

Moving Boards Out of Operations, Into Results

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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.

We find most board members eager to talk about redefining their roles to allow them to add value to their districts. The trick is to create a governance structure, culture and agenda that allow that shift to occur.

Change? Change What?

So *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 Jefferson County School District in Colorado is a work in progress toward this student focus. The board and its superintendent, Dr. Jane Hammond, 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, they practice their value to focus on strategic leadership ... and block time at each meeting to discuss their desired end-results for student achievement in this large and complex district. In fact, the board has eliminated one of its two business meetings each month in favor of one business meeting that includes a public “linkage” session with a target group to discuss student achievement ... and one public engagement meeting devoted exclusively to student issues.

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 problems no longer can consume board time, but they will be addressed at the proper level.

The school board of Orange County, Florida purposefully is restructuring how it works with its vast constituencies. It is writing out rules for public participation at its board meetings and telling the public why it is changing ... so together they can focus on students, not operations! Members are developing a process to assure that community members’ concerns are responded to, and are designing a comprehensive approach to proactive board linkages with targeted groups within the community, all built around student achievement issues and partnerships!

Boards must develop strategies for meaningful interaction with the full community about student-centered end results, 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 Fargo School District in North Dakota serve an intense and focused community that demands their individual voices be heard ... at the board level. The board is embarking 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 La Crosse, Wisconsin and Newark, New York 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.

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.

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