

## **Do Boards Have the Will and Discipline to Focus on Student Achievement?**

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Well-meaning citizens who want to make a difference. School board members. The question is, a difference in what? For whom? And at what cost – to the district, to the staff they employ, to themselves?

School board members tell us they want to focus on kids. That's why most ran for office in the first place. They want to see an improvement in student performance and achievement with all their kids regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, native language or socioeconomic status. At another level, they want their schools and district to rank competitively in state assessments and be a source of community pride.

At a fundamental and personal level, school board members want to leave a legacy. This is a value that often is not articulated well, but nonetheless is a heartfelt desire by every board member with whom we speak. Board members want to leave office at the end of their tenure with their friends and community constituents believing they served well, that children had a better education and were better prepared for life after high school as a result of their service.

But school boards across this country, far more often than not, find themselves incapable of focusing on kids' issues. Far too frequently, they not only fail to make a difference in helping kids, but they also hinder any administrative initiatives to do so. Boards seem wed to an inherited "system" of reactive governance that is rife with a belief that their job is to: watch-dog the finances by reviewing bids and line item expenditures; assume a posture of approving decisions with little or no expert knowledge about curriculum or delivery; second-guess and challenge, sometimes even overturn, personnel decisions; challenge their superintendents to provide basic operational information in a multiplicity of formats for rehashing at the board table to prove board members are "in the know."

Neil Duresky, board president in La Crosse, put it this way:

"Board members come on a school board very often not knowing what a board does. They think they need to 'know everything' or they aren't good board members. Well, there's no way they can know it all. That's what we have employees for – we need to hire the best staff possible and hold them accountable to run the operational side of the district."

Karen Ardaman, a new board member in Orange County School District in Orlando, Florida added:

“I came on the board with a desire to increase the credibility of the public school system. I am learning that in my desire to *respond* to community member concerns, we have to have a system of knowledgeable employees who are *responsive*. Sometimes the community expects us to play an ‘oversight’ role rather than a policy role - but the district is so large and complex we can’t know it all. One job clarity I now see is re-educating the community to focus on student achievement.”

Dr. Michael Wade, former board member in Jefferson County, Colorado, shared his insight at the NSBA convention in San Diego. With a roomful of board members and superintendents at an Early Bird Workshop on his district’s movement into Policy Governance, Michael said:

“Boards aren’t making a difference because they literally choose to deal in minutiae. They like mucking around in operational details. Great! You can go and be a very good manager somewhere. But boards are about leadership! That literally means boards must set a vision for student achievement in concert with the community and discipline themselves as members to make meetings and discussions focus on just that – students!”

Does some of this language sound familiar? Vision, structure, accountability, advocacy – the original key work of school boards as developed by the National School Boards Association. Let’s explore these areas in greater depth to see how to help you and your board colleagues develop the will and exercise the discipline to make a difference – for students – and consequently leave a legacy as having made a difference.

### **Vision: “What benefit? For whom? At what cost?”**

Do board members get elected or appointed to focus on staff, their contracts or grievances? To focus on budgets and conduct hearings? To spend time deliberating about buildings, bricks and buses? To enjoy rifle-shot fixes to single issues or problems? Or, aren’t boards really asked to exercise district-wide and big picture focus on the entire system and how it is aligned to help all students?

Community members want efficient and effective operations, to be sure. But their bedrock concern is whether all students are getting the best education we can provide for the tax dollars spent.

Then, it makes sense that as school board *trustees*, members are to exercise their trusteeship by “linking” or engaging with their constituents to determine community values around what students should achieve. That is, setting a locally-determined, community-based vision for what students should know and be able to do as a result of attending our community-supported schools.

“This is way beyond meeting state-set minimum standards,” asserts Karen. “Our community has unique expectations of what students should achieve. We have to liaison to the community and put those expectations in writing. Then, our job is to give direction to staff to make it happen and monitor that it is being done. Looping back, we have to communicate that the goals are being addressed and met – that way we can build public confidence in the system.”

In Jefferson County, Michael and his fellow members have spent the last nine months initiating proactive linkages within their community. “We have conducted linkages with groups ranging from civic leaders, boards of realtors, elementary and secondary teachers, administrators, and the most fun, students! Our last several linkages have centered on this one part of our vision: that all students “demonstrate responsible citizenship in their diverse communities.” We’ve had enormous endorsement of that End Result, lots of discussion about what each word means, great insight shared about how that vision is working in classrooms everyday across the system, and suggestions for how to measure that it is being achieved. It has clarified our thinking, renewed our confidence in good teachers and students, and is preparing us to further define exactly what we mean as a board when we make that statement. Our next step will be to give further definition to staff and hold them accountable for making reasonable progress with all students, K-12.”

