

# The Board Agenda: A Means to Governance Reform?

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Throughout the land, superintendents lament their boards' tendency to "micromanage." Although some board members might agree, many argue that they are merely doing their jobs, primarily overseeing the operation of the district to be sure things are working the way they should. And in truth, they are doing the work of the board, as they have defined it.

So this is the challenge: simply redefine the role of the board.

Easily said, you say. Well, perhaps the task is a bit more complex than the discussion of it, but let's see if we can break it down into a couple of component parts to make it easier.

Virtually all will agree that the board acts as a body, not as individual members. Logically, then, the only time a board acts officially is when it convenes in a formal, legal meeting. That suggests that clearly defining what the board does during meetings may be the key to significant governance reform.

If we accept that premise, then we must decide what goes on the board's agenda. That makes the agenda supremely important, since most boards will act upon virtually any matter the agenda asks them to address. To define board work, and thus decide what kinds of matters should be agenda items, let's pose some questions:

- **What is the board's job description?** It should have one, just as should the superintendent. Once a job description has been agreed to by the board, the agenda should track those tasks included in the description, *and should avoid matters not included in the description*. The latter point is key: keep off the agenda **any** item unrelated to board work. Otherwise, the board is doing somebody else's work, usually the superintendent's.
- **What should be the board's work?** Most board members will say that they are frustrated that they spend too little time on issues directly related to kids. They have a point: most agendas we have observed devote as little as 20 percent of time and attention to matters directly affecting student achievement. Theoretically, every issue affects kids, we agree. But we hope we further can agree that boards can and should have a higher level of contribution to make to the district than to spend a majority of their time discussing internal operational stuff, at the expense of valuable time that could be spent discussing student

achievement expectations, performance and other matters directly related to the district's mission.

- **How important is it for boards to spend valuable meeting time listening to staff and other routine reports?** The information conveyed may be interesting, but is devoting sometimes a third of the meeting to reporting the best way to spend board time? Is the board adding value or simply reacting, ratifying or appreciating? Could the same information be conveyed in other ways that allow the board to spend its time deliberating board issues?
- **Must the superintendent seek the board's approval for every important operational decision?** Look back over the last several agendas and count the number of "approval" items the board was asked to accept. Why? Most of them, we'll bet, were operational matters. That's the superintendent's work, not the board's. So why should the board be "blessing" the superintendent's executive decision-making? In doing so, the board and the superintendent are sharing responsibility and accountability for operational decisions, and in the process destroying any hope for role clarity and accountability.

In our work with boards and superintendents across the nation, we are finding that those boards that are serious about better defining their jobs attack the challenge through the agenda. Many of our clients are Policy Governance boards, a governance model that requires careful development of a board job description. They cannot fail to recognize the obligation to relate that description to the agenda, and ask for each item on the agenda, is this the board's work?

Most have taken it to another level and have linked every agenda item to a board policy: if they can't find a policy that fits the agenda item, there's a good chance that it isn't a legitimate board task.

Can the board's work be redefined without a major overhaul of the agenda? We don't think so. The meeting is where work is performed, and the agenda defines what that work will be. We think that right after deciding in policy what the jobs of the board, superintendent and district should be, the agenda may be the next platform for meaningful governance reform.

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