

**A Legacy of Board Leadership:
Two Examples of How Effective Board Governance Contributed to
Increased Student Achievement**

Does a school board really make any difference to improved student achievement?

Do the arduous campaigning, the hours of study, the countless meetings, and the rigors of debate in pursuit of wise decisions by a school board actually have any effect on student success?

We've looked for evidence to prove that it does. Mind you, we are not using increased personal or political influence as a measure. Nor are we buying into the erroneous assertion of some boards that, *"Our kids are doing well, so it must be because of us."*

It is perfectly logical to assume that a governing board, if unified in its vision, courage, leadership, discipline and focus, can improve student performance. But do we know whether it actually does?

We interviewed two remarkable board chairs in an effort to help determine whether the efforts of their very high-performing boards had a positive impact on learning in their districts. We've witnessed first hand these boards' unerring focus on students – setting aside *adult issues*, and instead focusing on what matters: are kids learning? These boards contextualized every issue with which they dealt in terms of, "Does our spending time on this issue improve achievement for every child?"

That focus allowed them to forge agreements, to mediate opposing voices, to drive higher standards of staff performance and accountability, to be the voice of reason when political and personal interests collided with doing what is best for student learning. Both board members, as chairs of their boards during very difficult times, distinguished themselves by their self-lessness and their courageous grit and passion. Learn how they leave their positions convinced that their respective board's work drove improved achievement.

Following is a summation of our conversations with these two leaders. We hope you will benefit from consideration of their experiences and their leadership. Both chairs left office in November 2013 when there was considerable turnover on the board, in one case due to state-imposed term limits. With you, we will be interested to see if the prior board's focus on results for students survives the transition.

**Patricia Cochrane: Calgary Canada Board of Education
14 years as trustee, 12 years as chair. 200,000 students:
70% Caucasian, 10% Asian, 3% Black, 10% Aboriginal,
30% poverty, 24.14% ELL**

“Sure. I leave the board with some sadness, but with no regrets. As a board, we’ve done the job. Since 2001, our students’ achievement scores have continually increased, despite extraordinary budget cuts.

“Achievement at the “acceptable standard” on Provincial Achievement Tests in core academic disciplines from 2008-2012 increased to 81.6% of our students in Grades 3, 6, and 9. Students in those same grades who achieved the “standard of excellence” increased by over 2% points to 22.4% of that total population. Achievement on Diploma Examinations for Grade 12 over the same time period remained at a high of 85.6% with an increase to 23.9% achieving the standard of excellence. Meanwhile, our high school completion rate continued to improve significantly with between 73.7% and 80.2% of our students from the Grade 10 Cohort completing high school by a variety of means, ready to continue into post-secondary or apprenticeship programs.”

“Back to the board. Not insignificantly, in 2007, our Board of Trustees was the overall winner of The Conference Board of Canada/Spencer Stuart 2007 National Award in Governance. We also won the public sector category.

The Calgary Board of Education’s governance is unique because it has created a cohesive governing body made up of individually elected trustees, which is rare in this part of the public sector. The governance model has linked to student learning outcomes, which have improved in part as a result of this innovation—making the board’s students prime beneficiaries.

“Fourteen years ago, our system was in a desperate situation. The province had dismissed the governing board due to its inability to resolve its own internal issues. Our new board and system were not addressing the needs of our special education population, students who came from profound poverty, and the many students who came here with their families from around the world and could not speak English. Our students’ achievement was low; with many of the students I’ve cited falling through the cracks.

“Complicating our situation? We inherited a \$32 million deficit that we were given 10 years to pay down. We were cutting teaching staff up to 300 employees per year. We needed to build new schools to address growing subdivisions; close 23 older urban schools that were in many cases only at 45 percent capacity; provide programs that would stem the growing loss of kids to other choices of public or private schools; and deliver an education program despite rolling cuts to our funding.

“The problems we faced seemed insurmountable, but our Board said *no more excuses*. Canadians are a proud people. Calgarians are even more so. We determined we had to make sure *every* child could be successful.

“The work needed to begin with us. We needed to focus on student success, and not on keeping subgroups of adults and the community happy by responding to their narrower concerns. We needed to find a better way to govern that allowed-- even forced us--to do just that.

