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Coherent Governance

A board-superintendent relationship based on defined goals can raise achievement

By Linda J. Dawson and Randy Quinn

To defend this nation's chosen system of lay governance of public schools, it is necessary first to assume a direct relationship exists between what happens in the board room and what happens in the classroom. Evidence abounds that the assumption is valid. Unfortunately, much of that evidence is negative.

For example, in far too many school districts, school boards are so internally conflicted, so focused on the minutiae of operational detail, so crossed up politically, that the top leadership of the district is seen more as a distraction than as a leader of change. In some cases, distraction may be understating the severity of the problem: In those instances, impediment may be a more accurate description.

But there is hope. The three school districts profiled here represent a growing number of others that are effectively creating new roles and a new relationship for school boards and their superintendents, roles that for once are crystal clear in terms of the board's governance responsibility and the superintendent's responsibility for students' academic success and operational accountability.

These school boards have recognized the need to change their focus from daily operations to long-term student achievement gains and have sought outside help to make that change happen. All have built success with strong, pro-active relations with the communities they serve.

Each board and superintendent in Austin, Texas, Horry County, S.C., and Trenton, N.J., is creating a community-based system focused on students. All programs and operations are aligned, K-12, to improve achievement. Each board holds the superintendent accountable for the success of the entire district through an evaluation process determined

one year in advance, which provides data-based evidence of student achievement progress. These are their stories.

Austin, Texas

Austin, the state capital, is a complex, savvy and diverse community. Pat Forgione came to the district as superintendent five years ago full of vigor and focus. He was eager to make a difference for all students. But he found a district in free fall.

The 77,000-student Austin Independent School District was facing a negative financial rating, pending criminal prosecution for data integrity issues, an unacceptable rating from the state for low student achievement and serious achievement gap challenges among African-Americans, Hispanic, white and economically disadvantaged students in the community.

Forgione wasted no time in making major changes in priorities, staff and district organization. There was no time to waste. Yet for some segments of the community, many of the changes were coming too fast and furiously. There was a degree of alarm and a growing need for clearer alignment and communication between the nine-member board of education and the professional staff.

While pleased with the focused and pro-active administrative leadership, the board increasingly felt the need to more clearly define its own trustee role within the community, to delegate responsibility to staff and hold it accountable for results and to establish systems to ensure the board was informed of change and progress.

The board was willing to give up much of its traditional approval (or blessing) of professional staff decisions and its own operationally intrusive role. In return, the board required clear accountability by the superintendent through complete, disaggregated data and a summary analysis that would prove the district was making progress toward achieving the board's defined results for student achievement. The board and administration turned to a process known as Policy Governance."

Proposed Results

Together, the superintendent and board members wanted to reach clear agreement on what the Austin community demanded in return for its tax dollars and expected for its future through the education of its children. The board and senior staff drafted over two days a mission and results statements for student achievement to drive alignment of all teaching and learning. The board then took its work throughout the community for the citizens' reaction, understanding and support.

The board hosted more than a dozen focus groups and town hall meetings with students, parents, teachers, administrators, business leaders, higher education representatives and other constituencies. The board was careful to meet with a wide mix of cultural, ethnic and racial groups. The process was labor intensive and required the board to debrief after

each session and then again after multiple sessions to synthesize and assimilate the feedback.

The breadth of feedback included:

- The mission is too narrow. Focus on students' contribution to the world, not just Austin.
- These are the results we want. How will you implement them? How will you measure them?

The board has refocused on the defined end results, subsequently clarifying language and rewriting the mission to prepare students for contributing to the world and not just Austin. Board retreats engaged members in synthesizing the volume of feedback and incorporating citizen values and perspectives. The community now is being informed about the redefined end results, reflecting the feedback heard from citizens through the district's annual report and the website. Board members and staff make sure that citizens know their voices are heeded.

Changing Mission

The easiest data to gather are on our academic results for student achievement," says Forgione. "We presented our data indicators, benchmarked current performance and forecast targets for growth for the coming year. We don't have all disciplines covered yet, nor do we currently have the ability to completely disaggregate and summarize as we hope to in the next couple of years. But I now know exactly what I will be held responsible for in my evaluation and understand that data will prove whether we have hit the targets for student achievement."

The board is planning new ways to link with the community to jointly explore citizen values in the other areas addressed in the results statements college and career; life skills; citizenship; art; and health and safety. Meanwhile, the district staff is figuring out how to measure and collect quantitative and qualitative data on these non-academic values for student outcomes that will be added to Forgione's evaluation over time.