Michael went on to admonish the NSBA group, “If you aren’t focusing on students and what they can do, with the help of your community, you simply aren’t doing your job. Step aside and let someone else serve on the board and provide that kind of leadership!”

Most boards who engage us to help them improve their governance performance spend at least a full day or even two just distilling “draft” end results for student achievement in their district. Do we see commonalities? Certainly! Most boards generally start with a purely academic goal with some language and refinement aligned to state standards. But very quickly, boards move into identifying further values for student achievement. Those statements might talk about graduating students who are “productive and contributing citizens”, who “demonstrate the skills necessary for personal and workplace success”, who “make healthy lifestyle choices”, who “possess good character”. These boards then develop a process to engage or link with district and community groups to further define their vision embodied in those statements, provide direction to staff who respond with a strategic or long-range plan of actions, and then loop back to those same linkage groups to talk about progress.

“You know, “ said Neil, “our experience is that you have to make the vision, the End Results for student achievement, the focus of all of your work. Elevate the importance of your vision/End Results to the level of policy! In linking, you educate the community to share a vision and then everything else falls into place.”

## **Structure: Is Your Board set up to focus on Student Achievement?**

Take a look at your agenda. See any student centered issues there? If you stretch it, sure enough, you can make a case that finances and buildings are necessary to educate students.

But then take a look at the system that you serve on the Board of Trustees. You set out to hire the best superintendent. Most ads read something like, “Demonstrated financial management skills; creative risk-taker; good people skills; experienced in strategic planning; classroom or administrator experience with an advanced degree.”

That great candidate is hired, and after the honeymoon period, the second-guessing begins. On the agenda, usually developed with care by the superintendent (is it then the superintendent’s agenda?) are all the approvals – the “Mother/Father May I?” game. We hire the Chief Executive Officer of this complex organization, with all the requisite expertise, talents and experience, and set about spending valuable board time “approving” their decisions. Some of those decisions have in fact already been made and instituted! Yet, boards make them again.

So, while the board remakes decisions, or exercises its collective judgment in choosing textbooks and curriculum and carpet color – who is deciding what students should know and be able to do? Far too many boards have given up the BEST part of their jobs – and we would argue their MAIN job as trustees – to determine student achievement expectations.

“We are working at realigning our agenda to focus on student achievement. It has been and continues to be a struggle as we individually and collectively let go of administrative work and focus on real board work,” said Michael. “In Jefferson County, we had two business meetings a month. We have restructured to one business meeting and one public engagement meeting and that has served us well. But we can still get caught up in dissecting administrative decisions and not getting to discussing our Ends.”

In Burlington, Kansas, board president John Fletcher says working together as a board focused on student achievement, “ ...Has revolutionized our agendas, the focus of our discussions, our reason for existing. We constantly ask ourselves if what we are concerned about is really the board’s business and whether we should be spending our time discussing it. If we determine the issue is indeed not the board’s, we have a great superintendent in Dale Rawson. He takes care of the operations within the clarity of our board-developed Executive Limitations policies. He works with me to make sure the board deals with lots of operational details on our consent agenda so we can focus our meeting on the meat – kids!”

### **Structure to get boards to focus on student achievement. What does it take?**

1. **Dissatisfaction with the status quo:** Recognition that the board could make a greater difference and make the decision to do something about it.
2. **Integrity and discipline:** Board members who can represent their individual concerns, engage in a profound discussion and even debate at the board table, but who can then engage in our “democracy for the common good” by supporting the majority decision.
3. **Clear direction to the Superintendent:** Written statements of direction to the staff, usually in board-developed policy. These clarify the concerns board members collectively share about operations. Rigorous monitoring follows.
4. **An annual schedule of work:** A year-long calendar that schedules the discussions and development of student achievement goals/policy among members of the board and with the community.
5. **Focused board agendas:** An agenda for board meetings that expedites statutorily-driven and operational votes to a consent agenda – and focuses public and board deliberation on student achievement.

Can you do it? Many boards across the states have and are!

### **Accountability: Of Whom? To Whom? For What?**

So, you're elected to make a difference. And you want to make that difference. But here come the tricky parts! The same public who wants you to focus on student achievement also wants you to make operational decisions and sometimes, *bring home the bacon* to your local constituency within the broader district.

“First, the board has to re-educate the community about the board’s role. We are not there to watchdog finances by line item. Show me where that has ever been effective! You want to watchdog? Then go out and become a principal or superintendent – that’s their job! You want to oversee bids and blueprints – find a job as a contractor somewhere! Our job as a board is to link within the district and community, find out community values and determine what student achievement should be, hire the best administration to make it happen, and link back to the community who is holding us as a board accountable for student achievement. In the process, we educate them about our true role!” said Neil.