“What did our Board do? Two things stand out for us:

1. We put our heads down and attended to the Board’s core work. We re-defined ourselves as leaders through adoption of a very well defined governing system.

“We identified our values about how we would work with discipline and focus. We decided how we would give clearer direction to, and require transparent accountability of, our Chief Superintendent. We established high standards of operations for all areas of functionality. And most importantly, we – the Board – defined the results we expected for each student. We committed everything to new governance policies and established a rigorous cycle of systematic monitoring and accountability.

“With students as our reason for being, the culture shifted throughout our system. Every issue was related directly to this challenging question: ‘What does this have to do with students?’ Our annual work plan focused on students. Our board meeting agendas shifted to incisive analysis of student data to determine where progress was being made, or failing to be made. Our self-evaluation, our Chief’s annual summative evaluation, and all staff focus shifted to the difference being made for students.

2. We focused externally, undertaking deliberately contextualized conversations in our community. As trustees, we had to build understanding and support with our owners and consumers around what public education is all about in order to survive, let alone thrive, in meeting kids’ needs.

“We talked with business and civic leaders, post-secondary institutions, parents and guardians. We undertook an on-line survey with over 2,000 responses. Questions reflected our need to connect with our rapidly changing “global” community: *What do you expect of our students? What do you want from this Board of Trustees? What is the role of this public education entity? Unique to our culture, what is the role of religion in public education? How do we*

demonstrate genuine respect for families and children coming to our community from around the world and the implications on languages, dress and customs?

“We took the information and used it to further shape our student expectations, our standards for how students and families are treated, and to inform our program delivery. Most importantly perhaps, we took the summary and analysis of the feedback and shared it back with the community – often school by school. This time, the conversation changed to, *“How do we deliberately reach these student achievement expectations together.”* Calgarians heard and saw for themselves the breadth of opinions, the diversity and yet commonalties, and the challenge for us as trustees to represent, serve and lead in these changing times.

“**Success? Yes.** We did close all 23 schools but left one open in each local community so that kids could still walk to their neighborhood school and benefit from full support systems. We paid off our debt in seven rather than 10 years. We stemmed the loss of our students to the Catholic and private schools to the point that now our enrollment steadily increases each year. We have innovative, broad academic programs that assure: *Each student, in keeping with his or her individual abilities and gifts, will complete high school with an academic foundation necessary to function effectively in life, work and continued learning.* We have supportive partners and families throughout the community who believe in our role and mission.

“What was the single most important indicator of our impact on this incredible system and community? Since our Board undertook redefining its role and focus in governing policies by owning the vision for student achievement, requiring high accountability system-wide, engaging the community in a profound partnership around our common purpose, **student achievement continues to rise!**”

Deborah Hendrix: Harrison School District 2 Colorado Springs, CO
Eight years as trustee, six years as chair. 11,000 students:
33.3% Caucasian, 9.4% Asian and Native American, 13% Black,
42.7% Hispanic, 70% Free and Reduced Lunch, 18.2% ELL

“Have we done the job? Oh yeah! We are off the state’s Academic Watch list. The majority of our schools were classified as *needing improvement*. Now we have only one school out of 22 that is designated *needs improvement*. We are a fully accredited district and for the first time in four years our enrollment is *not* declining while enrollment in the charter schools *is* declining. The students and families are returning to us!

“And data? Since 2005, our graduation rate increased 9.1%. Since 2009, our percentage increase of students achieving proficient/advanced, measuring within the district student body on the state standardized tests, dramatically rose in

every academic discipline in the 3rd-5th grades, 6th-8th and 9th-10th grades. And, our poverty achievement gap in reading and math was cut to single digits.

“What did our Board do? Four things stand out for us:

1. VISION: Why were we letting students fail? Eight years ago, I ran for the board advocating for the 50 percent of students our district was not serving. I made it my business to read, review and challenge – everything! We had to address the dysfunction.

“My first year we had the opportunity to hire a new superintendent who was up to the task. He embraced our vision for *all* students to achieve. He developed a comprehensive plan of actionable objectives to make that happen. He insisted, with our agreement, that it was no longer going to be business as usual. He - and we - ushered in a new era of no excuses.

