to be so self-evident!”

A Blazing Question: in the REAL World

A prime example in Ends monitoring: *As a result of our efforts, all students will be literate.*

Seems self-evident, but is it really? Just what did literate mean to the board when it chose that wording, rather than saying all students will read at grade level?

To the CEO and staff, does literate mean reading—at grade level? With a love of literature? Reading from a broad range of styles, authors, purposes? Able to discuss what they have read and able to extrapolate meaning and purpose to their own lives?

If literacy means more than achievement on a standardized test, the choice of indicators must be further considered to prove to the board that its End Result, as intended, will be assessed for student progress. The first step: literal interpretation. ■

Check out these innovations

Ohio schools shed "cookie cutter" approach to learning

Nine districts in Northeast Ohio have embraced "[universal design for learning](#)", an educational model that uses teacher collaboration and technology to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Proponents say UDL has reduced the achievement gap and boosted student engagement. [The Plain Dealer \(Cleveland\)](#)

Ten Tips for Creating a Caring School

There is growing evidence that students do better not only socially but academically when they feel safe and regarded as important members of a learning community. In response, a number of reform efforts are focusing on creating small schools or schools-within-schools where students are known and valued as individuals by other students as well as by teachers and staff. Some schools have instituted practices such as looping (teachers stay with the same students for two or more years), multiage instruction, and block scheduling to connect students with their schools. Other schools or districts have instituted character education, violence prevention, and empathy programs. But even simple actions that cost little or no money can positively affect the school climate and create that all-important sense of belonging and safety that many researchers say makes the difference between thriving and floundering at school. Diane Curtis outlines ten strategies for fostering healthy and caring environments for learning. <http://news.publiceducation.org/t/4602/52180/68/0/>

Building a Strong School—Family—Community Partnership

You'd be hard pressed to find a school district that leaves improving test scores, budgeting for new technology or developing the curriculum to chance. But too many schools do exactly that with parental and community involvement, arguably as important to student success as any of those above activities. It takes work, writes Carl Vogel, to get past the once-a-year bake sale and some fundraising calls to local businesses. This article reviews Joyce Epstein's framework of six types of school engagement and provides specific ideas on how parents and community members can best impact student performance at schools, going beyond typical PTA-type activities. The article also contains a sidebar on "Ten Steps to Successful School-Family-Community Partnerships." <http://news.publiceducation.org/t/4602/52180/55/0/>

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Monitoring the Academic End Result, continued from page 1 ...

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- From one year to the next, scores on all or most Indicators may show a clear decline in achievement. Is it time to fire the CEO?

Some Suggestions to the Board

All these circumstances and realities play into the complexity of a board's job of judging organizational performance, and the CEO's job of presenting data to indicate progress. There are no easy answers or shortcuts to be announced here. But maybe a few insights and suggestions can help.

First: recognize the limitations of all tests of human cognitive performance. They are better than ever, but tests still fall far short of the accuracy of a ruler measuring length or a scale measuring weight. This is why it is conceivable that at any given time, results reported from one Indicator may show declines, while results from another may show improvement. Use test results for what they are: general indicators of student performance.

Second: as for measuring third graders' reading performance this year and comparing it with third graders' reading performance last year, it is clear that this is a very imprecise way to assess whether either group is making progress. A far better way to make that judgment is to find ways to track the same students' performance over time. Not every district has that capacity, but over time the better use staffs can make of longitudinal assessment data—not just of groups of students, but of individual students as well—the better. This is especially true if the board, in its Ends policy, has stated its expectations that each student will reach his individual potential. In the meantime, boards will be forced to use the data they have and make the best judgments they can within the limitations of their assessment tools.

Third: make no rash decisions on the basis of a single year's results. There will be years in any school district when

scores generally are up, and other years when they are down. What the board should look for is the trend line: over a reasonable period of time, is it moving in the right direction? And even if it does drop or rise, does it move to a statistically significant degree, or is it within a range that is short of significant?

