

The Roles and Responsibilities of the School Board

The board acts on behalf of the school district and has jurisdiction over school matters within the territory of the school district. All powers of the board lie in its action as a group. Individual board members exercise authority only as they vote at a legal meeting of the board.

The board is empowered to make policy for its own governance, employees, students, and for school district facilities. The board is also empowered to enforce its policies. The board may be required to conduct hearings and rule on disputes confronting the school district. As the governing board, the board must perform three duties: legislative, executive, and evaluative.

Of the three, the major duty is the board's executive role. The main function is the selection of the superintendent to operate the school district on the board's behalf. The board delegates to the superintendent its authority to carry out board policy, to formulate and carry out rules and regulations and to handle the administrative details in a consistent manner with board policy.

These are challenging times for public education, and even more challenging is the work of local school board members. The board of education is the leader on the front lines of public education. The board is responsible for putting in place the proper stepping-stones for students to learn and achieve at the highest level possible. Board members' primary agenda is raising student achievement and involving the community in the attainment of that goal. A board's framework must be based on the premise that excellence in the classroom begins with excellence in the boardroom. The board fulfills the commitment to education through:

VISION

The board engages the community when defining the future of the district and then formulates the goals, defines the outcomes, and sets the course for growth and improved student achievement. Vision is not about what we are, but what we want to be. For the school board, it is about where we are going and what kind of school system we are trying to create now and for the future.

STANDARDS

A major component of a school district's approach is meeting achievement standards and the school improvement goals. In order to ensure the district is performing in accordance with expectations, the board/superintendent must establish specific and clearly delineated goals for improvement.

ASSESSMENT

Promoting outstanding student performance based on clearly delineated data is central to the key work of the board. The next step is to assess student learning and achievement. School boards need information in order to make decisions, not only about how well they are doing, but also about what may be needed in order to ensure the district goals will be met.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Increasingly, school districts are held accountable for how students perform. Accountability is not only a growing expectation from community members, but at the state level.

ALIGNMENT

Alignment is another key component of the school district and board leadership. A critical role of the board is to establish goals and priorities focused on improving student achievement. The board is responsible to provide appropriate professional development and support for the classroom instruction to ensure improved student achievement. Therefore, the next critical step is to align the district resources to the achievement of the district vision and goals.

CLIMATE AND CULTURE

Climate is an essential aspect of a school district's culture. Climate is a by-product of culture and is dependent on it. Leading-edge school districts are very conscious of climate because of its powerful effect on behavior. Effective school boards give priority attention to climate as well, because it factors importantly in what students and teachers are able to accomplish. Climate also is a critical determinant of how parents and others in the community view the school district.

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The development of collaborative relationships is vital and an important dimension of a school district. We know that when individuals work together effectively, the product of their efforts will be superior to the efforts of any single individual. Relationships are not just important, they are critical. The quality of relationships within the school district will largely determine how well the district performs.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The board causes the continuous assessment of all conditions affecting education and ensures that schools are accountable for results in student learning. Boards monitor student achievement, make program corrections as necessary, keep the public informed of the status of education programs and progress, and ensure that all functions of the schoolwork together well for the good of education.

A board member's job can be challenging given "the job" is in essence a group responsibility. Yet each board member has an obligation to approach the work of the board with an effective mindset, to carry out his or her part of preparation and participation, and to take responsibility for the group. This is not always an easy concept to embrace. Success for an individual board member will be realized by:

- **Preparing to participate responsibly.** Do your homework, come prepared to work, remember that sometimes the work is to listen, agree, and disagree as your values dictate, and accept that the group decision is legitimate even if it is not your personal choice. It is not acceptable to have opinions and not express them.
- **Remembering that your identity is with the community, not the staff.** It is easy to identify with staff, as you probably will have more discussions with them about issues. You must remember that your job is to serve in trust for the community.
- **Representing the community, not a single constituency.** You will understand and/or identify with certain constituencies (parents, neighborhoods or communities, special education, etc.), but you **must** remember that being a board member means serving in trust for the entire community. There is no way six/nine people can provide a spokesperson for every constituency or legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. You can be **from** a constituency, but you must not let yourself **represent** it.

- **Being responsible for group behavior and productivity.** You are responsible for not only yourself but also the group. If the group does not do its job, meddles in administration, or breaks its own rules, you personally share that responsibility.
- **Honoring divergent opinions without being intimidated by them.** You are obligated to express your honest opinions on issues, and so is each of the other board members. Encourage your colleagues to speak their opinions and listen to them carefully and respectfully. However, do not allow yourself to be intimidated by louder or more insistent board members.
- **Using your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom.** If you have special expertise (law, accounting, construction, etc.) remember that you are **not** personally responsible for decisions relating to that area. Use your expertise to help inform your colleagues (i.e., help them understand what fiscal health looks like v. fiscal jeopardy) but do not assume sole responsibility for those decisions. Also, remember you are not on the board to help the staff or advise them with your special expertise. Your job as a board member is to govern. If you wish to offer your help as an expert, make sure that all parties know you are acting as a volunteer, not a board member, and remember that asking for or accepting your help is a staff prerogative, not yours.
- **Being aware of the community and staff's perceptions of the board.** If the board is perceived as being unethical, dishonest, secretive or self-serving, whether justified or not, that will become reality for the community and staff. Consider how stakeholders might interpret your behaviors and decisions. Then act accordingly.
- **Thinking upward and outward more than downward.** There is a great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the district should make in the larger world. This requires ignoring the minutia or details in order to examine, question and define the big picture. The latter is a daunting and awesome task, but it is the board's work – governance!
- **Zero tolerance for putting off the big issues forever.** As daunting and awesome as the big decisions are, they are the boards to make. (What are our core values and beliefs about education in our community? Based on those where do we put our resources?) If you do not, you are abdicating your authority.
- **Supporting the Board's final choice.** No matter which way you voted, you are obligated to support the board in its decision. This does not mean you have to pretend to agree with it. You may maintain the integrity of your dissent. What you support is the legitimacy of the choice even though you do not agree. For example, you will support without reservation that the superintendent must follow the formal board decision, not your personal preference.
- **Supporting sound decision-making.** Do not confuse extensive financial reports for having sound finances or a public relations committee for having good public relations. Beware of the trap of having procedures rather than substance.
- **Expecting board agendas to be designed around your interests.** The board's agenda should not be a laundry list of individual members' interests but a plan for taking care of the governance of the district. Being a community trustee is very different from seeing the organization as your personal possession. The board job must be designed to ensure that the right of the entire community is faithfully served in the determination of what the district should accomplish.
- **Squelching your individual points of view during monitoring.** Your own values count when the board is creating policies. However, when you monitor the performance of the superintendent or the success of programs, etc., you must refer to the criteria the board decided, not what your opinion was regarding the criteria. In addition, as you review the criteria, your monitoring should not be based on whether things were done the way you would have done them, but whether they were a reasonable interpretation of the board's policy.

- **Focusing on the outcome.** Keep the conversation focused on values, mission, vision, and goals.
- **Continuously asking yourself and the board, “How does this impact student learning and achievement?”** The deliberations of the board must add value. They must deal with fundamental, long-term issues that require the wisdom and decision-making of a diverse group of six/nine people who look at the whole – not just at pieces or the issue.