

Ten Strategies to Help Assure the Sustainability of Policy Governance® in the Public School Environment

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A board's decision to adopt and faithfully implement Policy Governance is the first level of commitment. To assure that the current board's commitment is sustainable as a legacy of leadership and good governance is quite another challenge. This is a particularly acute challenge for public boards.

Most of our clients are public school boards in the U.S. Most members of those boards are elected, some by partisan ballot. They face enormous challenges as they try to sustain Policy Governance, among them rapid CEO and board member turnover; public and political pressures to "fix" things; public and staff criticism based upon faulty understanding of the model; and member impatience to revolutionize the organization within realistic timeframes. Sometimes when boards find themselves unable to resolve these public pressures to the satisfaction of those calling for action, Policy Governance itself is labeled the reason, and thus becomes a target.

We recommend that public boards, in the adoption and initial implementation of Policy Governance, consider using language similar to the following:

"We have allowed ourselves to become embroiled in issues and day-to-day operations that have prevented us from focusing on end results for student learning. We arduously have reviewed and refined our policies to enforce a discipline upon ourselves to get out of management operations. The CEO will execute his/her job without further interference from us, but with regular reports of compliance with our policies and statutory demands of the district through administrative policies."

A further public explanation of that enhanced board role may sound like:

"We have heard from students, parents, and community members that student achievement in our district must improve. To model that improvement, we as a board are committed to our own self-improvement through a dedicated focus on student learning success. Our meetings and discussion will center on that topic. We will actively engage all segments of our community in this ongoing challenge by providing a locally controlled curriculum that assures not only that state standards are met, but our local community standards are being met."

Despite what we consider to be wise counsel, many boards believe they first must try to "educate" the broad community about their new governance model. Their attempts genuinely are based on their excitement of wanting to share their understanding and enthusiasm for what they have done. However, this attempt to teach the principles and unique terminology and policies of Policy Governance to

a broad-based public, in usually very limited timeframes, results far too often in confusion and impatience rather than achieving the true aim: to focus themselves and the owners unerringly on student achievement. Indeed, political opponents, entrenched staff, and sometimes media grab hold of this new “target” to attack the board and its members.

All these factors combine to pose a formidable challenge for school boards. These pioneering members want desperately to create a governing system that will outlive those who created it and leave a legacy of good governance for their districts.

The good news: we have worked with dozens of school boards during the past eight years to assist their movement into the model. To the best of our knowledge, none has completely abandoned it. Some have watered it down and compromised it in various ways to suit their own purposes, but even they probably are better boards today than they were before. But for the purpose of this article, we’ll consider these boards to be among the group that challenge the sustainability of PG in the public school arena.

Each year we sponsor a symposium we purposely have named the “Wisdom Sharing” for our clients. The name speaks to its purpose of offering an opportunity for them to meet and share implementation experiences, both good and bad, while critiquing efforts and offering support. At the most recent symposium, we asked those board members and CEOs who attended to discuss in groups the challenge of sustaining Policy Governance in their world, and to offer their suggestions about some things boards could do to make sustainability more likely than not. They contributed some wise recommendations, and we added a few of our own to produce the following list.

1. Recognize Policy Governance as a means, not an end.

Especially during the early stages, boards tend to struggle with the mechanical process of Policy Governance implementation. They must outgrow this awkward preoccupation with the model and reach a point of realization of what it can mean in terms of good governance practice. For some boards, the cause of this mechanical preoccupation is those members who continue to act as if using the principles steadfastly is an option from one meeting to the next. Consequently, the vehicle remains the centerpiece of board agendas instead of a governance tool to help the board get to the destination.

There must be balance: the board must remain occupied with the “mechanics of the model” in order to “get it right,” but it should not be so tied up in the mechanisms that it fails to use that mechanism to focus on system ends and other real concerns.

The board must be clear that by using the model properly they are not working for it ... but having it work for them.

2. **Plan and implement an effective training program for new members (and maybe candidates as well).**

This may appear to be a no-brainer, but boards are surprisingly reticent to take the lead in orienting new members in the board's "corporate culture." Many rely on the CEO or staff to do that job, and some new members resent being brought into the fold by staff.

The board itself must assume the major responsibility for assuring that new members understand how the board operates, its culture and focus, and why it chose Policy Governance. Some thought should be given to the idea of starting this process with candidates who have declared their intention to run with more detailed training following the election.

3. **Strengthen linkages.**

In the board's job description, engaging in proactive conversation with the owners usually is Job Number One. Yet, many boards give far too little attention to this part of the job.

The board must develop a formal strategic linkage plan for interface with the owners. In the process of implementing that plan, supportive relationships with the owners will be built and strengthened. If the owners understand the board's commitment to focus on student performance, the board will have allies when attacks come.

4. **Emphasize Board shared values and priorities - and not dwell on its members' differences.**

Board members have individual differences in perspective and they have an obligation to express them. However, this expression of differences does not have to reach the level of incivility and hostility that increasingly characterizes many American school board meetings.