All this points to a board's need to understand data, and how to use indicators in such a way that they mean something. For a board to use data in an uninformed way is as dangerous as playing Russian Roulette with four rounds in the chamber. An uninformed board may reach the correct conclusion twice in six attempts, but it may act completely erroneously the other four. This begs for serious attention to data training when the board schedules its board development topics for the year, and the teaching should be done by someone who knows the complexities of data and the practical challenges of school boards' use of it.

An interim, helpful source: try www.schoolboarddata.org. This web site accesses a PDF copy of a data publication created by the National School Boards Foundation explaining data and how school boards can use it for decision-making. The project that created the publication was led by The Aspen Group's Linda J. Dawson.

The CEO's Role

To help the board maneuver itself through this landmine of challenge, the CEO has a very big role to play when he or she, along with key staff, construct monitoring reports. We believe boards are poorly served when they receive a monitoring report loaded with meaningless numbers, unaccompanied by any executive summary or analysis of what the indicators show. Thus we have a few suggestions for the CEO as these reports are prepared and presented:

(continued, p.4)

Accountability occurs around the non-negotiable, common, system wide End Results for student achievement articulated by the policymakers and carried out through district leadership who demand and support excellence in teaching.

**New Board members?
New Administrators?**

Time for training or a refresher?

"Policy Governance: The Way School Boards Were Meant to Do Business"

**September 29,
10 a.m.—5 p.m.
Sonnenalp Resort
Vail, CO**

A from-the-ground-up examination of Policy Governance for school boards

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Ends monitoring ... continued

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- Always restate for the board its Policy, and then the pre-approved literal interpretation, the indicators, baseline data, any benchmark comparisons, and targets (see previous Part 1 for details). This reminds the board that it already has taken action on these parts of the monitoring cycle, and indicates what the staff's work was based upon.
- Provide an Executive Summary of the report. Include an overview of what the data points are, what they mean in broad-brush fashion, and any conclusions the staff has made based on these numbers. Highlight here the actual performance against the targets: how many were achieved, how many not?
- If there are particular issues about the tests or other Indicators to be acknowledged, tell the board what those are. Did more or fewer kids take the SAT or ACT? Was the test changed from one year to the next?
- Present the data in a format that is understandable to the board. That could be bar graphs, trend lines or any understandable format. Raw numbers sometimes make the eyes glaze over, but there will be times when they must be presented in table or chart form.
- Results should be presented for each Indicator against the pre-approved targets, and they should be compared with other similar results over time. This latter step is necessary in order to show trend lines. We encourage you to think about portfolios!
- Disaggregate according to the board's expectations and to whatever extent it is meaningful to the district. Most CEO reports disaggregate by grade, by school, by gender, by ethnicity, and by socio-economic status at a minimum. If other subdivisions make sense in your district, use them.
- If you have selected other "benchmark" districts against which to compare your results, be sure to show them along side your own.
- Once the data have been presented and explained, offer a conclusion: what did the staff learn from this information? What did the data fail to reveal? What are the strengths and weaknesses that are apparent as a result of these data? And what are we proposing to do, if anything, from a strategic standpoint as a result of this information?
- Help the board become facile at analyzing data. Lead them through a discussion about how to

question what is presented. What the information really tells us, and fails to. What better, different data would be more informative? What is nice to know, and what is need to know?

The length and format of the report are important. It is an art to judge how much information, in what format, the board needs in order to do its job. We come down on the side of brevity and simplicity, while maintaining enough depth and substance to allow the board to make an informed decision. The task is not to overwhelm the board with numbers or paper, but rather to present all important information in a manner that informs without confusing.

Conclusion

Even if the CEO provides a "perfect" report—enough information provided in the most user-friendly way—the board's job still is challenging. We don't mean to make it appear to be impossible; it isn't. But making the ultimate decision about whether the organization has made reasonable progress remains a task requiring reasonable people to make thoughtful and informed judgments. We'll say it again; it's that important: the better a board understands data, the better it will do at this task. Find a way to arm yourself with this knowledge and these skills. Your lives will be better as a result. And we'll bet your CEO and staff will be happier as well.■

Next time: A look at the special challenges of monitoring the non-academic Ends.

