

Yes, Virginia, School Boards Can Operate at the Policy Level

Since 1983 and the release of “A Nation at Risk,” public education has suffered scrutiny, criticism and outright derision unprecedented in American history. Those of us who chose to work in the field of education, either occupationally or by election, were maligned and accused of everything short of criminal activity. The school board has not escaped that fate.

While much of the criticism has been unwarranted and misplaced, some of it has been justified. There is little basis on which to argue that change was not needed and that the priorities of many school boards were suspect.

What has been discouraging is the failure of many of our critics to recognize the monumental change and improvement that have taken place. Today’s schools barely resemble those of 1983. While the physical surroundings may be much the same, what happens inside our buildings is, in most instances, astoundingly different.

Something else has happened in public education since 1983, something that remains largely unrecognized. That change is this: school boards now, more than ever before, recognize their need to govern with a focus on student achievement.

Historically, most school board agendas have been cluttered with information and action items dealing with virtually every facet of the district’s operation, with one notable exception: education. Boards have spent their time making decisions about buses, buildings, bills, trips, schedules, roofs, playgrounds, personnel, equipment, insurance and janitors.

Few boards have found adequate time to establish a culture that allowed them to spend time on the end results desired from students' experiences in school and to assess the success of programs in meeting those ends. It isn’t that boards haven’t cared about such things; it has been due more to the absence of governance structure that meaningfully focuses the board to do its business—governing, not managing, the education process.

In the face of mounting criticism, many boards have asserted themselves to make a bigger, more effective difference. But often that asserted vigor has led boards to act in the wrong way at the wrong level. If boards had not done enough, they reasoned, they would do more. They would get right into the system and be sure it worked, and they would do it at the operational level. Although well intentioned, such boards have found themselves accused of micromanaging, meddling, and hindering progress. What has been lacking is a sound structure and vision of what a school board can and should do, at its level—the governance level—to add value to public education.

A Meaningful Board Role

Over the years we have asked school board members why they ran for the board. Almost invariably they have said that their motivation was to improve student achievement.

We have asked board members to define their primary role. Almost without exception, they have said it is to develop or approve policy.

But when we analyze what boards have spent time doing, precious little time has been spent dealing with "kid issues." The focus on policy, and how to use it to govern, has been sacrificed in favor of fixing day-to-day operational problems.

Making the shift away from "fixing things" to governing at the policy level can be challenging. Exactly how does a board govern through policy? How can a board do its job, not the administrator's job?

More fundamental questions: What is governance? What is a sound role definition for a school board? If the board truly is a policy-making body, how can it use governing policies to increase learning?

There may be several right answers to the questions, but at the base of them all is one clear fact: the only way a board can expect to add value to a school district is to do its job well, not somebody else's job. Only the board can govern; the superintendent can't, the teachers can't, and the principals can't. They have their own jobs to do. While the board is obligated to ensure all those other jobs are well done, the board is not qualified or positioned to do all those other jobs.

If the board commits to focus priority attention on student achievement issues, it must provide for itself time and structure to do so. That means something must go. That something should be board time inappropriately spent on operational issues.

It isn't that these operational decisions aren't important; they are. But the board doesn't have to make every important decision. The board should make every important board decision. It should expect and demand good administrative decisions to be made by administrators and good instructional decisions to be made by teachers and other educators.

What is needed is a more mature, logical governance structure that allows the board to truly add value to public education, a structure that recognizes that the school board is different from school administration and that its contribution must be at a different level.

School board members have only so much time to give, and that time, being valuable, must be spent doing the right things.

The right things have to do with increased student achievement, meeting taxpayer expectations by providing overall quality at least equal to cost, establishing meaningful and ongoing community engagement processes, and operating with clear, accountable governance processes.

Coherent Governance®

One reason school boards often haven't performed as well as their members expect is that the governance structure does not encourage quality board performance. Traditional governance structures are filled with opportunities for role confusion, diversions, misplaced priorities and wasted time.

We concluded years ago that the governance structure itself—not the people who operate within it—could be the problem. We asked these questions:

- What is preventing good, dedicated people from enjoying the satisfaction of a job well done in meeting their governance expectations?
- Why is it that boards universally identify policy as their unique domain, yet find themselves making all kinds of decisions at the operational level?
- Why is role clarification such a constant challenge?

In pursuit of a means to help boards find answers to these barriers to good governance, we created a very simple, but yet thorough, operating system to help position boards for success as they struggle for a meaningful leadership role. We call it Coherent Governance. The model features only four categories of policies, and usually only a handful of policies in each of the four quadrants.

A typical board Coherent Governance manual includes 40 or fewer policies...total! This is an unheard of concept for most school boards who struggle with—or choose to ignore—3-ring binders of lengthy policies, which usually reach 300 to 400 in number.

These are the four policy categories in a Coherent Governance structure:

- Governance Culture—how the board will govern itself first, before attempting to govern the district! These value statements establish the culture of the board, stipulate how members will interact with each other, identify the primary focus of the board and disciplines for maintaining that focus, and in general establish the board's and board members' roles and commitments.
- Board CEO Relationships—how authority will be delegated by the board to its only employee, the CEO. These policies clarify the Board-CEO relationship, establish the CEO's job expectations, and specify the process for evaluating CEO performance.

- Operational Expectations—the latitude the board gives the CEO within which to operate. The OE policies define the board’s expectations for every area of the organization’s operations, and in essence become the standards by which operations will be evaluated. The CEO is obligated to meet the standards set out in the OE policies, but is free to choose the means for doing so, within clearly defined parameters established by the board. This feature of Coherent Governance can establish absolute clarity of roles, eliminating much of the confusion and rancor that occurs between boards and CEOs.

- Results—the ultimate value the board seeks to provide for its clients, the students. Results policies are fashioned to address the toughest governance responsibility of an elected leader representing stakeholder interest. They answer the question: what benefits, for whom, at what cost to the district?

The fundamental attraction to Coherent Governance typically rests in the Results policies. This is where boards will spend the majority of their time. Results will be the board’s ongoing focus: Are we achieving our stated end results for our students? Are the Results consistent with our owners’ (taxpayers’) expectations? Do we have the right resource allocation to enable us to meet those stated outcomes? If we aren’t making reasonable progress, why not?

Contrast these questions to those that might apply to boards operating at a different level: "Which is preferable, red or gray brick? Is a two-inch thick wrestling mat really that much better than a one-inch mat? Should we allow the seniors to take a trip to Mexico? How do we know this is the best price for copy paper?"

All may seem to be important questions. But are they worthy of the time and attention of five (or seven, or nine) important community leaders? Are they policy decisions?

The point? The board does not need to make every important decision. It does need written policies in place that express the board’s values and provide a consistent framework within which those decisions can be made at the management level. Then the board is freed to concentrate on student achievement.

One reason we so enthusiastically embrace Coherent Governance is that this model holds great promise as a structure to allow the board to do the job board members tell us they were elected to do—to ensure that kids learn. It is a model that forces the board to pay priority attention to the Results the district commits to deliver to kids on behalf of the owners, or citizens. It contains the elements necessary to clarify who does what by clearly specifying the domain for board work versus the playing field for the superintendent. And it forces the board to commit in policy how it will conduct its own business and how it will relate with the superintendent and staff.

The transition to Coherent Governance is not necessarily an easy one; established cultures don't give way to new ones without a bit of trauma. But for those boards willing to make the shift, the results can be a cultural transformation not only for the board, but for the entire organization. And when it happens, it is a thing of beauty!

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