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Governance Brief

Defining Governance, *Issue 2*
Governing Commitments

This is the second in the Defining Governance series, which summarizes what school governance research and literature has to say about the attributes of effective school boards. The first issue developed a definition for school governance. This issue focuses on governance commitments. Effective school boards create and abide by governing agreements to which they mutually commit. These agreements are achieved through deep discussions that result in mutual understanding and common ground in three critical areas: board core beliefs, board and board-superintendent partnerships, and board values, norms and protocols.

School governance defined: *School boards ensure success for all students by making decisions that fulfill legal mandates and align district systems and resources to ensure the long-term fiscal stability of the district. To do this, boards must act collectively and openly, be guided by community interests, and informed by recommendations of the superintendent and professional staff.*

Effective school boards commit to core beliefs

These commitments include establishing overarching values and beliefs they share about public education, governance, students and the district that help them transcend their individual differences to develop a cohesive board.

Public Education

In order to support the district mission, it's important for board members to articulate a clear and coherent set of beliefs around the purpose of public education. Gemberling and others assert that "Building a shared vision requires that you first are able to agree on your core values and beliefs. Knowing what you really value individually and collectively guide your aspirations and your mission as a district." [1]

Governance

Eadie identifies concentrating on governing as an essential habit of effective boards. In order to be effective, school boards must develop a coherent understanding of what it means to govern. Board members should discuss thoroughly the purpose and functions of governance, and the value of "high-quality, citizen-owned and -led public education…" [2] These conversations are critical because beliefs and values drive behavior. When board members have conflicting beliefs and understandings about governance, it can lead to confusion as board members practice their governing roles in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Creating clarity among all governing team members about the purpose, definition and attributes of good governance is a key step to building and maintaining the trust that is necessary for board members to work effectively with each other and the superintendent.

Students and staff

Core beliefs about students have been correlated with high student achievement. The Lighthouse Study found that "…board members in high-achieving districts had more elevating views of their students' potential…"[3] This is consistent with CSBA's Professional Governance Standards, but constitutes a more prescriptive standard than keeping "learning and achievement for all students as the primary focus."[4] Boards that positively impact student achievement do more than simply focus on student achievement; they believe their students are capable of achieving it. Board member beliefs and attitudes about the capacity of the district are also important. The findings of the Iowa Lighthouse Study were not limited to attitudes about students. "Board members in high-achieving districts had…more confidence in district staff's capacity to effect gains …"[5]

Effective school boards invest time and effort in reaching clarity around their core beliefs regarding the purpose of public education, the characteristics of good governance, the ability of all students to learn and the capacity of the district to perform well. These core beliefs are foundational to establishing mutual trust that board members have in each other and in the superintendent regarding their individual and collective intent in leading the district.

Effective school boards establish productive partnerships

CSBA specifically identified the importance of the board-superintendent relationship: "Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust."[6] In addition to being supported by the work of Delagardelle and Eadie, this concept is upheld by Don McAdams. "Board members have numerous and complex relationships… Of all of these the most important are the relationships board members have with one another and with the superintendent."[7] A Wallace Foundation report concluded "having a strong school board-superintendent relationship is viewed as paramount to achieving school and district success…"[8] The importance of this partnership is consistent with the research of Waters & Marzano, whose meta-analyses identified "a significant correlation between the superintendent's relationship with the board president and board alignment with and support of achievement goals."[9] Plecki and others note that "Having a strong school board–superintendent relationship is viewed as paramount to achieving school and district success…"[10]

Research on nonprofit boards confirms the importance of the board–director relationship. BoardSource, dedicated to training non-profit boards, identifies this as one of its core principles for effective governance: "Exceptional boards govern in constructive partnership with the chief executive, recognizing that the effectiveness of the board and chief executive are interdependent."[11] Researchers Douglas Jackson and Thomas Holland identified six board competencies essential for effective governance including "the board nurtures the development of its members as a group; it tends to the board's collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness."[12] Rotherman and Mead found that "Superintendents play a key role in ensuring good relations with their boards and among board members."[13]

The concept of partnership subtly shifts CSBA's idea of a 'governance team' where the board and superintendent lead together within their respective roles. This is still true, however, teams usually consist of equal members. Partnership is different; it includes people who are not on the same team. They have different roles with shared goals they mutually pursue. Partnership conveys the concept of mutual dependence, but not equality. Superintendents and board members are not the same, but each needs the other to be successful. Board members are usually not professional educators and have neither the special training nor the experience necessary for educational leadership. Superintendents do have these qualities, but they are not elected officials and cannot perform the governance functions that community-elected board members fulfill.

Effective boards are intentional about maintaining productive relationships between board members, and between the board and the superintendent. They set aside time to specifically discuss the quality of the relationship, clear up misunderstandings, and strengthen trust.

Effective school boards clarify values, norms and protocols

Values, norms and protocols help boards clarify their collective beliefs, how they will work together, and the procedures they will follow to manage board operations. Values are the principles and ideals that serve as the foundation of board culture. The board and superintendent must specifically articulate the values that will guide their working relationship. These values help answer the question: "What do you need from each other to function well as an effective group?" CSBA's professional governance standards speak directly to the question of values, and specifically mention openness, trust, integrity, civility and respect.