Monitoring Process

Step 1: CEO Reasonable Interpretation

Literal interpretation of Board's Ends statement

Choice of indicators/assessments

- Presented to the Board for concurrence by vote -

Step 2: Gathering Data

CEO baselines current performance on indicators

Project growth targets by indicator and by End
(with Board concurrence)

Step 3: Monitoring CEO/District Performance

CEO presents monitoring report

Board adjudicates report on the basis of
"Reasonable Progress"

Policy Governance for School Boards: A Different Animal

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We long have recognized that the special characteristics of school boards, as well as the kinds of challenges they face, make them unique among the different types of boards with which we work. For example, school boards have concerns about operational issues not faced by many other boards, including: the instructional program; the learning environment; student discipline; the expenditure of vast amounts of public resources; teacher quality, training and evaluation; and, others.

For the past three years or so, we have been in continuing conversation about these issues with the creator of Policy Governance, John Carver. Our mission was to find ways to incorporate recognition of these issues, which we consider to be legitimate school board concerns, into board policy, allowing the board to control them all through EL policy while delegating to the CEO the daily administration of the district.

Carver takes the position that the "pure" application of the Policy Governance model provides no opportunity for the board to say anything in policy about such matters. He argues that if the CEO succeeds in achieving the board's Ends policies, the board should assume that all operational decisions in these areas were suitable and effective. He maintains that including policies on the instructional program, staff development, staff evaluation, the learning environment, and other such matters is "inconsistent" with his model.

We maintain that expecting a publicly-elected school board to say nothing in policy about such matters is not reasonable. We have encouraged all current and former clients to adopt such policies and policy provisions. We firmly believe that having well-constructed policies in these areas allows the board to remove itself from the operational decision-making that typically consumes so much of school boards' time, with complete assurance that the board's values are understood and will be complied with in administrative actions.

Accordingly, we have changed the reference to our school board product. Our work with school boards is an *Adaptation of Policy Governance for School Boards*, a distinction agreed to by Carver.

Our commitment is to our clients. We must help you address, in policy, the real issues faced by elected public boards working to represent the owners. Our 60-plus combined years' experience with school boards offers unique perspective about the world in which our public school board clients live and work, and we rely always on that experience as we seek to guide our clients in the most credible and effective way.■

"We will refer to our work as an *Adaptation of Policy Governance for School Boards*, a distinction agreed to by Carver.

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"Let me highly recommend that you attend this one day seminar overview of the principles and implementation practices of PG. We have found this learning, and in some cases relearning, invaluable in maintaining the power of this governance system. It keeps us all "honest" - staying focused on student achievement with role clarity between the board and staff. Randy and Linda do this work all over the country and we think they are the best in assisting school districts - we've worked with them for over 10 years now.

And stay for the Wisdom Sharing® - for practitioners of PG who want to gain new insights into implementation from colleagues."

Dr. Mary Barter, CEO, Durango School District, CO

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Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn founded The Aspen Group International Inc. in 1993 following careers that combine to total over 50 years of service to education and other non-profit and corporate Boards. They work with clients across the United States, in Malaysia and Singapore, Asia and Africa, as well as clients from Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Linda and Randy serve as consultants and coaches to governing boards and their senior staff in creating and sustaining good governance and leadership. While their work centers primarily in Policy Governance, they also provide:

- board and executive coaching;
- strategic governance projects and planning;
- individual leadership and team development;
- community engagement training;
- executive searches; and,
- conflict management.

Aspen clients include school districts, city councils, insurance pools, associations, cultural/civic & religious organizations, governmental agencies and for-profit corporations.

Educational terms in everyday language

Education, like all professions, has a specialized vocabulary that parents and others may have a difficult time understanding. ASCD's online glossary, A Lexicon of Learning, provides clear definitions of educational terms in everyday language. [View the Lexicon of Learning.](#)