



# THE ASPEN GROUP INTL, INC.

A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT COMPANY

## PEAK PERFORMANCE

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

**Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn**

### Part 3: Monitoring the Non-Academic Ends

*(In the last two issues we have focused on monitoring the Academic Ends. In this issue, we offer advice on how to establish reasonable progress in the "non-academic" Ends, such as people of character, independent and contributing citizens, and workplace skills.)*

**"A crude measure of the right thing is better than a precise measure of the wrong thing."**      *John Carver*

**"Not everything that counts can be counted. Not everything that can be counted counts."**      *Albert Einstein*

These two fairly intelligent people understood something that many of us can learn from: we need to "do what's right," in this case serve our owners and our students as they deserve to be served, even though the benefits resulting from doing so may be difficult to measure.

If you are a school board, it is likely that you developed Ends policies that commit benefits beyond the basic academics. You likely wrote policies describing intended benefits for students that included Citizenship, Life Skills, Workplace Skills, Personal Values, the Arts, and possibly others. So why did you do that, knowing very well that it will be exceptionally challenging to your staff to find ways to demonstrate reasonable progress in any of them?

You did it because you know your owners expect more from the school district than academic achievement, even though that always will be the centerpiece of the district's work. You did it because those are important benefits in the development of young lives. And you did it because you understand that if the schools fail to accept the challenge, few other entities can or will.

But developing policies is one thing. Measuring whether anything is happening as a result is quite another. So here is your staff, a year or more after the board's policies were approved, challenged to develop and present a meaningful monitoring report on, for example, whether kids are becoming contributing citizens. Just how is a staff expected to go about this challenge?

It isn't an easy task, and the board must recognize that—just as did Einstein and Carver. We won't even try to make it easy here, but perhaps we can offer some suggestions both for the board's and the staff's consideration that may be helpful.

The basic components of an Ends monitoring report we have discussed in past articles apply here as well: the report should start with a reasoned literal interpretation of the board's Ends policy language, followed by the CEO's chosen indicators, followed by baseline data for each indicator, and finally (See p.3)

**"You did it because your owners expect more from the district than academic achievement."**

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*“Why is providing orientation to people considering running for the school board so important? Are we just training our competition and giving them an edge over incumbents?”*

## **A Blazing Question: in the REAL World**

When we hear that question in response to GP.2 on Governing Style, it gives us a golden opportunity to reflect back to a board and its members what this important service is all about—sustainable board excellence to impact student achievement.

Orienting citizens about how the board conducts business and how the district operates can be invaluable in helping people decide if they really want to run.

**They learn about your principled governance. They learn they are coming into an environment that focuses on student achievement. They learn how much time and effort and discipline are required by this school board. They learn authority and direction come from the whole board, not from any one individual.**

**Recruit:** seek out good people to encourage to join your team. **Orient:** people who are considering their candidacy—tell them how you operate and what is expected.

**Train:** new members on Policy Governance and your board work. Have staff train them on district operations. Create a legacy of leadership by building the board. ■

## **Linkages: Advice and Outreach**

### **COMMUNICATING FOR CHANGE: What Educators Must Know and Be Able to Do**

Over the years, a lot has changed in the worlds of media, marketing, and public relations -- and without changes of corresponding sophistication or significance in education communications. More "woefully inadequate" than the performance of U.S. schools and students is the degree to which communications in the education marketplace advance meaningful changes that yield better teaching and learning. Even corporations dominating other fields find that they can't use standard tricks of the trade to command consumer opinion or market share. Those who do well in the education market focus on essential aspects of public engagement. We've learned the hard way that traditional marketing and PR tactics predicated on the quick sale of ideas proffer perilously weak support -- insufficient to sustain commitment or muster the political will to affect policy and practice in education. In this article, Scott Widmeyer outlines a dozen lessons learned during decades of reform: (1) Publicity and promotions are not enough to make a real difference or a lot of money in education; (2) Invest time and talent to create informed education consumers; (3) Be patient and prepare for fallout from unintended consequences; (4) Listen carefully to what the public is saying -- and use polling data wisely; (5) Beware the perils of pandering to public opinion; (6) Gain support by behaving like experts; (7) Help people ask good questions; (8) Paint a variety of pictures of success; (9) Take time to educate the education reporters; (10) Keep corporate leaders at the table; (11) Be willing to consider real structural changes; and (12) Make communications an engine of the learning enterprise.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2006/06/07/39widmeyer.h25.html>

