

Why Board Culture Matters

Adapted from article originally published in The American School Board Journal

Part One: Defining Public Board Responsibility

In America, the most critical responsibility of a school board is to safeguard the public's trust in public education. Since the board is not responsible directly for day to day operations, achieving this trust requires the employment of a CEO/superintendent with great integrity and expertise. Achieving public trust requires excellent board policymaking and rigorous monitoring of operations in all areas, especially financial administration, asset protection, treatment of students, and evaluation of staff. Public trust hinges on a clear, unerring organizational mission to educate all students and challenge them to their level of ability.

Trust. A tenuous bond that once violated rarely can attain its original quality. In our communities, we trust that the board can define what it wants the system to achieve for students and delegate the attainment of that vision to trained professionals who are expected to know how to do it. We trust that the board monitors and evaluates organizational and CEO performance. We trust that the board and its members will hold themselves accountable to one another and to the broad community of people whom they were elected or appointed to serve and represent.

Mainly, we trust that members of the board of education can find ways to work together.

We trust that despite personality or pedagogical or philosophical differences, members will maturely and civilly labor to meet the needs and hopes of all the students in the school district, ensuring that seat time produces reasonable academic gain. And, we trust that members will have the skills to discuss, argue, and represent their individual points of view, but ultimately vote and move forward as a democratic body to serve the diverse citizenry that expects a reasonable return on its investment.

Is this Lake Woebegone expectation possible? Is it reasonable to expect that public school boards should be comprised of board members who are committed to creating an ethical culture for the board to build the public's trust and support?

While it may be reasonable to expect it, our experience suggests that we are far from achieving it. We are encountering with increasing and alarming frequency the rebel board member who chooses not to act for the public good, electing instead to promote private agendas and seek to advance the demands of special interests.

The concurrent trend is even more alarming: fellow board members tolerate the rebel member's unethical and self-righteous behavior to the destruction of whole board's public credibility. It continues to amaze us how much power a single member can wield over an entire board, especially when other members do not share his views or his tactics.

These rebels, or mavericks, usually march to a different drummer—and they have found that they can make the entire board march to their drummer, too.

This small percentage of board members who refuse to play as members of their board has become a tyranny of the minority, forcing its will on the majority. It is a powerfully destructive force that is handicapping, if not destroying, effective board work and consequently, public trust in public education.

The result is an undermining of public trust in the board and the district. In a climate of public mistrust, the options of charters, vouchers, private school and home school become more and more attractive.

Part 2: Identifying Irresponsible Behaviors That Erode Public Trust

We have seen boards comprised of good people, motivated to make a positive difference in the districts they serve, allow themselves to be completely taken over by a single board member who refuses to be a functioning member of the board. In their effort to be "nice" to each other, to allow unwarranted latitude to a fellow politician, they have allowed behaviors they detest and they know to be destructive to both the board and district to continue unchecked.

They have allowed a single member to dictate what they will and will not spend their time doing, to limit or delay significant actions that need to be taken, to direct major staff activities without board authorization, to take over agendas with unrelated and irrelevant motions and comments. They have left unchallenged public comments demeaning to staff and other members of the board.

Consider the following real-life scenarios that we have observed over the past few years:

Case Study A: The QUEEN Syndrome

Sandra has come on the board to take charge of operations. The professionals can educate, but they can't possibly operate a multi-million dollar enterprise without her tenacious vigilance. In her opinion, a watchdog is needed by this lackadaisical board to make sure buildings are built on time and without change orders. Finances must be scrutinized, with every line item requiring further explanation. Vendor complaints of injustice in the contracting process are examined and re-examined.

At each board meeting, Sandra takes advantage of every opportunity to place the staff on the hot seat with such questions as “Can you explain ...;” “How could you let ...;” “ Do you mean to tell me?”

Increasingly, Sandra garners more public attention with her veiled and un-veiled innuendos and accusations. She likes the notoriety. She has disdain for the superintendent’s appearing on television or at political or notable social events; that is the board’s role.

It is a zero-sum game for her – a scarcity mentality.

The superintendent and staff are bowed, trying to focus time and energy on their main job of educating the students and operating the district effectively. The board is worn down and worn out.

Sandra has recently acquired an officer role through careful politicking. Her fellow members believed that if she were rewarded with an officer’s position, her behavior would be moderated. That never works. She now is working for the defeat of board colleagues who are running for re-election, and is increasingly revved up and flexing her muscle over all board decisions.

