

## **Good Governance: Art or Science?**

*What is it about governing a school district that makes it such a formidable challenge?*

**by**

**Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn**

Some school boards seem to govern well. Results show in the form of high student achievement, good interpersonal relations, an organization that operates effectively and efficiently, and strong public confidence and support.

But for every board that works well, there seem to be scores of others that simply can't get their acts together.

What are the outcomes of a poorly functioning board? Try these: achievement isn't happening at its potential level; the organization seems to be in a state of constant upheaval; morale is low; members fight with each other; the board and superintendent are at odds with each other; and accountability is non-existent.

You know dysfunctional boards when you see them by observing these characteristics:

- They function not as a single unit, but as a collection of individuals.
- No issue is too insignificant to fight about; in fact, it seems that the smaller the issue, the more eager members are to fight about it.
- They live in the world of operations, not of results.
- Members trust no one: not each other, and certainly not their superintendents.
- Meetings are long and unproductive, rarely focused on anything related to kids and whether they are succeeding.
- Meeting agendas are dominated by budgets, bonds, buildings, buses, bricks, boilers, and bickering.
- Every administrative decision is to be questioned and sometimes reversed, including personnel decisions.

If one accepts the belief that there is an important relationship between what happens in the boardroom and what happens in the classroom, the result of this kind of board behavior can be viewed as nothing short of tragic.

These boards are at best a distraction, and at worst an impediment to good organizational performance. Organizations tend to perform as their leaders lead—or don't.

Consider this: Poor board performance is not a fate handed to any board, but rather a chosen option. School boards have within their own power the ability to lead their districts in different and better ways. Governing well requires a commitment to a higher ideal than is demonstrated by the boards whose behaviors we just described.

**Just what is “good governance?” What does it look like? What does it require of a board, and what of board members?**

Between us, we have worked as governance consultants with school boards and other types of boards for more than 60 combined years, including school boards in almost every state and others on three continents. From our observations, good governance includes two dimensions: one we call science, and the other art.

**The Science of Good Governance: Systems**

One of the primary reasons why boards perform poorly is the governing system—or lack thereof—they use to do their work. In most cases, boards have no defined governing system. They have not taken the time and effort as a body to consciously decide what their jobs are and how they should do them. Boards tend to do what they have always done, as they have always done it. They are trapped by their own inertia.

Examples of poor logic and no systems:

- Approving superintendent recommendations about operational matters, in many instances after the decisions have been made and are in effect.
- Meeting time wasted on routine, *sacred cow* items instead of focused on meaningful analysis of all student achievement.
- Agendas formulated by staff rather than by the Board - driven by the board’s own annual work plan.
- Evaluating the superintendent using a meaningless checklist, as opposed to tying superintendent performance to defined student and district performance.
- Failure to self-reflect and evaluate the board’s own performance.
- Failure to recognize the need for strategic and on-going communication and advocacy with district taxpayers and patrons.

**The science of good governance includes the board’s deciding, as a body, what its work is and how it chooses to get it done. It is the structural and procedural part of the board’s leading the district from the boardroom.**

There are available established governance models designed to provide the procedural framework for good governance. Boards in these customized, policy-based models develop and implement governing policies that:

1. Identify specified outcomes for students as they progress through the district and arm them for success upon graduation;
2. Express the board's non-negotiable standards for operational functions and how staff will be held accountable for meeting those standards;
3. Create the board's own governing culture and accountability for performance as individual members and as a body;
4. Specify the board's clear delegation of authority to, and rigorous accountability of, the superintendent for operational excellence and student performance.

A fully-developed governance policy manual usually contains about 30 policies—total—and provides for the board all the tools it needs to effectively govern the district from the broad policy level. The board's current manual, which generally contains 500 policies or more--almost all of which are legally required and focus on operational matters--would become the District Policy Manual, and be the superintendent's responsibility. Of course, the board would continue to approve all mandated policies before they are placed in the District Policy Manual.

Governing models play an important role in improving board performance. They provide the framework for getting work done. They are the board's governance "operating system." They fill the void created by the habit of "doing things the way we do because that's the way we've always done it." They force the board to thoughtfully examine its values and commit them to policy, which then drives all staff and district actions.

### **The Art of Good Governance: People**

The art side is the people part. Most school board members are people who choose to be on a governing board that makes a valued and contributing difference to the district. They check their ego at the door. They focus on the issue, not the person. They engage in their own professional development to be sure they know and understand board work and their individual role. They ask questions and delve into the board's work of public education and data-driven decision-making. They thrive on diverse opinions, but they drive for consensus. They manifest integrity and self-discipline.