### **Maryland District Grooms Immigrant Parents for Leadership Roles**

Howard County, Md., schools conducted six two-hour training sessions this year about the school system's structure and operations to encourage immigrant parents to assume a greater voice in shaping school policy. Some immigrant parents say they've been reluctant to become active in the PTA and other parent groups because their cultural background has trained them not to ask too many questions.

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followed by future performance targets. The final piece is the presentation of actual monitoring data, assuming all the other steps were taken roughly a year earlier.

Taking things in order, and not skipping any of the steps listed above, is at least as critical for the non-academic, or “soft” Ends, as it is for the academics. This is true because the indicators are less evident; this means that the board and staff need to be sure they are on the same page well before the policies are to be monitored.

### **Selecting “Soft Ends” Indicators**

The factor that makes the monitoring of soft Ends more challenging, of course, is the difficulty of selecting meaningful indicators. There are few tests or standard measures to be relied upon. So, what does a staff use as indicators?

**First, what should *not* be used:** unless there is some quirk to the board’s policy language, we suggest that counting of participation numbers, opportunities afforded, and “exposures to” be avoided. This is the wing-flapping we’ve talked about before—it is what the district is doing with work and intention. But it is not what kids are becoming or achieving.

We have found that one of the best and most meaningful devices is to identify the overt behaviors that typically are demonstrated by kids who have acquired the skills we say they should have. For example, what behaviors do good citizens tend to demonstrate? Can we see those behaviors? Can we document them?

What behaviors are demonstrated by kids who have acquired an aesthetic appreciation of the arts? Can we see them? Can we document them?

What about workplace skills? Are related behaviors observable?

In some contexts, there may be a slight exception to the earlier statement about participation. For example, do good citizens tend to participate in elections? This is a behavior that we can observe and count, and it could be considered a useful

indicator of citizenship. But in another context, to use participation in a music program as an indicator of whether kids are acquiring an appreciation for music may be more suspect. So would participation in physical education classes as an indicator of kids’ physical health and fitness.

There are times when student surveys can be used as devices to build evidence of attitudes and values. Surveys may not be considered as “hard” as other types of evidence, but remember, we are trying to measure the right thing, even though our devices are less accurate.

### **Trying Them Out**

If we all agree that monitoring the non-academic Ends present challenges beyond those presented by monitoring academic achievement, the Board will need to be a bit more understanding of the staff’s efforts, particularly early in the process. This doesn’t mean that the Board is any less serious about these Ends; it just means that it understands the struggle the staff faces, and is willing to accept measures that are less “hard” than those chosen for academic achievement.

The Board and staff may need to “try them out” for a year or two before settling into a set of indicators with which they are comfortable. Sometimes what looks good at first fails to be as meaningful as either the board or the staff assumed. Don’t be afraid to add or abandon indicators. There is no better way to learn than by experience.

### **Lessons Learned**

The Boards and staffs that seem to do the best job of monitoring the soft Ends are those districts where the CEO and top staff involve their best minds in helping determine what reasonable indicators are available or can be developed, and those who give the task their best and most careful attention. Where it doesn’t work is in those districts where the staff assumes the Board may not have been as serious about these Ends as it was about academics, and therefore they (see p.4)

*“Unless there is some quirk to the board’s policy language, we suggest that counting of participation numbers, opportunities presented, and ‘exposures to’ - be avoided”.*

Recommended reading:

### **Holistic Accountability**

By Doug Reeves

[www.MakingStandardsWork.com](http://www.MakingStandardsWork.com)

**An accountability system that includes not only test scores but also the instruction and leadership practices at a school/district— info about curriculum, assessment, and instruction that can lead directly and swiftly to better decision making for policymakers.**

## Ends monitoring ... continued

deserve little real attention.

