

Clarifying Board and Superintendent Roles

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Sometimes real life defies explanation. Some realities vary so greatly from logic that we see, but we can't believe. We may even accept, but we can't understand.

Such is the case with school board-superintendent relationships. How can one explain how such seemingly complementary roles can clash so greatly in practice? How can one employing entity so proudly announce to the world its "nearly perfect" choice for superintendent one year, only to see the wheels come completely off within a matter of months? What is it about this relationship that makes it so seemingly impossible for the people involved to reach common understanding about whose role it is to do what? And why is it that reasonable role definitions are so perpetually elusive?

For most of the 40 combined years we have worked with school boards and superintendents to help them find answers to these nagging and career-threatening dilemmas, we have been as stymied as those caught in this web. We did all the traditional things to help the parties find clarity: we did retreats and workshops; we created boxes into which we placed all the tasks the board should perform and then all the tasks the superintendent should perform; we facilitated the development of mutual commitments and covenants between the parties; we played traffic cop, counselor, shrink and advisor.

Still we saw far too many troubled relationships. We knew there were answers, but we couldn't find them. Finally, after careers that featured excessive frustration, we discovered why: we were looking for answers in the wrong places. We were assuming that we were dealing with:

A performance problem. If we could just improve peoples' personal skills and knowledge, and hence their performance, they would work better with each other;

An attitude problem. If the boards and superintendents could confront the negative attitudes held by people that prevented positive interaction, things would improve.

A set of personal problems. Sometimes people just don't like each other. If we could get them to focus on a common, larger vision, they could rally around that and not spend their time dealing with the negative factors that divide them.

The Real Problem: A Governance Process That Causes Disclarity

There is some truth behind all these assumptions, at least in some specific circumstances. But it is now crystal clear to us that the real, underlying problem of board and superintendent relationships is not attributable to any of the above. The real problem is the traditional governance culture in which most school boards try to function. The traditional process of doing board business not only allows role confusion; it causes it.

Let us explain.

We typically say that the board's job is policy. Really? Bring to mind your school board's last meeting agenda. How many policy decisions did the board make? By comparison, how many decisions were focused on operational issues? (Now for the embarrassing question: who prepared the agenda that asked the board to make those operational decisions?)

The problem is that when both the board and superintendent share decision-making at the operational level, role confusion should not surprise anyone. Confused roles is an inevitable by-product of such a process.

We say that the board has only one employee: the superintendent. Yet when we analyze the board's policy manual, we see board policies aimed directly at all employees, not just at the superintendent. The board indeed can control all employees through policy, but it must do so through its only direct employee, the superintendent.

We find that most board policies focus more on operational concerns than on governance concerns, another contributor to role confusion. The fact that a typical school board policy manual consumes a small forest of paper products is evidence of policy aimed at the wrong target. The board can and should state its policy-level concerns in a handful of very broad policies, then leave the administrative detail to that superintendent it so proudly announced last year.

In fact, it sometimes seems that the school board and the superintendent have reversed roles: many superintendents spend more time with policy than their boards do, and many boards deal with operational matters at least as much as the superintendent does. How can role clarity be expected from such confusion?

For us, both the problem and the solution became clear with John Carver's publication of Boards That Make a Difference in 1990. Carver described the problem just as we had experienced it. He not only identified the problem, but he took the next step by offering the solution: Policy Governance.

Policy Governance suggests that every decision a board makes should be a policy level decision. The model suggests that only four kinds of policies are necessary for the board to fully express its unique values for the organization:

Ends policies, which describe the ultimate benefits the district will provide for its students, and at what cost;

Governance Process policies, which set in policy how the board will conduct its business and the discipline members will exercise to govern themselves with excellence;

Board-Staff Relations policies, which establish how the board and superintendent will interact with each other and how performance will be measured; and

Executive Limitations policies, which establish the boundaries within which the superintendent may make operational, or means, decisions while working to achieve the Ends.