In our experience, the people-part of good governance is the most difficult part to manage. Regardless of the value of the board's governing system, it is virtually meaningless if the board's members are not personally disciplined enough to allow the system to work.

No system of governance is any better than the people who are trying to use it. If they are not committed to their governing policies, if they are not able to subordinate their own personal agendas and contribute to the common good of the board and organization, if they fail to intellectualize their governing system and use it as the tool it is intended to be, the result remains a dysfunctional unit.

People and the way they interact with each other always seems to be at least as critical to the board's overall performance as the board's governing system, regardless of the sophistication of that system. Developing a sound governing system is relatively easy, beyond the initial cost and commitment of personal time. But the promise of any model will go unrealized if the people who are trying to use it refuse to contribute to its successful implementation.

**A tragic case in point:** the XYZ School Board (real board, fictitious name) spent two years developing a state-of-the-art governing system. All policies were in place, district operations were aligned with the board's policies, and most of the board's members were committed to make the system work.

Two members of the board were unwilling to commit to the policies the board adopted, even though they both participated in their development and then voted to approve them. One announced to his colleagues that he refused to accept majority decisions of the board, and even refused to maintain the confidentiality of executive sessions.

This board adopted policies committing members to reserve comments critical of the superintendent and staff to closed sessions of the board. Some members publicly and repeatedly violated the commitment, using their "First Amendment rights" as their justification. Public meetings were dominated by rehashing old decisions and dissecting the work of administrative staff.

The picture: the board had a solid system for governing effectively, but the members could not clear the obstacles created by some of their own colleagues. The situation was akin to loading a software program onto a computer with an incompatible operating system.

**Confront or let it slide?** For a majority of a board to allow the entire organization to be held hostage by one or two disruptive board members is not demonstration of good governance. No board can afford to allow its performance, or the performance of the district, to be hindered by such individual member behavior. Every board owes to its members an opportunity to express their personal views and participate as equals, as long as all members are willing to work for the common good of the district's students and its owners.

When a member's behaviors cross the line and become an impediment to the effectiveness of the board and the organization, a high-performing board will confront the issue and take whatever actions available to it to correct the problem.

Elected school boards generally have limited options for dealing with disruptive members. They can try personal persuasion and logic, which in many cases will resolve the problem. If that tactic fails, the board may progress to more severe remedies, including removing the member from any leadership positions and even public censure.

In most states, a board lacks the authority to remove an elected colleague. Voters placed them where they are, and they likely will stay there until the voters have had enough of the disruption.

So what can a board do if it has exhausted all the available remedies, and the problem persists?

We have counseled a few boards to take one final action: operationally, become a *smaller* board. The maverick member still will be there, and still will retain the rights to speak and make motions. However, his comments will never be questioned, debated or even acknowledged. Any motions will die for lack of a second, or if they do receive a second, they will be voted down without comment. The member will be treated courteously, but even eye contact with him will be rare. The majority of the board will waste no more of its time and attention on him. He will not be a factor in the work of the board.

It is called *operational isolation*, and it is a harsh remedy. However, the alternative of allowing the behaviors to go unchecked is an even less appealing option that can destroy the credibility of the board and its ability to function.

### **So, an Art or a Science?**

Good governance is both an art and a science. No board, regardless of its good intentions, can lead an organization as complex and challenging as a public school district in this era without a sound, logical structure for doing its job. That structure must include defining the board's own governing culture, the board's stated values about how the district is expected to function from an operational standpoint, clarity about the role and accountability of the superintendent, and most important, the student outcomes the board expects and demands.

But the people who have been placed at the board table by the voters must be able to function as an effective unit. They must bring their differences and perceptions to the table for rigorous, but constructive, deliberation. And then,

after the vote, they must be able to rise above personal agendas and preferences and lead the district in concert with fellow members. When these two dimensions of leadership converge, the result is a thing of beauty. It is good governance. We know it when we see it. It would be good if we saw it more frequently.

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*Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn are Senior Partners with AGI Aspen Group International, LLC, a governance-consulting firm based in Gulf Shores, AL. They may be contacted at [aspen@aspengroup.org](mailto:aspen@aspengroup.org). AGI Aspen Group web site is [www.aspengroup.org](http://www.aspengroup.org).*