The Key Work of School Boards

An Updated Framework for Improving Student Achievement

We know what a good school board looks like. The impressive results are evident when a board of education makes student achievement the primary focus.

We have identified the core skills that effective boards need to ensure that all students achieve at high levels. Together these skills form a framework for effective school governance. We call this the Key Work of School Boards. With these skills, boards can guide their vision to fruition by exploring, questioning, assessing, and working with others to improve outcomes for today’s students as well as America’s next generation.

Vision

Ensuring that public education will meet emerging challenges requires a clear vision for the work and operations of school boards in the future. With that vision before us, we can shape proactive strategies that make boards more relevant, credible, and effective leaders of public education.

Objective

To understand how school boards can develop and implement an effective vision that focuses on student achievement, positively guides district strategies, and involves the community.

- Vision Statements
- Mission Statements
- Goals and Strategies
- Vision Self-Assessment

Vision Sample Goals and Strategies

Goal: To offer high-quality student programming so that graduates are prepared to compete in a global society.

1. Provide personalized learning for all students.
2. Support progression based on mastery of individual student goals.
3. Embrace a collaborative culture by leveraging and maximizing parent and community partnerships to support accelerated student success.
4. Create a parent scorecard for families and the community to increase transparency with regard to student and school performance.
5. Implement a plan to transition to student based budgeting, where funding is directly tied to students and their individual needs.
6. Require students to play a key role in setting their goals along with their teachers, advisors, counselors, and parents.
7. Provide student and families with choices and meaningful opportunities to improve their school experiences.
8. Ensure all classrooms are wired global places that encourage interactivity and learning by doing.
10. Design classroom instruction to be a hybrid of face-to-face and online.
11. Design classroom instruction according to individual learning goals and assessment for competency.
12. Ensure all classrooms are using electronic tools for instruction.
14. Ensure that technology proficiency and digital citizenship literacy are part of the learning experience for each student.
15. Maximize all data sources to improve instruction for students.

Goal: A board committed to excellence in education and aware of its responsibilities.

1. Have every board member participate in annual professional development.
2. Maintain ongoing review and development of pertinent policies.
3. Conduct at least one retreat for the entire board and superintendent each year.
4. Involve community and business leaders in the development of the board’s vision and strategic plan.
5. Develop and monitor standards for student and system performance.

Accountability

School board accountability means taking your fair share of responsibility for student outcomes. Being accountable means answering not only for your actions but also for the results of your actions.

Objective

To explore how effective school boards maintain public confidence through a shared understanding of expectations, roles and responsibilities, and standards/desired results.

- Strong Focus on Student Results
- Success Measured by Improved Student Achievement
- School Board Responsibilities
- Constructing Excellent Standards
- Student, School, and District Data Are Publicly Reported in an Easy-to-Understand Format
- Accountability is Motivation for Continuous Improvement
- Accountability Does Not Limit the Education Experience
- Accountability and Alignment Are Not Mutually Exclusive
Policy

Policy is how a board sustainably exercises power to serve students. Through policy, school boards establish a set of cohesive guidelines to transform vision into reality. Policy permeates and dominates all aspects of school operations. It also presents the most powerful lever for the exercise of leadership.

Objective
To examine how effective school boards use policy to remain accountable to citizens for the governance and management of schools and to explore how visionary policy can support the district’s educational mission and philosophy.

Community Leadership

Through public advocacy and community engagement, school boards share their concerns and actions with the public. Effective boards recognize public schooling’s impact on the community, and understand how strong connections mean everyone is invested in successful schools.

Objective
To analyze how effective school boards employ the art of influence – through legislation and strategic engagement, to generate public and parental support.

Board and Superintendent Relationships

To develop a productive partnership, the board and superintendent must draw on, and respect, the backgrounds and abilities of everyone involved.

Objective
To understand how the board-superintendent leadership roles are interconnected as well as the process for decision making and evaluation.

**Information found at https://www.nsba.org/services/school-board-leadership-services/key-work. All of the information on the website is highlights from Key Work of School Boards Guidebook.**
The superintendent and school board work together toward the same goals for the school district. They form a team with separate roles and responsibilities. One is a governance role and the other is a management role. The success of the school district depends upon a good working relationship between the school board and the superintendent. That requires that both understand, accept and support each other in their roles. It also takes time and focused attention to form a strong team.

Elements of an effective board/superintendent team:
- Utilize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses.
- Never put their own success above the success of the team.
- Hold each other accountable, but do not criticize publicly.
- Work together for the common goal and common good.
- Keep open mind until the topic has been fully discussed.
- Adopt and understand clear policies for meeting procedures. Adhere to an agreed upon code of conduct for board meetings.
- Place routine items on the consent agenda.
- Read materials and get routine questions answered before the meeting.
- Present a positive student achievement item at each meeting.
- Work to improve their individual skills.
- Have a common strategy/plan to reach the team objectives.
- Follow parliamentary procedure, but don’t get bogged down.
- Participate in board development and stay informed on educational issues.
- Project a strong working relationship with the superintendent.
- Provide clear expectations; communicate support.
- Avoid micromanagement; the board is responsible for the “what” and the superintendent provides the “how”.
- Let their decisions always be guided by what is best for all students.