Case Study B: The Champion Syndrome

Milt delivers. He sees himself as the lone voice for the special interest groups and individuals in the community. Since that is Milt’s primary reason for serving on the board, the board and its other concerns come second. His job is to fight at the table for special consideration and then to deliver on promises.

He questions the integrity of fellow members. He accuses them of not understanding or caring about “his” constituents. He enjoys offering counter-evidence to every recommendation of the superintendent, and even writes lengthy counter comments on the superintendent’s weekly newsletter to the board. The confidentiality of executive sessions has little or no application to him. His responsibility is to his constituents.

Milt views facts as mere points to be manipulated. In turn, staff members are meant to be distrusted. Efforts to bridge understanding and find common ground are agreeable to him only for the night of the retreat. With the daylight comes renewed vigor and commitment to the fight.

The superintendent has a long and honored career, but is reaching the point that the option of leaving before his contract is up is increasingly attractive. Senior staff members are frustrated and question why the board doesn’t confront this destructiveness when as a board they claim to be —values-driven. The local paper has an unending source for new stories that question the competence of board and staff to do their jobs. There is growing discontent among diverse factions of the community.

Case Study C: The Keeper of All Knowledge Syndrome

Thomas is a 40-year-old native of the community. He takes great pride in serving his hometown. He believes himself entrusted to be the watchdog, keeping a keen eye on all administrative dealings. Senior staff errors in a prior administration have proven to him that all employees are not to be trusted. Every hiring, extension of tenure, curriculum decision, and building project must be questioned and queried through laborious committee and board processes, assuming that wrong will be found.

Most importantly, Thomas needs to know EVERYTHING ... and NOW! His queries and complaints sound like:

1. How am I supposed to answer questions when I get phone calls?
2. I can't look stupid and say I don't know. It's my job to know.
3. Our constituents believe we have the answers and the information to any concern they have.
4. And the highest sin of sins: I heard about this incident on the television, not from you, our superintendent! Your job is to keep us informed!

Superintendent and senior staff members labor to get information to the board members in a timely fashion. But in any school system, oversights occur. Some decisions seem to be clearly within the purview of staff with information to follow. Sometimes it doesn't occur to staff that the board would even care about some operational decisions.

Board meetings are punctuated with skepticism and comments like, "I wish we had known" or "We have failed to be informed, once again."

Staff looks forward to board meetings like a root canal – they never know when pain will be inflicted by a public tongue-lashing with comments about staff's "purposeful" intent to keep the board uninformed.

We could continue with other examples. You can add your own to this list. In fact, with rigorous self-reflection, do you ever fall into these behaviors?

- Passive-aggressive behavior, including refusal to participate during meetings but openly criticizing the board's decision following the meeting;
- Dominating meetings by over-talking, intimidating and shutting-down other members through bullying and ridicule;

- Public criticism of the board or superintendent with the intent of self-promotion and undermining public confidence in colleagues;
- Refusing to participate in board development, choosing instead to revel in “lone wolf” notoriety;
- Circumventing the superintendent to give directives to his/her staff;
- Trying to fix things for your constituents rather than referring problems to the district for a systemic fix;
- Declaring your “First Amendment Rights” to say and do as you please, without regard or care for the concomitant responsibilities you have assumed as a member of the board to work for the whole.

Often, the individuals who manifest these behaviors are bright people who are accomplished in some field and gifted with a measure of ability that, if used properly, could reap enormous benefit for the board and district. Instead, they choose to strike out on their own and refuse to engage as constructive members of the board.

Part 3: Steps to Improving Board Culture

How can a high-profile board address its own culture, its own commitment to ethical behavior, its vested trusteeship to build broad community trust and support for its school district in the face of these kinds of behaviors? We have several suggestions for consideration:

1. The board can and should resolve to govern as a body, not as individuals. What does that mean? The individual members must resolve to represent their separate individual perspectives, to rigorously deliberate issues at the board table, but to act as a single entity through the most powerful tool in a democracy: the vote!

This commitment should be written in policy, and it should be self-monitored routinely by the board to assure full compliance. Then the board majority must faithfully practice the commitment: NEVER should any single board member be allowed to override the whole to dictate the actions, the timing, the agenda, or any other aspect of the board’s or the staff’s operations.

2. A board member code of conduct should be developed by the full board and approved by the board as board policy. The policy should articulate written values by which the board will responsibly self-govern. Once adopted, the policy should be routinely monitored for compliance by all members.