2. STRUCTURE: The no excuses had to begin with the Board. While our superintendent set about his work, we simultaneously committed to redesign our board structure to match our objective of leading – not following - systemic and systematic reform and accountability.

“About that time, I attended an NSBA Conference session focused on the intriguing concept of a true governing, policy-driven board. Within the year we developed written policies based on the board’s values, using fewer than 25 governing policies that established how we work together as a unified board, aligned the operational system to increase performance on defined Results for student achievement, and positioned us to work with, not against, the superintendent in his efforts.

“We established ourselves as credible, not allowing individual interests or egos to pull us off center. We established a new level of respect in our interaction with staff, especially at board meetings. We supported our superintendent even when controversial decisions were made. We took back leadership of a runaway committee and dealt with our 1,500 employees with fairness and integrity.

3. ACCOUNTABILITY: We put students first. Our mantra became, “Is this an adult issue, or is this about kids?”

“Our agendas changed to filter every item for relevance to the board’s work, to increase our use of the consent agenda for mandated board approvals, to put student achievement up front at meetings, with principals reporting to us directly on achievement against our Board-defined Results.

“Data on achievement came to us on a regular basis from the superintendent. It was dissected and analyzed to show us how all subgroups were performing and significantly, how the gap was being closed.

“We held ourselves responsible for working together as professionals. We established clear covenants in policy about board and member behavior and held ourselves rigorously accountable for living up to them. We committed to bring a level of respect to our interaction with staff, never embarrassing them in public (a favorite past time of previous boards) and we did not tolerate violations from each other.

“The board remanded the five-inch-thick district policy manual to the superintendent for his lawful oversight, allowing the board to focus on our governing values. There was no more pretense of governing using antiquated policy mandates focused on operational decision-making.

“Another remarkable achievement during this time period: the state required the board to return \$13 million over a 3-year timeframe due to our healthy fund balance and the state needing to rebuild its education fund. We still implemented a cutting edge pay-for-performance program, consistent with our policy values, that required our licensed staff to be evaluated and compensated based on classroom performance and student achievement.

4. ADVOCACY: We connected with our schools and community to build support and understanding for district efforts.

“This called for a multi-pronged strategic communications plan. We started with three community-wide meetings to share how we’ve addressed kids’ needs and how achievement had improved. We used hard data. Then, we took questions about things happening in the district. Our theme: Positively Harrison!

“We refused to listen to anonymous complaints, innuendos, or the rumor mill. But to do that we had to become active. We were all over this community as board members, attending events and getting into community centers and churches and talking to our patrons.

“We developed formal relationships with 12 community partner organizations. This narrow focus was designed to increase meaningful connections with our students and families. These organizations provided significant resources to our families and therefore allowed us to continue to meet the needs of the “whole” child. Our board knew that with a 70 percent free and reduced population, we have to go beyond traditional programs and resources.

“Our board got in the schools and knew what is going on. We divided the responsibility to make sure every event was covered. The pay-off? Staff saw the Board as accessible and caring about what’s really going on in the district. We were welcomed as advocates who they understood could better support them by understanding their programs, challenges, successes.

“We believed our governing policy values and concurrent self-discipline, role clarity, rigorous standards for operations, accountability systems and unfailing focus on student achievement succeeded. Together our board led the systemic and systematic reform of our failing district to transform the district to one of remarkable improvement.”

What has been learned?

Boards often are criticized for getting in the way of or sabotaging district efforts to improve student learning. Boardrooms too often are dominated by conversation about operational or adult issues. Politics and personalities too frequently take center stage as gamesmanship re-directs board focus, time and attention.

These two remarkable board chairs and their colleagues, through their dedication, resolve and leadership skills, demonstrated that school boards can make a solid choice to govern themselves and their districts well, and in the process drive systemic and systematic reform that increases student achievement. And it can be done in an era of demographic complexity, political wrangling, growing needs of students and competing and ever-changing standards.

Courage, focus and fortitude. If Deborah Hendrix and the Harrison School District Two Board of Education, if Pat Cochrane and the Calgary Board of Education, could do it, we believe this same measure of board leadership can be repeated anywhere—provided the board has the determination and the commitment to make it so.

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