Characteristics of high functioning boards in influencing student achievement:
- Holding the district accountable for meeting student learning expectations by evaluating the superintendent on clear and focused expectations.
- Setting and communicating high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations.
- Committing to continuous improvement in student achievement.
- Providing responsible school district governance by conducting board and district business in a fair, respectful, and responsible manner.
- Engaging the local community and representing the values and expectations they hold for their schools.
- Working together as an effective and collaborative team.
- Creating Conditions district-wide for student and staff success by providing for such learning essentials as a rigorous curriculum, technology, and high quality facilities.

Practices to avoid:
- Micromanagement
- Abdicating to the administration
- Making unrealistic demands on administration and staff

The role of the superintendent:
- Serves as the educational leader in the community and provides sound recommendations to the board.
- Manages the day to day operations of the school district.
- Effectively Executes the policies/laws of the board, state, and federal government.
- Understand the pressures placed on board members by the community.
- Keeps board members informed about time sensitive issues in the district.
- Provides information to the board in time to make fact-based decisions.
The board's expectations of the superintendent:
- Ability to communicate and keep board, staff, and public informed in a timely manner.
- Commitment to accountability and continuous improvement.
- Understand the "politics" of being an elected board member.
- Lead with integrity and professionalism.
- Provide firm recommendations to the board.
- Understand community pressures often placed on board members.
- Managerial capability to employ and delegate to a competent staff.
- Focus on student achievement.

The role of the school board:
- Establishes broad goals.
- Advocates for all students.
- Hires and evaluates the superintendent.
- Approves and provides oversight for the board.
- Sets policy and holds superintendent accountable for implementation.

The superintendent's expectations of the board:
- Willingness to acknowledge and follow chain of command.
- Willingness to abide by its own rules and policies.
- Work together in a professional and cooperative manner.
- Avoid telling a constituent, "I'll take care of that."
- Refer all complaints to the superintendent.
- Keep confidential information confidential.
- Refrain from any involvement in personnel issues.
- No "surprises" at board meetings.
- Publicly support the decision of the board (even if you vote against it).
- Be a positive example for teachers, parents, and community.

From "Roles and Responsibilities of School Boards and Superintendents" Dr. Keith Ballard
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good Governance-Sample Protocols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The board packet will be delivered to all board members days prior to the board meeting and will be posted online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members agree to call the superintendent with questions or clarification on items in the board packet as early as possible prior to the board meeting. The superintendent will distribute this information to all trustees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the extent possible, board members agree to provide the superintendent and staff with advance notice of questions they plan to ask at a board meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members recognize the concept of &quot;Nice-to-Know vs. Need-to-Know&quot; information and will seek information only necessary for effective decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually board members do not have different values. They have different value priorities. Rarely are there single-value problems. The board should seek the best rather than the right solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any individual board member who desires a copy of an existing written report of survey will make such a request to the superintendent. A copy of the material may also be made available to each member of the board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The superintendent takes directions from the board as a whole; therefore, requests for the generation of reports of information must be placed on a meeting agenda for board consideration and approval. Because the board also believes in &quot;no surprises&quot;, board members agree to notify the superintendent of the information request discussion prior to the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a member of the governance team (board member) cannot support the decision of the board because it offends a moral/personal code, the member is expected, at a minimum, to refrain from undermining the decision or directive. The decision of the board should be considered final.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The board recognizes that it represents all students and all facets of the community, and as such, it has an obligation to pursue different points of view with honesty and vigor. Each board member commits to hearing one another out. By doing so, board members model for students the honest and respectful expression of different points of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The superintendent will inform the board of pertinent activities of the district. If it's likely to be in the newspaper, the board should know about it. The superintendent will use email to communicate routine matters to the board on a regular basis. During crisis situations, the superintendent will send out an email alert and then attempt to reach board members via telephone beginning with the board president.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While board members may listen to complaints from staff or community members regarding policies or procedures; members must be careful not to usurp the chain of command. Complainants are encouraged to discuss the matter with their supervisor or union representative. However, with regard to the board's Court of Appeals role, board members will not listen or respond to complaints against personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeals Court Role-Sample Protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a board member receives a complaint, s/he will refer the complainant to the appropriate staff member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members will be knowledgeable of the complaint policies along with the accompanying administrative rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While board members may listen to complaints from staff or community members regarding policies or procedures; members must be careful not to usurp the chain of command.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With regard to the Board’s Court of Appeals role, board members will not listen or respond to complaints against personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members will notify the superintendent of all complaints they receive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Protocols that are written in Churchill County School District policy.

From "Avoiding, or Resolving, Dysfunction in the Boardroom" Steve Lamb, Governance Consultant/Educator, California School Boards Association
Levels of Decision Making

A. The superintendent has complete authority to decide and act within the limits of the law, board policy, propriety, and common sense.