When the board membership changes, the code of conduct should be reviewed for understanding and reaffirmation. Members should be expected to comply with

the agreed upon code, without exception. If a member fails to comply, the board has reason and responsibility to privately and even publicly question the behavior as a violation of board policy. Individual situations must be dealt with, even though they may be difficult. The board expects the superintendent to deal with policy violations by members of his staff; the board must be equally diligent in confronting violations that fall in its area of responsibility. .

3. Individual points of view should and must be heard. Encourage rigorous floor debate and deliberation to explore conflicts and perspectives. This is demanded by our democratic society. But once a vote is taken, every member should accept the majority vote in order to provide clarity of direction to staff and the community.

4. Encourage rigorous and frank dialogue through proactive and planned linkages with stakeholders and diverse constituencies. As a board, explore significant issues in public forums and other broad-based groupings of the public. This broad-based knowledge provides board members the perspective needed to govern clearly on behalf of the broad community it labors to serve. The dialogues also serve to expose the more narrow agenda promoted by board members who seek to represent only a small faction of the broader public.

5. Don't ignore the behavior. If the board realizes that it has a rogue member, it first should make every reasonable attempt to encourage the member to work with the group in a contributing manner. This could mean conversations with the member by the president, by members aware of offending behavior, discussions with the full board, facilitated retreats to get to the root of the behavior, and any other reasonable attempt to establish full understanding of board behavioral expectations.

6. Continuing and willful violation of board code of conduct challenges the board to take further steps. This requires soul-searching, courage and determination to be an ethical board working for the benefit of the entire community and its expectations of its board for good governance. Public censure may be required after having pursued logical and reasonable attempts to address and mitigate destructive behaviors. A public censure, in effect, is a public statement signifying that the board has chosen to publicly separate itself from the destructive member.

This is not an easy choice to make, and it certainly is one that the board will want to exhaust every option before taking. However, failure to act at some reasonable point is to allow the misery to go without challenge and the damage to remain unchecked and unchallenged, thereby signaling to staff and community that this board cannot responsibly govern itself, let alone govern the organization.

7. Staff members cannot be focused on operations and work to achieve defined goals for students, nor be held accountable for failure, if individual members direct their work. The board must reaffirm to its superintendent and staff that they are not to perform any work directed by a single board member. If such demands

or requests are presented, they should be referred by staff to the superintendent and by the superintendent to the full board for majority disposition.

8. Be strategic and speak the truth! Because some boards value projecting unity and civility at any cost, they too often succumb to the temptation to allow renegade, political, undermining behaviors to go unchecked. We have seen this behavior taken to the extent that the board members refuse to publicly speak truthfully when they are being attacked or challenged, or when campaigns are run against them.

Who benefits from that choice not to confront? Certainly not the board. At the board table, when responding to news queries, when meeting with small groups of citizens or staff, speak the truth without rancor: "My colleague knows exactly what has transpired and I challenge him/her to speak the truth about this issue in the context of our mission and purpose here of governing a system to educate children."

9. Encourage and recruit citizens of high ethics and integrity to run for or be appointed to the board. Target people who want to work with a board comprised of members who value good governance, people who care about the whole and not their own self-promotion. Assure that your community's school system has a legacy of good governance by people who have a demonstrated ability not only to express ethics in theory or talk, but in the ways they live their lives.

Part IV: Board Culture as the Beginning and End of Public Education

Democracy and public boards need clear, consistent, value-centered leaders unafraid to confront and to speak the truth about rogue board member actions and purpose. Letting the destruction continue can result in devastating regression in or cessation of public trust in public education. Operational progress is stultified by poor morale and fear. Good people leave for quality of life choices. The ability to attract good staff and leadership for future work is diminished. The community suffers the image of a toxic system unable to govern, lead or educate. It has and is continuing to happen in districts across our country.

We can't tell any board when enough is enough; that usually is a self-identifying condition. When members realize that they are being dominated and hindered by a single member, when it becomes apparent that one member is compromising the effectiveness of the board and the district, it is time to act. Advance attention to some of the suggestions we have made can and should be considered by all boards, whether they currently have destructive members or not.

Hopefully, your board has been and will continue to be able to avoid the problem outlined here. It is not a pleasant, constructive, or wholesome environment in which to try to wisely, and with excellence, govern a district. If you find yourself there, our best advice is this: don't allow it to go unchallenged for the sake of

temporary peace and harmony. In the long term, the cost of doing nothing is far too great.

About the Authors:

*Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn are foundering partners of AGI Aspen Group International, LLC, offices located in Gulf Shores, AL. They have consulted with boards across the United States and on three continents, focusing primarily in working with boards of education. P: 303-478-0125 or 303-250-9000
Email: aspen@aspengroup.org www.aspengroup.org*