Effective meeting management and a code of conduct that encourages diversity, and yet values finding common ground, must characterize the culture. When the public sees the board doing important board work, engaging in vigorous deliberations, and supporting each other to find common values, it will have confidence in both the board and the board's chosen processes.

5. **Demand results reflective of community values and expectations.**

This suggests that the board understands what the community—the owners—want and expect. Such wisdom can come only from an effective linkage program.

Once the board is satisfied that it is in sync with its ownership, it should monitor Ends and Executive Limitations policies effectively to assure that the specified results are being realized and that the organization, which is typically the most costly public activity in the community, is operating

within the parameters of policy. When the owners see this kind of public performance and accountability, they have little reason to challenge the system that produces these results. More likely, they will be motivated to resist any attempt to weaken such a system.

6. **Maintain board and district responsiveness to public concerns.**

All elected school board members are hit from time to time with complaints about something that is or is not happening in the system. A common question we hear from the board members is, “Do you mean I cannot intercede or fix complaints about the operations of the district I hear from my constituents?”

The answer is, “Yes.”

Board members must give up the individual “fixes” to assure that the district – its staff and processes - is organized to resolve this problem, and similar ones, system-wide. This does NOT mean members cannot listen to the concern, refer the complainant to the appropriate level of authority with notice to the CEO, and require the CEO to inform the board of the resolution.

The beauty of this Policy Governance culture is that the board can assure through its own policy development and monitoring that the public is being responded to while being treated fairly and courteously. A responsive system will build a credible and sustainable leadership and management culture.

7. **Educate the media.**

The media can be a significant ally. Or, as we more often than not find them to be; they can be a significant negative force and emotional distraction. The board must very deliberately work with editorial staff and reporters to engender at least basic understanding of the principles of Policy Governance and the board’s purpose in adopting the model.

Boards must meet strategically with media owners, management, and staff to explain the board’s dedication and discipline to focus on students’ results and the precision empowerment of management to achieve those results. Boards must appeal to these opinion leaders’ logic to assure that they understand why the board has chosen to exercise governance leadership as opposed to rehashing and redoing operational decisions made by expert staff.

And, boards must challenge the media to constructively and fairly focus with them on the community good.

8. **Demonstrate board accountability by demonstrating CEO accountability.**

Sometimes school boards feel that they must protect their superintendents from negative fallout resulting from sensitive decisions. They feel

compelled to approve the superintendent's recommended action in matters that clearly are the superintendent's decisions and fall within his/her area of delegated responsibility.

Boards and their members must not do that! Superintendents are highly skilled and qualified decision-makers who are paid well to make tough decisions. The board best can help by allowing the superintendent to make the decisions that are his/hers to make, and then support those decisions. The board demonstrates its own accountability by monitoring the superintendent's performance against policy criteria, and thereby holding the superintendent accountable. Systems thinking!

9. **Build trust among board members, CEO and staff**

Many Policy Governance boards have adopted a policy called GP.2, Governing Style, to establish their value and belief that by working together and with the CEO they can achieve governing excellence. The preamble to the policy often reads:

The Board will govern lawfully with emphasis on End results for students rather than on interpersonal issues of the Board; encourage diversity in viewpoints; focus on strategic leadership rather than administrative detail; observe clear distinction between Board and CEO roles; make collective rather than individual decisions; exhibit future orientation rather than past or present; and govern proactively rather than reactively.

Building or re-building trust is not easily accomplished, and space limits extensive conversation about how to do it. But one thing is clear: if members of the board don't trust each other or the CEO, it will be a challenge to make any system of governance work - even Policy Governance which relies upon rigorous monitoring of agreed policy statements rather than trust.

Board members and staff at our symposia agree that time must be spent to build relationships between and among each other, at meetings and retreats. They believe that the root reasons for mistrust must be identified and constructively confronted. Board members often also agree that skilled third-party counsel will be needed to help members and other affected parties work through these challenges, establishing an environment in which it is safe to share and critique.

10. **Use board meetings to build public understanding.**

The board meeting is where the board does most of its work. For a school board required to hold meetings in the public view, this is *Showtime!*

Policy Governance boards work to construct agendas that show the board to the public in its best light – efficiently and effectively dispatching with routine matters while getting to the Ends focus. Agendas should place the important, Ends-related matters close to the beginning of the meeting so they can be fully presented and deliberated in prime time. The agenda itself

must be presented in a clear and logical way to the viewing public with sensitivity to building their understanding of board processes and focus.

Is Policy Governance sustainable for public boards, especially school boards? We do this work with the belief that it can be. It is our best hope for local control; meaningful use of volunteer time; accountable use of tax dollars; achieving individual student potential; and, the future of our democratic society.

Sustainability. It happens one board at a time with deliberate preparation, great exercise of self-discipline, and thoughtful, strategic engagement of the broader community of owners.