The board sometimes struggles with whom to establish linkages, how to connect and how to maintain meaningful dialogue as it embarks on this ongoing, pro-active development of relationships with the community. Forgione has his own community-based advisory committees to advise him about operational matters that are separate and distinct from the board's connection to the people who elected them.

Board members wrestle with themselves at times when tempted to get reinvolved with the administrative function they have delegated to Forgione. But as they continuously self-monitor their own performance, they regroup, clarify responsibilities and move forward in their exclusive roles.

The clarity for all of them comes in the superintendent's evaluation, which is based entirely on whether the district is making the student performance gains the board has prescribed and whether the district has operated within the board's expressed policy boundaries.

The board understands its accountability to the citizens who elected members as trustees to represent their expectations and values. Forgione has clear accountability, established in advance, to the board that evaluates him on improved student achievement.

Results: In August 2004, the administration released definitive data showing significant reductions in the achievement gaps among student groups, the board's priority. The gaps narrowed significantly in 3rd grade reading, 4th and 7th grade writing and 11th grade social studies and English. All student groups improved in these subjects with African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students making double-digit gains.

Horry County, S.C.

Five years ago, the board of education in Horry County knew student achievement in the district needed to improve. SAT and other normed test scores were below national averages.

Faced with a vacancy in its top executive office, the school board hired Gerrita Postlewait as superintendent of the 32,100-student school system. The board was impressed with her curriculum and instruction expertise and her eagerness to assume clear accountability for operational strategies that would lead to increased student achievement.

At the same time, the board chose to adopt a governance model for itself that would recognize and reduce micromanagement, time-consuming oversight committees and individual member direction to the superintendent and her staff. The board's focus turned from operations to achievement. Members determined to focus on developing community fiscal and moral support for the daunting job that lay ahead and to support the staff in its efforts to educate children.

"Our business community was willing to support and pay for the obvious work that needed to be done in building and renovating schools, but they wanted assurance that student achievement would increase," Postlewait says. "The board, as their trustees, promised it would."

Performance Gains

The board established written policies, "End Results for Student Achievement." Its acceptance of indicators and targets to demonstrate reasonable progress over time preceded federal and state expectations for standards and a system of measures. Ahead of many other districts, Horry County continuously has raised achievement across grades and schools, significantly reducing the achievement gap over the past five years.

“It’s really a strategic business plan,” Postlewait adds. “The board established end results that we as a staff agreed are the priority. In turn, we have developed a results-based system to achieve those board and community expectations.”

The business plan is systemic, sequential and really quite logical. The plan takes the results and breaks them down into disciplines. Indicators were established that the board agrees measure achievement. Data are provided that prove progress is happening.

But what has been done in Horry to make consistent academic progress so remarkable? Logically, the superintendent’s evaluation is based on student data. If children are learning at the targeted rate, Postlewait is doing her job. But so are the district staff, including every principal and teacher in the district.

Systemically, the superintendent and the senior staff have moved the achievement-based evaluation throughout the district all the way to the teachers in the classroom. Twice per year, every teacher meets individually with the principal. They must show current performance status for each student and then evidence of student performance increases for children at high, mid-range and low achievement levels and how progress has been made. If the measures are hard to come by because of the content, it is the teacher’s job to show the evaluation tools being used.

Progress Measures

By July 2004, Postlewait and staff completed their “First-Quarter Pacing Guides” for the 2004-05 school year. They outlined the achievement goals for all schools beginning in August. The superintendent uses them with the board before and after each quarter for their evaluation of her performance and with the community to ensure widespread understanding of the district’s central focus on student performance.

“It’s important that everyone knows this evaluation process and data are used with teachers as a signal to support and nurture their efforts with mentoring and monitoring,” Postlewait says. “This is about methodology, materials, teaching and learning together. We are all focused on the same priorities. Our move into Policy Governance, our systemic plan to achieve the end results and our performance-driven evaluation system have created what our local paper calls “an educational juggernaut.””

Results: Horry County’s superintendent and board credit collaborative leadership, good governance and meticulous focus on their academic achievement in core academic areas with the success achieved over the past five years. Five years of data show annual, continual performance progress of students across the county, effectively narrowing the achievement gap. The district enjoys unprecedented support from the local newspaper through its editorials, business and citizens who encourage the board to stay the course with role clarity and allow the staff to do their job without board interference.