In terms of establishing absolute clarity of roles and who does what, this latter category of policies is key. In essence, these are the “Thou shalt nots” that provide clarity for the superintendent by stating, in advance and in policy, what the superintendent may *not* do. Anything not prohibited by the board as an executive limitation may be done by the superintendent as he or she makes the means or operational decisions necessary to achieve the board’s Ends. The superintendent’s job description has only two features: achieve the end results specified by policy, and stay within the boundaries set by the executive limitations policies as he or she goes about daily work.

Think of decision-making as a continuum: there will be a point along the continuum where the board will stop making decisions, because all the board’s concerns about the particular topic will have been expressed. At that point, the superintendent may begin making further decisions about that same topic. The process may continue throughout the district, all the way to the classroom, where one teacher may have a particular concern about a student behavior issue, for example.

Role clarity comes with the continuum and with the Executive Limitations concepts. Instead of the challenge of trying to decide whether a decision belongs either in the board’s box or the superintendent’s box, it is clear where the board stopped making decisions in its policy. At that point, the superintendent is freed to do his or her job.

The Colorado Experience

When Policy Governance was presented to the world by Carver in 1990, we were executives with the Colorado Association of School Boards. We saw it as a model that held great promise for helping overcome many of the frustrations described earlier. We lack the space to detail all the steps we went through leading to our focused work with school boards in Colorado, but the short version is that while we were employed by the association, we launched a formal service for our members to help them adopt this new

way of doing business. Within the first three years, 12 Colorado school boards made the move, and the results have been impressive.

The first of our client boards was the Lake County School Board in Leadville. Lake County superintendent Peg Portscher, Colorado's Superintendent of the Year in 1997, talks about her assessment of how Policy Governance has clarified her role: "My staff and I have complete clarity about our role, but more importantly, we know for what we will be held accountable. Our performance standards are clear, challenging and unambiguous," says Portscher. "I don't worry about watching my backside and wondering 'what next'," she adds.

Thomas Farrell, Superintendent of Aspen Public Schools, says that Policy Governance has changed the way the district does business. "The board thinks about its agenda and members plan how they will work with the community and staff. This proactive attitude tends to better focus the board and keep members out of micromanaging," says Farrell. Farrell adds that from a personal standpoint, he and his staff are more focused now than ever before on meeting the board's expectations. "Our administrative team meetings have been transformed; we all are focused on students and their achievement," he stated.

Dr. Cyndi Simms, Superintendent of the Steamboat Springs Public Schools, says that clarity of roles has pushed her district to new levels of student achievement. "We can attribute new community support, district alignment around student achievement, and greater accountability to the board and its clear and simple policies. Policies are clear, monitoring is scheduled, and accountability is definite," says Simms.

Dr. Dennis Disario, Superintendent of the Weld County Re-3(J) School District, credits Policy Governance with his board's learning how to speak with one voice. "I have clear direction, my staff and I know what is expected and how we'll be evaluated. The guesswork and surprises are gone. The clarity of the board's role has allowed us to clearly define our roles—and move forward to get the job done."

Why Do It?

We believe there are a number of reasons why a board and superintendent would want to move into Policy Governance. In virtually every project we have facilitated, both the board and superintendent saw the advantages of the model, and both eagerly embraced the movement toward it. From the board's perspective, Policy Governance holds the advantage of greater focus on kids and their success, which is what we believe leads most board members to run for the board. In addition, the model requires the board to think and decide at the policy level, not at the operational level; it reduces the number of board policies from the typical 300 or more to a manageable 35 to 40 governing policies; it sets in policy the governance culture, style and discipline of the board; and it creates proactive linkage between the board and the district's owners—the taxpayers.

From the superintendent's point of view, Policy Governance offers unprecedented freedom to do the job, but this freedom is balanced by accountability for results. Total district-wide alignment becomes necessary for results to be achieved. Policy becomes the single driver for what the district does, eliminating the competition for the driver role that we see so often in districts that pledge allegiance to board policy, a strategic plan, board goals, superintendent goals, or any number of additional things that compete for the driver role.

The dominant attraction for superintendents seems to be the promise of role clarity. Over and over superintendents tell us that for the first time in their careers, they are confident that they are operating on safe ground. They say that they are enjoying their freedom to do their jobs without constantly seeking the board's permission or approval of an operational choice. And they have no fear of the accountability part, since now they at least know the end results for which they will be held accountable.