Norms are the behavioral expectations that board members have for one another. While his concepts regarding organizational health are directed at executive teams, Patrick Lencioni's work is pertinent to boards. Lencioni proposes that the question "How do we behave?" is second only to the question "Why do we exist?" because any group of people responsible for the leadership of an organization must be cohesive, and this cohesion cannot be achieved without clear agreements on the behavior members expect from each other.[14] Values answer the question: "What do we stand for and believe in?" Norms answer the question: "What does that look like as we interact with one another?

Protocols are the board's operational procedures that clarify how the board does its work. BoardSource emphasizes the importance of reaching clarity in board operations. "Exceptional boards purposefully structure themselves to fulfill essential governance duties and to support organizational priorities. Making governance intentional, not incidental, exceptional boards invest in structures and practices that can be thoughtfully adapted to changing circumstances."[15] Don McAdams' work on reform governance for urban schools makes the same point for school boards. "Without effective processes … governance is difficult, maybe impossible."[16] Protocols for school boards should address four key areas.

1. Communicating between meetings

These protocols provide mechanisms for board members and the superintendent to contact one another in order to keep each other appropriately informed. Protocols can also clarify if and when the superintendent meets regularly with board members between meetings as well as establish protocols for electronic communication.

2. Preparing for meetings

These protocols clarify the processes board members use to submit items for possible inclusion on the agenda, the structure of the agenda, and the distribution of all agenda materials to board members in advance of board meetings. The protocols may also address the set-up of the board room itself.

3. Conducting meetings

Among the most important of the board procedural agreements are those that specifically prescribe the rules of order for board meetings. McAdams suggests that "effective board meetings are the first prerequisite… Frequent, long, unfocused, or contentious meetings are sure signs of an ineffective, perhaps even dysfunctional,

board."[17] Large governmental bodies often use Roberts Rules of Order, which are complicated and may not be best suited to a five- or seven-member board. One alternative is Rosenberg's Rules of Order—a streamlined approach to parliamentary procedures for smaller, local governing bodies. Some districts use an even simpler approach; they develop their own set of limited and specific rules for making motions, calling for the vote, and other basic procedural needs of board meetings.

4. Board members and the public

These protocols answer a variety of related questions. Who respond to the media? The board president? Or any board member? How do board members respond to questions or concerns from parents or staff? How do board members contribute to making sure issues get resolved without getting involved in administrative decisions?

It is in the area of protocols relating to public statements that board members often encounter disagreement and tension. The purpose of having clear agreements about these issues is to provide clear guidance for board members and staff regarding communications and to ensure that individual board members know what to expect from each other with regard to how all members communicate with the community. The agreements are binding only because members agree to them; they are not legally binding. But breaking agreements damages trust, and so developing clear agreements by which all members can abide is important to the board's cohesiveness.

Failure to establish and abide by values, norms and protocols is a common source of difficulty for boards. Lack of clarity or commitment to these procedures can create confusion as well as anger or distrust among members. This often distracts the board from its real governing work and has a negative effect on board and district culture. Effective boards work hard to maintain clarity and commitment to the board's values, norms and protocols.

Summary

Effective school boards establish governance commitments in three key areas: 1) They embrace a common set of core beliefs. 2) They are intentional about building and sustaining productive partnerships. 3) They have clear agreements regarding board values, norms and protocols. Reaching clarity around these issues is foundational to working effectively as a governing board. These agreements should be committed to writing, referred to regularly and reviewed periodically. This level of clarity creates the conditions for the smooth and effective functioning of the board, freeing the board to focus all of its energy on the most critical matters facing the district.

Endnotes

1   Gemberling, K., Smith J., & Villani, S. (2000). *The key work of school boards guidebook*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association

2   Eadie, D. (2006). *The five habits of high impact school boards*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Education

3   Delagardelle, M. (2008). The lighthouse inquiry: Examining the role of school board leadership in the improvement of student achievement. In T. A. Editor, The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation (pp. 191-223) Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Education

4   California School Boards Association. (2000)

5   Delagardelle, M. (2008).

6   California School Boards Association. (2000)

7   McAdams, D. (2006). What school boards can do. New York, NY: Teachers College Press

8   Center for Study of Teaching and Policy. (2006). Redefining school district governance. Seattle, WA: Plecki, M., McCleery, J., and Knapp, M.

9   Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. (2006). School leadership that works: Effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement. Marzano, R., Waters, J.

10 Center for Study of Teaching and Policy. (2006).

11 Board Source. (2005)

12 Jackson, D. & Holland, T. (1998). Measuring the effectiveness of nonprofit boards. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 27 (2), 159-182

13 Institute for a Competitive Workforce. (2012). *School board case studies*. Rotherham, A. & Mead, S.

14 Lencioni, P. (2012). *The Advantage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

15 Board Source. (2005)

16 McAdams, D. (2006).

17 Ibid.