Our consistent caution to staff is to assume that the board meant exactly what it said in policy—nothing more and nothing less. Let the policies be your singular guide to shape your work, and expect the Board to respond to that work exactly as it said it would in policy. That means that if the Board said it wanted kids to be able to demonstrate that they are contributing citizens, the job of the staff is to make that happen, and then document to the Board that it has happened.

### Conclusion

Nobody said this would be easy work. And sure enough, it has proved to be difficult. But it is the most important work—the most rewarding work—the work of an intelligent, visionary Board and staff who will make great things happen for their community and their students.

If it is the right thing to do—and the Board has said that it is—then it is worthy of doing well. ■

*Next time: EL monitoring*

## Sample Indicators from Colleague Districts: Beaufort SC & Fargo ND

Comfort can be taken from the fact that other districts have gone before you in grappling with how to measure whether non-academic End Results are happening.

Since we have used Citizenship in our article, we thought it would be productive to use examples from two other districts that have chosen indicators:

**Beaufort SC:** A former Board in this district was quite serious about its students who come to them from a broad background of cultures, ethnicities, race and socioeconomic diversity. Beaufort's End policy stated: *All students will be responsible citizens and productive participants in their community, their country and the world.*

The Board undertook a series of focus groups, surveys and district wide dialogue meetings to help flesh out the sub-ends and to help the staff identify meaningful indicators to which the community would agree. Those preliminary

indicators included some of the following:

- Community perception survey
- Employer feedback
- Number of students who vote
- Mock election results
- Social studies end-of-course test results
- Quality of school life student and teacher surveys
- Post graduate reports
- Involvement in service to the community, logging volunteer hours per school/student
- Establishment of personal plan to accomplish long term goals

We don't know what was ultimately selected as the indicators, and there were many more identified initially (we have them if you want to see them for more ideas), but good initial work was undertaken by board, staff and community in hopes of seeing good citizens come from Beaufort County Public Schools.

**Fargo ND:** The Fargo Board and administration worked together from the very start of their Policy Governance initiative to coordinate the Board's vision and the staff expertise for what Fargo students should know and be able to do. They went to the community with draft beliefs, mission, and Results and developed strategic direction with indicators and operational plans.

Their Result #5: *Citizenship—Students will be citizens who participate in and contribute to the well being of their community. Sub-results: Students will participate in their community activities; demonstrate positive behaviors; understand and participate in the democratic process; be conversant about societal issues.*

Current indicators being used in Fargo:

- Student portfolios document involvement in community service activities as prescribed and assessed by a district-developed rubric by 12th grade
- Each student's portfolio contains evidence demonstrating the student's ability to discuss a significant societal issue
- Each school documents as a part of its building portfolio ways in which students are engaged in and have the opportunity to practice the democratic process
- Evidence/documentation of appropriate election-year activities connecting students to voting and the election process
- Student attendance and behavior indicators document an increase in the percentage of students engaged in positive behaviors, and/or a decline each year in negative behaviors. ■

## KC—Key Communicators: Strategic Linkage

For a long time, we have counseled Boards on linkages—proactive, strategic and two-way connections with their community stakeholders. Why? To learn what is expected from the school district! What is the return on investment of time and tax dollars? But in asking critical questions to ascertain community values, Boards also have the opportunity to establish a feedback loop, actually sharing about district End results and administrative initiatives designed to achieve those results. The desired outcome of this work is to build focus on student achievement, and support for district efforts.

But where do Boards begin? Focus groups? One-on-one interviews? District-wide “come one, come all” meetings? Surveys?