Karen added, “If our communities develop the student achievement Ends with us, our job is to assure them that the entire school system is aligned to make those End Results happen. Our job is to communicate, to play the liaison role I spoke of earlier. I feel that accountability to the people who elected me. I hold the staff, through our superintendent, accountable for getting all board members good and complete information as it impacts our decision making.”

“Our job as a board is to focus on the needs of students throughout our district, not just the areas we represent directly. So, our challenge is understand the needs of all

different students. We need and ask for good data to inform us and help shape our Ends accordingly,” said Michael. “ We hold our superintendent, Dr. Jane Hammond, responsible for aligning each site with its unique student population to meeting the district-wide Ends. It means site based accountability to Jane, district accountability to the board, and board accountability back to our citizens throughout Jefferson County. It is a huge job and each partner in the district has its unique role to play – and ours is not operations – it’s governing through expectation and holding the system accountable,”

Finally, we suggest, the board must consider the accountability of one board member to the entire board. The old saying, “You’re only as strong as your weakest link,” never held more true. Board members must hold themselves accountable to one another to do quality board work. What then must each do?

- Come to meetings having read your packets and asked questions for clarification so you are ready for great deliberation and voting
- Exercise discipline to focus on what’s best for all students and not just the loudest voice – even at political expense
- Insist on an agenda that gets to student results, not recommendations and approvals
- Empower others on the board to speak and participate by curbing your own need to discourse
- Insist on the rigorous accountability of staff in addressing your board-defined results for student achievement supported by valid and reliable data
- Protect and promote board development to understand the assessments that align to student expectations and for bringing home the best practices of other institutions to increase performance and learning.

## **Advocacy: Closing the Loop with Integrity**

“If we can show the public that the dollars are well-spent in achieving student goals, we gain their support and understanding,” Neil reminded us. It’s called systemic alignment. It’s called accountability. It’s called the bottom line. Perhaps most significantly, it is returning to the public you earlier engaged to demonstrate achievement, identify where you as a district need help, and through the on-going dialogue, develop the financial and moral understanding and support your board needs to lead the system.”

This is not talking at bond election time. This is not re-election time. This is not crises time. This IS true public engagement – not the much bantered tool and process for talking with the community – but the on-going and systematic solicitation of interaction with your constituents around student achievement in your schools.

“Our board has conducted linkages for the past year with various student and community groups. They know what we are trying to do and we feel new levels of support and understanding,” said Russ Harris, board member in Newark, New York.

“In Kansas, our state’s legislative agenda has been very challenging for us this year,” said John Fletcher. “We have really had to stay informed and be in the business of

informing our legislators about the real needs of our district to continue to perform to meet student needs. Our focus on kids demands that we advocate for them, with good data and knowledge about how they are performing, at the local, state and national levels.”

In La Crosse, board members have worked to invite their legislators to meet with them and share their successes in student achievement as well as their needs to help all students without intrusive legislation. In Jefferson County, board members regularly interact with legislators to discuss the demands, performance and needs of their district. In Orange County, highly active systems are in place to develop relationships with state legislators and committees. But the system and board has also become highly aggressive in establishing critical linkages with county governing bodies to plan for meeting the needs of high growth and development to ensure the schools can meet future community needs.

## **Our Bottom Line?**

As former teachers and administrators, as career educators who have devoted ourselves to helping boards govern effectively, we know it is all about student achievement.

Boards can and must reform themselves to address with unerring focus the needs of all students in their districts. They must rise above pettiness, lack of discipline, demanding and often uncivil citizens with single issues, a reticent or unresponsive system and its employees, to demand focus on students and what they are achieving – or failing to achieve.

It begins with the board. It begins with knowing and understanding a governing board’s role as it is different from that of the employee, with realizing that power comes from governing the whole system and not from rifle-shot “fix its.”

If local boards do not learn to govern, and govern well, power and authority will be taken from them until they are certain to survive as “vestigial organs, like tonsils or appendixes.” As Jay Matthews, staff writer for the Washington Post wrote in his article entitled, *“An End to School Boards?”* (2/13/01) went on to say, “I have watched board meetings drone on into the night, crawling from one excruciatingly minor administrative detail to another. I have seen members raise their eyes to heaven, as if to appeal for release from their pain and ennui.”

Student Achievement! The release Boards can use to focus staff, students and community together on what it’s all about! Do you and your board have the will and discipline? It begins with your decision to do something about it.

Try governing. Try leadership.

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