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Governance Brief

Defining Governance, Issue 4

Governance Decisions

This is the fourth brief in the Defining Governance series, which summarizes school governance research on the attributes of effective school boards. Topics of the first three briefs in the series were:

1. Defining school governance
2. The importance of board commitments in the areas of core beliefs, productive partnerships and board values, norms and protocols
3. Effective governance practices: focusing on improving governance, using data, and understanding the elements of successful district reform

This brief focuses on the governing decisions that boards make to improve achievement for all students. These decisions involve:

- Setting direction
- Aligning the system
- Ensuring accountability

Governance is: Ensuring success for all students by making informed decisions that align district systems and resources to ensure the long-term stability of the district. To do this, boards, guided by community interests, must act collectively and openly, fulfill legal mandates, and rely on recommendations of professional staff.

Effective boards set direction

Non-profit sector governance research has established setting direction as a core board responsibility. Boards establish a vision for organizational direction and help to ensure a strategic approach to the organization's future.¹ This important work takes time and requires the board to align board meeting agendas to strategic priorities.² These research findings on non-profit boards translate well to the school board context: Setting direction is also an attribute of effective school boards. Specifically, effective school boards:

- Make student learning a high priority
- Prioritize goals to ensure that the most important changes are addressed first
- Clarify expectations for outcomes

Making student learning a high priority

School districts that are successful in raising student achievement have board members for whom improving student learning is a high priority.³ Research on districts that successfully raised student achievement shows that board members were knowledgeable about learning conditions in the district, could articulate specific initiatives that the district was implementing, and could clearly describe the work of staff related to the goals.⁴ Other research has described the importance of the school board playing an active role in leading innovation and change in order to raise student achievement.⁵ A 2012 report based on case studies of 13 large U.S. districts concluded that boards are most effective when their strategic role includes setting high-level goals for improving student achievement.⁶ This focus on student learning is founded on what board members believe about students. The ability of the board to have an explicit agenda for student learning:

...rests, in part, on a fundamental belief that all children can learn. Where policymakers and decision makers at all levels bring this to the table, there is a greater likelihood that the board will act in the best interests of the young people served by the district.⁷

Prioritizing goals

Setting priorities means deciding which goals matter most. If the top two most important changes require most of the district's resources, then other changes, however desirable, will have to wait. Goals and priorities express the school organization's core beliefs. Effective boards recognize that "mission, vision and values are the bedrock upon which the board conceives and articulates change."⁸ Effective boards define clear goals to move the organization toward the vision.⁹

This focus on student learning also means deciding what not to do and limiting administrative initiatives to those identified by the board as key priorities.¹⁰ The board needs to hone its focus in order to prevent goal-creep—the tendency of the district to take on too many changes—and resist allocating precious resources to too many goals, thus underfunding all of them.

Clarifying expectations for outcomes

A critical element of the board's strategic direction work is setting clear expectations for results.¹¹ The clarity of these expectations is expressed through the data that the board will use to determine if they have been met. Boards use data to define what must change and to measure if and to what extent change has been achieved. In districts identified in research as making significant progress in raising student achievement, board members received a variety of information that allowed the board to identify student needs and to set goals based on the data.¹²

Effective boards align the system

Effective boards focus on systemic alignment to ensure that all aspects of district operations are pursuing the same goals in a coherent manner. This alignment has two fundamental components: resources and policies.

Aligning resources

The importance of the district budget as a direction-setting tool cannot be overstated. Boards fund the changes they seek by allocating resources for all the things that money pays for: buildings, technology, in-

structional materials, services, and most importantly, people. Boards know that the largest percent of a district budget is spent on salaries and benefits, often constituting more than 80% of all district expenses. Therefore, boards need to ensure that the allocation of staff supports the district's operations and aligns with the district's priorities. For example, if establishing district partnerships with other organizations is a priority for the board as a long-term strategic effort, that effort may require the dedicated time of key staff.¹³

A study of three Texas school boards characterized this alignment work as building efficacy—the power to produce a desired effect. Specifically, school leaders committed a very high level of knowledge, skills, resources, and support to change efforts. When responding to the challenge of limited resources, priority was given to using funds in ways that most directly supported instruction.¹⁴ The importance of resource allocation is well stated by Schmoker: "The key is to marry a priority on learning to an obsession with funding and the school calendar."¹⁵

Aligning policies

The board's strategic direction includes creating and improving district structures through policies that drive district operations and performance. Effective school boards spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.¹⁶ A majority of district policies are often driven by changes in state law. These are usually brought to the board by the administration as recommendations to ensure the policy language remains consistent with the law. These policies might be considered operational because they ensure stability and consistency in the district's systems for learning, business operations, transportation and facilities, and more. However, boards can also create policies to drive change. These reform policies are proactive; they are designed to make significant changes in the district.¹⁷