B. The superintendent has complete authority to act but should inform the board of the decision or action.

C. The superintendent must obtain prior approval from the board before taking action.

D. The board makes the final decision but may permit or require a recommendation from the superintendent.

Below is a list of actions that school boards and superintendents routinely consider. Read each statement and decide which level is most appropriate.

1. ___ Hire a certified staff member.
2. ___ Decide which teacher candidates to interview.
3. ___ Hire a classified staff member.
4. ___ Hire an additional part-time office assistant for the high school.
5. ___ Discharge a custodian for misconduct on the job.
6. ___ Change a school bus stop from one street corner to another.
7. ___ Approve an overnight field trip for 8th graders.
8. ___ Approve the textbooks and materials to be used in a course.
9. ___ Approve the daily schedule for teachers and students at the elementary school.
10. ___ Start a new career-technical program in the high school.
11. ___ Determine which clubs or other student organization will be permitted at the high school.
12. ___ Approve additional planning periods for two teachers doing a special project.
13. ___ Approve a school’s requisition for supplies and materials.
14. ___ Approve warrants for the month.
15. ___ Exceed the budget allocation in a specific line item of the budget.
16. ___ Establish an evaluation process for staff members.
17. ___ Increase lunch prices.
18. Approve a teacher’s request to attend a specific professional development training
19. Approve a request for a sabbatical leave.
20. Establish a policy about closed campuses for students.
21. Establish a procedure for approval of annual leave requests.
22. Suspend a student for 3 days.
23. Expel a student
24. Develop the strategic plan for the district
25. Assign teachers to grade-level positions.
26. Renew administrator contracts for another year.
Eight Traits of Effective School Boards

Research is clear: High-achieving boards exhibit different habits and characteristics

Patte Barth

What makes an effective school board—one that boosts student achievement? From a research perspective, it's a complex question that involves evaluating virtually all of a board's functions, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, building administrators, and the public.

But the research that exists is clear, according to a brief published by NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) in late January. The brief, which examined seven research studies conducted between 1993 and 2008, says high-achieving boards exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from those of their low-achieving counterparts.

What makes a board effective?

Here are eight characteristics found in the research:

**High expectations, clear goals:** Effective school boards make a commitment to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction. They define clear goals to meet the vision, make sure the goals remain the top priorities, and allow nothing to detract from them.

**Belief that all children can learn:** Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels. In high-achieving districts, poverty, lack of parental involvement and other factors are described as challenges to be overcome, not as excuses. Board members expect to see improvements in student achievement quickly as a result of initiatives.

**Focused on achievement:** Effective boards are accountability driven. They spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.

**Collaboration and communication:** Effective boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community. A strong communications structure is in place to inform and engage key groups—internal and external—in setting and achieving the district's goals.

**Data savvy:** Effective school boards embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement. In high-achieving districts, board members identify specific student needs through data, and justify decisions based on that data.

**Goals and resources aligned:** Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals. This occurs even during the most severe budget challenges, such as the ones districts now face.

**Team leadership:** Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust. Boards in successful districts define an initial vision for the district and seek a superintendent who matches this vision.

**Team training:** Boards that are effective take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for the district's improvement efforts. Training is formal, deliberate, and often on specific topics.

**Danger signs**
The CPE did not set out to specifically focus on what makes boards ineffective. However, some descriptions—what we call them a "dozen danger signs"—of ineffective boards emerged in the research review.

Ineffective school boards:
- Are only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives, and are seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning.
- Focus on external pressures as the main reasons for lack of student success, such as poverty, lack of parent support, societal factors, or lack of motivation.
- Offer negative comments about students and teachers.
- Micromanage day-to-day operations.
- Disregard the agenda process and the chain of command.
- Are left out of the information flow, with little communication between the board and superintendent.
- Describe a lack of parent interest in education or barriers to community outreach.
- Look at data from a "blaming" perspective, describing teachers, students and families as major causes for low performance.
- Have little understanding or coordination on staff development for teachers.
- Are slow to define a vision.
- Do not hire a superintendent who agrees with their vision.
- Receive little professional development together as a board.

Though the research on school board effectiveness is in the beginning stages, the studies included in this report make it clear that school boards in high-achieving districts have attitudes, knowledge, and approaches that separate them from their counterparts in lower-achieving districts. In this era of fiscal constraints and a national environment focused on accountability, boards in high-performing districts can provide an important blueprint for success. In the process, they can offer a road map for school districts nationwide.

Patte Barth (pbarth@nsba.org) is the director of NSBA's Center for Public Education. The full report, *The Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards*, written by researchers Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien, is available at www.centerforpubliceducation.org.

Copyright, March 2011, National School Boards Association. All rights reserved. You may make up to 50 copies for individual or noncommercial use. Any other use requires express written permission. Permission to use NSBA materials does not imply endorsement of any product or service.