

POLICY GOVERNANCE AND SCHOOL BOARDS? YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

PUBLISHED BY JOHN CARVER IN BOARD LEADERSHIP SEPT.-OCT. 1999

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This is what they told us:

“Policy Governance is great theory, but there is no way it can work with public school boards.”

For a while, we were inclined to believe our vocal naysayers who identified these as obstacles:

- Reams of state and federal mandates that dictate board activities that seem to be incompatible with Policy Governance principles
- A highly-charged political environment that expects boards to “fix it”
- An established and generations – old culture of flawed governance behavior
- Taxes and kids – the two most attention-getting, media-grabbing ingredients with which any board can deal
- Strong unions and special interest groups that understand how to apply public pressure
- Publicly elected board members, many of whom have political ambitions beyond the school board, and harbor a desire to please everyone.

But, while these obstacles can be formidable, they need not be fateful. In fact, we view them now as challenges that can compel boards of education into Policy Governance. In a Policy Governance environment, most mandates are dealt with on the consent agenda; the political environment, unions and special interest groups are mitigated in their influence when the board works as one; parents are relieved and excited that boards are focusing on student achievement; and finally, boards and board members are perceived to function better, which positions them for higher office.

Despite the fears that it would not work ... we forged ahead in our belief and hope. Here is our story:

In 1993 and again in 1994, working with the Colorado Association of School Boards, we made two back-to-back attempts to interest Colorado school boards in John Carver’s new governance model, which made immediate good sense to us. The Master

himself made one of those attempts. His eloquence was inspirational, but his message went unheeded.

We later would learn that sometimes the pain that results from poor board performance must reach an intolerable level before some boards will seek serious and meaningful change. That is unfortunate. We believe the best place to build a solid Policy Governance culture is with a board that already is performing at a relatively high level, but desires to find a structure to become even more effective.

For many boards, however, the long-standing culture that allows them to pursue single agendas, that encourages political maneuvering, that expects the board to “handle” staff issues, and that permits personal lack of discipline to go unchecked sooner or later begs for a solution. As frustrated members of these boards become aware of Policy Governance, they tend to discover that there is a way to pull themselves out of the muck. Indeed, for many it is a means of last resort.

Back to our story. Actually, Carver’s message did not go totally unheeded. One lone school board member quietly heard the message, and without fanfare set out to “convert” his local school board to Policy Governance. That board relied on help from two different consultants before the new model took root, but take root it did.

Now, not only did we know the wisdom of the model, but we also had a trail-blazing, at-home example that could be referenced.

Fast forward to 1997. We presented Policy Governance to our 176 Colorado school boards for a third time. Suddenly, what fell flat four years earlier now made infinitely good sense to a number of boards and their superintendents. The association, under our leadership as the two top executives, seized upon that opportunity by offering to its members a Policy Governance service.

The service was comprehensive and included full facilitation of the process from the two-day blitz through Ends development. We also included development of the first year’s agenda with monitoring frequency and methods of policies in all quadrants, linkage group definition as well as method and schedule, and one year’s review of meeting agendas and minutes. On-going phone facilitation for that first year was part of the start-up package. We wanted success for the boards ... and for us!

Success came rapidly. Since the service was launched in 1997, we have worked with 12 Colorado school boards to help them adopt Policy Governance as a governance model. As one would expect, they are in various stages of implementation, but all are well past initial policy adoption in all four quadrants, and many are well along in the Ends monitoring process — which we define to be the pivotal point in being fully operational.

We realized that the early converts would struggle. Cultural transformation is difficult under the best of conditions, but to attempt it with little or no established,

historical support is daunting. To help build a support base for the 12 Policy Governance boards, we decided to develop opportunities for them and their CEOs to come together and share their implementation insights and challenges. About 18 months into the service, we held the first of two, two-day “Wisdom Sharing” sessions. Topics defined by them for discussion included linkages, agenda development, orienting new board members, and effective monitoring. The first invitation was responded to by the attendance of every Policy Governance board and CEO. The second was the result of their demand for more. The agenda for the third “virtual conference” has already been determined: ENDS development.

How has it worked? We don’t trust our own biases, so we asked a few members from those pioneering governance teams to tell us, in their words, how they believe Policy Governance is working in their school districts:

- “It seems to me that policy governance has brought definition and structure to our deliberations. While sometimes we as board members would rather not have that structure ... it is for the greater good. It has enabled us to do those things that we always wanted to do. As we continue operating under Policy Governance, we are excited about our outcomes. That’s certainly because we do not deal with the trivial! We are dealing with the weightier matters of what we were elected to do.” *Sid Clemmer, Lake County School Board board member*
- “Success! We now have much more meaningful meetings with meaty and juicy discussions on education issues. We get meaningful input from all different sources, both inside and outside of the district. We don’t micromanage; we are more respectful of each other and the education experts, and both board and staff are more effectively doing their jobs. Where do we go from here? We need to better define our roles in monitoring ENDS without slipping into micromanaging. Our greatest challenge has been teachers not buying into our process as much as we’d hoped. We need to help them to understand they have new levels of empowerment and creativity.
Alice Davis, president of the Aspen School Board
- “We think it’s great! We have never wanted to ‘manage’ the school district. In creating our policies, we were able to play out our very strong philosophy of empowerment and involvement of our community and staff – we set up our policies and parameters, and then people were empowered to make decisions. Policy Governance has given our board the time to deal with the bigger issues and leave management decisions to our staff, as appropriate. Our greatest challenge has been the teachers who are fearful that we have backed away from active involvement and hold a wait-and-see attitude on our adherence to our values.” *Millie Beal, Steamboat Springs School District*

- “Policy Governance has given our district the structure that we hadn’t had before. The board members are functioning well under it – always asking the questions: ‘Is this our business? Does it relate to our ends?’ They are more into the educational process than the management of the district. The structure for the board is self-discipline and now all board members feel the obligation to operate within that discipline.” *Dr. Dennis Disario, superintendent of Keenesburg School District*

These are the things we have learned:

1. Policy Governance will work in public school districts, but it isn’t easy. The essential requirements here, as they are anywhere, are full understanding of the model, total commitment to the principles, and — here maybe more than in other settings — an extremely high level of personal discipline.
2. Mandates are not an excuse. Regardless of what state or federal laws require, there are legitimate ways school boards can observe those requirements and still maintain commitments to Policy Governance. The lawyers initially may argue a bit, but in most cases, as they become more familiar with Policy Governance, they will agree both with its inherent wisdom and its ability to accommodate legal obligations imposed upon the school board.
3. Effectively presenting Policy Governance, or more accurately the board’s “new governance commitments and focus,” to the staff and the owners is critical to its acceptance and understanding. Policy Governance by name can become a target, and can bring out the wolves among the special interest groups. We recommend little public fanfare around the name “Policy Governance,” preferring to let the board’s new focus on student achievement and its culture of focused discipline speak for itself.
4. Continuing support is essential to success. We refuse to price our startup service on a daily fee basis. It is offered only as a full-package option. Too many boards are tempted to commit a day here, another there, and end up not with true change, but with nothing more than frustration. After the basic service is complete, we add support days as needed.

But even beyond consultative help, boards new to Policy Governance must have opportunities to share, to learn from each other, and to reinforce their commitment to this bold new way of doing business. That is why we offered our “Wisdom Sharing” opportunities. And that is how we believe this venture into Policy Governance can be sustained.