For example, in addition to setting a goal for establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) the board could also develop a district policy that establishes the purpose of PLCs in the district, expectations for teacher participation in PLCs, and how the effectiveness of PLCs will be assessed.¹⁸ By placing the practice of PLCs in policy, the board elevates PLCs to a higher level of strategic direction. In the Lighthouse study, board members in effective districts believed if key district leaders or board members left their positions, providing guidance for district improvement efforts in written policies would sustain the initiatives.¹⁹

Ensuring accountability

The accountability expected from governing boards is commonly understood as monitoring organizational performance and reporting results to stakeholders. In the non-profit sector, exceptional boards are results-oriented, measuring the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of programs and services.²⁰ Fullan has suggested that focusing directly on accountability does not create the incentive and intrinsic motivation that lead to successful reform in K-12 school districts.²¹ However, this does not relieve boards of their statutory authority and responsibility for oversight. K-12 school and governance research suggests three aspects of accountability that can increase a school board's effectiveness:

1. Accountability as a framework
2. Accountability as a cycle
3. Accountability as shared responsibility

Accountability as a framework

Effective boards establish district-wide accountability systems to measure the performance of the board, superintendent and the district:

- **Board performance**—Effective boards hold themselves accountable,²² periodically evaluating their own performance.²³ Examples include regularly reviewing their governance functions, monitoring progress toward board performance goals, and evaluating the effectiveness of board meetings.
- **Superintendent evaluation**—Holding the superintendent accountable for results is a critical practice of effective boards.²⁴ This process is often considered a board's most important accountability tool. Unfortunately, it sometimes receives insufficient attention because boards either do not recognize its importance, feel uncomfortable evaluating their superintendent, or do not feel competent to conduct the evaluation. Three key elements of an effective process include 1) working with the superintendent to set very clear performance targets, 2) monitoring performance regularly (not just annually), and 3) focusing the process on improving performance as well as improving the board-superintendent relationship.
- **District performance**—This includes monitoring improvements in student achievement and other district goals, as well as the district's operations and fiscal performance. Student achievement data should

include indicators for achievement (where they are now) and improvement (how far they have come).

In each of these areas, the school board has the ultimate authority and responsibility for establishing and monitoring key indicators of success.²⁵ Specifically, effective boards use quantitative and qualitative data to: 1) set expectations, 2) monitor improvement, and 3) apply pressure for accountability.²⁶ Without clear expectations, professional staff has no way of knowing which information will be considered most important by the board.²⁷

Accountability as a cycle

Effective boards use the accountability framework, not only to provide district oversight, but also to organize their governing work. Accountability is not an annual event; it is an ongoing cycle of reporting and review. Boards work with superintendents to determine how frequently data should be provided, and these reports are embedded into the board's regular meetings so that some accountability measures are reported on a regular basis, if not at every meeting.²⁸ To ensure board and community understanding, these reports should be in a consistent format that is easy to understand.²⁹

Accountability as shared responsibility

According to a 2011 study,³⁰ community members have different views and definitions of accountability. Organizational leaders generally see accountability as primarily focused on using quantitative measures to improve performance and find technical solutions to problems. They believe that transparency is the basis of building community trust in the organization. In contrast, members of the public describe accountability as individuals at all levels behaving responsibly, ensuring fairness, acting honorably, listening to the public, and responding to public concerns with courtesy and respect. They also described it as shared responsibility: they do not believe that educational leaders bear the accountability burden alone. "They see it as a shared duty, and many seemed as frustrated by the irresponsibility of neighbors and fellow citizens as they were by irresponsibility among the powers that be."

A follow-up study in 2013³¹ concluded that the public believes that most schools should do better and that some recent accountability reforms, including raising standards and education requirements, are good reforms. The study also reported some parent perspectives on school accountability that boards should consider:

- **The critical role of parent accountability**—Parents believe that their primary responsibility is to instill the “values and habits of behavior that will help their children lead responsible and successful lives.”
- **The impact of the larger culture**—Parents say that schools cannot be successful without greater social support.
- **The over-emphasis on testing**—Parents indicated that testing needs “to be put in context with other important elements of teaching and learning.”
- **The vital role of schools in communities**—Parents strongly reject the strategy of closing schools as ways to improve accountability.
- **The benefit of choice**—Parents were not united in weighing the sometimes conflicting goals of giving parents more choices or having good neighborhood schools everywhere.
- **Good communication is the goal, not more data**—Parents want two-way communication. More information may be valuable, but it does not ensure that communication is taking place.

These findings about accountability suggest that as boards develop district accountability frameworks, it is important to engage parents and community members in determining how the district will demonstrate good accountability and what that means.

Summary

Effective boards set direction by making student achievement a high priority, prioritizing all district improvement efforts and clarifying the board’s expectations for performance. They align all district resources and policies to ensure that the improvement efforts are supported. Effective boards also establish a comprehensive framework for accountability that includes board, superintendent and district performance and they review accountability results as a regular activity at board meetings. Finally, effective boards ensure that the district accountability system involves and is responsive to the needs and interests of parents and community members.

Endnotes

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