We have come to believe that Key Communicators is one of the most practical and efficient ways for a full Board to share and receive terrific information. It certainly doesn't replace targeted meetings with critical groups over time, nor does it deny the utility of the occasional district-wide meeting. But it does get a Board up and running in its trustee reach-back to the community:

**What are Key Communicators?** First, they are a network of key people in the community who serve as a continuing, two-way communication link between the school district and its taxpayers. Second, KCs are people who talk to—and are believed by—lots of people. They are not necessarily the formal power structure people. Occupationally they may be the donut shop owner or waitress, barber, beautician, librarian! A second KC group can be developed for Internal audiences to build support: the secretary, bus driver, teacher, and food service worker.

**What does it cost?** Only 1-1/2 hours of board and administrative time—once every other month or so. Serve light refreshments to get people to relax.

**What's in it for community members?** First-hand knowledge of what's going on with the Board and the district—information is power!

**What's in it for the Board?** Build understanding and trust in the Board, district and its people as it works to achieve End results for students. Access the grapevine—the most credible source of information in any community. Get the good news out, surface emerging rumors before the embers become a firestorm, increase brainstorming as challenges are identified.

**How are people identified and invited?** Board and staff brainstorm names of those individuals who are listened to in the community when they talk. Cross reference names. Top “vote-getters” are invited. Send a letter of invitation, hand signed by the Board, and follow it with a phone call.

**What do we do?** Set up a 1-1/2 hour breakfast or lunch—whatever most likely will be attended. Explain their role, why they were chosen, how rumors get started, the kinds of problems the district is facing, and most of all, your desire to know “What's Your Opinion?” as you lay out your End Results focused on student achievement! Ask if they can meet once a month or so, what their preferred time would be, and would they allow you to send them information by email to keep them informed. Some districts, like Aspen CO, have established a private link on their website for their KCs.

### Some critical advice:

- Try to get the full Board to participate. Consider rotating the role of convener among the Board members.
- Don't invite so many to participate that folks don't have the ability to talk and be listened to. Remember, you are asking for their opinion and advice—these influential people who will go out and talk about what they have learned and influence others' opinions.
- If the group does get large, structure small group conversations with Board members facilitating—then report out to the full group.
- The questions you ask will determine the quality of the responses you receive. Careful construction!
- Keep notes, send them a thank you after the meeting with a summary of the feedback. Tell them how you will use what you have heard.
- Ask KCs to give the Board or Superintendent a heads-up if they hear of news in the community that you would want to be aware of—the lousy rumor, the under appreciated volunteer, the student who achieved something great and no one knows about it, the potential for business support if contacted by a Board member. Remember, this is grassroots advocacy.

Board members across the states have learned to use Key Communicators to inform their thinking, leverage their influence, build community understanding and support, help them demonstrate to constituents that they are in touch and care about community opinion and ... get KCs in touch with the diversity of expectation amongst themselves and the difficulty the Board has playing Solomon.

**A final word:** While Key Communicators is a great linkage strategy, it is only one. We are FIRM believers that Boards must have their own Strategic Communications Plan. How will the Board reach out to the community, staff and students? What forum? What timing? What cost? What questions and messages? How often? With what administrative support? BIG WORK! Do it and reap the results. Talk to us for more information. ■

**“The three most important words are not , I love you.**

**They are ...**

***What's Your Opinion?***

**KCs will think you are pretty smart for asking!”**

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## PEAK PERFORMANCE

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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. Their work centers primarily in Policy Governance, but includes other services as well:

- **Complete PG services: overview seminars, custom projects, implementation training, sustained coaching, linkage training and consulting, networking with fellow practitioners**
  - board and executive coaching;
  - strategic governance projects and planning;
  - individual leadership and team development;
    - community engagement training;
  - team building and conflict management.

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

### High Performance Governance Clients:

Our clients include Policy Governance districts, and additionally some Boards who have chosen their own customized paths to governing excellence.

We will continue to use PG terms such as Ends, but we wish to encourage our non-PG clients to see themselves in the content of these articles.

In the end, our hope is to serve all of our clients as they pursue good governance.