Trenton, N.J.

Two years ago, members of the board of education in Trenton called us and said the board needed to know exactly why Trenton had failing schools. The board wanted data. It wanted accountability. What it really wanted was a performance-based system with true accountability for all staff, from the superintendent to the classroom teacher.

Board members joined in a movement to back away from operations, write policies to hold staff accountable for all internal actions and release staff to concentrate their time and efforts on student achievement. It hasn't been easy. The board struggles with the urge to re-engage in managing the district, to delve into details out of fear of administrative lapses that might be costly and damaging.

But the board holds the course, and it holds its chief school administrator, James "Torch" Lytle, accountable. In turn, Lytle expects the board to operate at the policy level, maintain interface with the community and let him and his staff operate the district.

Reports to the board documenting student achievement have been difficult. The cabinet has learned that the board wants executive summary presentations, deep conversations and dialogue, clear data and good talking points. "It has become imminently clear to me that the quality of board work and discussion is dependent upon the quality of the work we present to the board in the first place," says Lytle, Trenton's superintendent of five years.

A Results Basis

Backing away from managing operations in the 18,500-student district has been replaced by the board's monitoring of results and moving to a results-based evaluation. Instead of year-round and random conversations about how the superintendent is doing, the board is moving to holding Lytle accountable, based on data, for how students achieve.

"Having my evaluation and pay based on what students are achieving is absolutely the right thing to do," Lytle says. "I have just worked with my senior cabinet members to accept an incentive component in their contracts, pro-rated on their salaries and based on student achievement. We are creating a collaborative work culture responsive to what the board has done in establishing clear end results statements, priorities for achievement and limitations on our latitude in operating the district. It's Policy Governance. They do their job and challenge us to do ours. It can work."

Lytle and the negotiating committee are working to drive the performance-based system to the classroom. They are negotiating with state officials, hoping to achieve the same type of "bonus pool" for teacher rewards. Two sticking problems are these: negotiating the assigned dollar amount to each different result for achievement, and state policy that fails to recognize any bonus payment as total earning for retirement purposes.

The superintendent clearly agrees with the board on one of the outcomes and commitments from the board's last retreat: the critical need to connect, build relationships with and advocate for this movement with other elected and appointed

officials in the state. They include the mayor, city council members, legislators and officials at the state department of education.

A fully accountable system, aligned from the boardroom to the classroom, must be understood by all local and state public entities with which the district interacts.

The board's focus on driving alignment and clear accountability is new, having defined their end results only one year ago.

Results: Trenton is analyzing its most recent data. They know that dropout rates are decreasing and graduation rates are increasing. Their "Twilight" school for students who left high school, or adults who are returning to finish their degree, is enjoying remarkable success. They know reading test scores have improved and they are focusing on mathematics. The entire administrative staff at their recent three-day retreat wholeheartedly joined with and supported the board in their new policy focus on targeted student achievement results.

Defined Expectations

Does good governance contribute to an improvement in student achievement? Can the superintendent work cooperatively with a board, with complete role clarity, to align a system around defined results for student achievement? What causes improvement in student outcomes? From what source does change spring? What is the role of district leaders in driving change?

These three districts have taken a nontraditional approach and bold actions that are out of the norm among most school districts and board. They now have defined good governance, articulating and living by written board policy, and are committed to the delegation of operation of the schools without the board's micromanagement. In these communities the board must drive meaningful change to the classroom and school level and align it coherently at the district level.

From the school boards' perspective, all three have assigned to themselves the role of meaningfully interfacing with the citizens who own the schools, deliberately creating strategies to better understand what those owners want and expect from the schools and defining those expectations in policy. Once that is done, the challenge to make it happen has been assigned directly to the superintendent, who is held singularly responsible for the outcomes.

In all three instances, the superintendents eagerly have accepted the challenge. For the first time in their professional careers, they tell us, they know exactly what their jobs are and they know precisely how they will be evaluated. While the accountability is substantial, the freedom to accomplish the expected results is unprecedented.

Each board has committed in policy to stay out of operational decision making and allow the superintendent to decide how to get the job done and be held accountable for the results of those decisions. They know that if the district succeeds in its mission—that is,

should students meet the academic targets?they have succeeded and will be evaluated accordingly.

Complete alignment of all district operations, including budget, personnel, curriculum and human relations, is a given if success is to be achieved. The three superintendents fully understand this obligation and have significantly overhauled their operations accordingly.

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