

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Practical Strategies, Resources,
Processes, and Wisdom for
Governing Boards and their CEOs

Governance Reform is at Gale Force. Is Your Board Prepared to Weather the Storm?

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School boards don't spend time doing what board members say they want to do. Our observation suggests that most boards devote less than 20 percent of their time to the kinds of issues members acknowledge to be most important: student performance and achievement.

So what does consume board meeting time? How about buses, buildings, boilers, budgets, bonds, and butting into issues that really aren't board work at all?

Reacting, ratifying, second-guessing, listening to endless reports members already have in writing, and approving administrative recommendations about programs and operational strategies do not constitute meaningful board-level leadership for the district. There is little leadership in any of those activities.

There should be a higher level of contribution that the board—and only the board—can make to the district.

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Change? Change What?

Just what must change if boards are to provide intelligent leadership for the district and for kids?

For a start, agendas must change. Boards must get off their agendas most of those things that now consume board time so they can address student issues. They can't deal with everything; there is not enough time. They must have a governance structure that allows them to delegate most operational decision making to their superintendents while providing for proper monitoring to assure acceptable superintendent, and therefore district, performance. By doing so, time will be freed to allow the board to plan desired student-centered end results while deliberatively discussing and monitoring district **progress toward achieving them.**

The Palm Springs, CA school district is a work in progress toward this student focus. The board and its superintendent, Dr. Lorri McCune, have moved to the consent agenda those operational items that the board is obligated by law to approve. Their former operational laundry list of three pages no longer consumes valuable Board discussion time. Instead, the board practices its value to focus on strategic leadership ... and block time at each meeting to discuss its desired end-results for student achievement in this complex district. The board's agenda now is focused on the issues that the board has identified as important—not what someone else has handed to it.

A related shift in thinking must occur: board members must internalize for themselves a role definition that transcends “fixing things.” Operating in the public arena can make this a difficult challenge, but it is a challenge that can be met, and in fact is being met by many boards. To do so, the community must be educated about what the board believes to be important and how it has chosen to structure its own performance to make sure the important work gets done. That means that special, individual problems no longer can consume board time. Rather, the public is assured that those matters will be addressed at the proper level.

The school board of Racine, Wisconsin purposefully is restructuring how it works with its diverse constituencies. The board developed and has implemented a plan to proactively inform the public of its very clear focus on students, not operations. The process that will result will assure that community members’ special concerns are responded to, but the board’s comprehensive community dialogue plan is intended to allow the board to engage in meaningful engagement with targeted groups within the community, all built around student achievement issues and partnerships! The board recognizes that fixing things is important, but it also acknowledges that it has hired a very competent staff who can do that job quite well.

Boards must develop strategies to lead the change process, not just lend attentive ears to the loudest faction. Change is easy for no one, communities included. Parents and taxpayers may call for change until it happens, then recoil because “that isn’t what I had in mind.” The desired outcome from community engagement should be identification of shared values and a resulting vision that is driven by the board itself.

The board and administrators of the Issaquah Washington school district serve an intense and focused community that demands that individual voices be heard ... at the board level. The board has embarked on an ambitious and disciplined strategy to reach out to internal and external groups with a focus on academic achievement ... but further, to determine what more the community expects.

Finally, boards must learn to lead from the level of policy, not from a lower level of decision-making. Most boards never have developed a complete understanding of how board decisions can and must be policy decisions rather than operational level decisions. We can’t overemphasize the critical importance of this point; all kinds of bad things happen in organizations when boards and CEOs share operational decision-making, leaving policy to no one. Roles get confused, accountability gets lost or blurred, organizational vision is reduced to a period of days or hours rather than long-term, and everyone within the organization becomes frustrated and ineffective.

The school boards of San Diego CA and Hutchinson KS both are better defining their roles in policy. Both boards are committed to greater clarity of roles and responsibilities that places both authority and accountability for operational decisions clearly with their superintendents. The counter responsibility for the boards is to discipline themselves to stay clearly focused on policy for student achievement, while monitoring operational performance to assure proper organizational performance.

Indeed, boards can add value to the organizations they serve. Many do. But it is clear that for many, it is time for a complete overhaul of the board’s governance culture and operating system. We would go so far as to say that absent such a fundamental shift, the future of the American school board as we know it may be in jeopardy. **The winds of change are blowing that hard.**

The Gauntlet: Board Development in a Devastated Economy

Ed note: This article was written for our clients and sent in our March newsletter. Hope you find it helpful too!

Why is it that the first budget cut is often that of the board's professional development? To model sacrifices that will take place in the district? Or because the on-going plan for the specific learning, skill-building and content knowledge of board members is not understood, or more importantly valued, both inside the district and in the community?

You and your colleagues have embraced the belief that *if you govern well* - district operations will be more accountable and student achievement will increase. **You have invested in yourselves with a long view - not the one-time training so prevalent for traditional boards that recedes in the rear view mirror as you leave the mountain-top experience.**

You have finely-honed policies and a plan. You have a year-round calendar of rigorous monitoring of every aspect of district operations, committed to self-assessment to stay true to your healthy board culture and processes, developed a process for evaluating your superintendent with clarity and integrity. You believe that the learning environment begins with you and how you conduct business.

Painstakingly, you have identified Results for student achievement that address the WHOLE child - far-ahead of the important work advocated by the Partnership for 21st Skills. You have struggled with the non-academic skills and learning - and how to know they are being taught, modeled, learned and achieved - long before other boards have recognized the need and responsibility. You have identified what student achievement must be and evaluate, from the board level, whether it is happening.

Your work has involved a steep learning curve. You have learned what the term "govern" means; you've learned what is it to "own" the system - not tinker with it; you've learned about assessments, benchmarks, cohorts, meaningful linkage and advocacy to engender public support. **You have believed that systemic alignment and achievement begins with you.**

This business of governing well requires sustained focus and resources. With board turnover, your work can always be an election away from being dismantled and diminishing your legacy building of leadership. Courage to overcome public skepticism, even internal doubts, about the true value of board development requires extra efforts to demonstrate the practical benefit of good governance and its undeniable link to a learning environment that envisions, supports and demands high achievement.

For the district to be high-performing and have public support, you must strive for full capacity to do your unique governing job. It must be sustainable through on-going coaching, skill-building, collaboration with like-boards, evaluation and strategic points of re-directing and re-tooling.

More now than ever before, board development is worthy and critical to sustaining your district.

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