

the ability of both parties to carry out their governance and management responsibilities, but rather to take the time to review, discuss, and commit to appropriate roles.

POLICY-DRIVEN MEETINGS

The board meeting's impact on board-superintendent relations lies in the fact that the meeting is the vehicle through which each party demonstrates and meets its obligations to the leadership team. When you give careful attention to planning the agenda and the agenda items, you make it easier for both you and the board to pay conscious attention to your respective leadership roles. Discussion of and action on policies should occupy the majority of the board's attention.

This does not exclude other items such as the need for the board to exercise its representative function with constituents. Listening to the community and working with it to shape the direction of the district in a way that supports powerful teaching and learning is critical to the board, superintendent, and district's success. However, the board meeting is the actual time when the board properly exercises its governance responsibilities.

Using most of board meeting time to deal with policy issues respects and acknowledges the important governance functions for which the board is responsible. Carver (1997) makes the point well: "Because policies permeate and dominate all aspects of organizational life, they present the most powerful lever for the exercise of leadership" (p. 25).

Effective policies establish direction for the district and superintendent in a wide variety of areas including curriculum, instruction, assessment, student support services, human resources, business services, and facilities. They should deal with results, parameters within which staff is expected to operate, board-staff relations, and processes by which the board represents its constituency, provides strategic leadership and monitors progress toward goals. As superintendent, you then provide the information the board requires to do its job well and make recommendations for action when appropriate.

If you or members of the board choose to "load the agenda" with discussions and actions that are in essence not directly related to the board's governance responsibilities, the board's ability to do its mission-critical work well is impacted adversely. It is far better for a board meeting to be shorter and focus on the right things than longer and filled with matters that more appropriately fall within the superintendent's range of responsibilities. We reiterated that, since agenda planning is the superintendent's role, you take the lead to make sure the agenda furthers the board's role to govern, not manage. A board meeting should not appear to be a staff meeting with the board seemingly directing the daily work of the superintendent and the staff.

Stating that board meetings should reflect the appropriate governance and management roles of superintendents and boards is one thing; doing it is quite another. But there are two useful ways for the superintendent-board leadership team to translate perspectives on governance and management into action. The first is your commitment to developing a board agenda that is focused on mission-critical work. The second is to actually plan each board agenda so it is focused on the mission-critical teaching and learning work of the district (Goodman et al., 1997). If, as the authors recommend, boards and superintendents attend to vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity, they will function as effective leadership teams that stay focused on this mission-critical work of student achievement. Because commitment to mission drives everything else, we will look at that first.

Mission

When we consider the roles and responsibilities of boards and superintendents, we look at what each does to enable the district to achieve its mission and how board meetings either support or inhibit that work. The board through its policies and processes clearly defines the mission and monitors progress toward that mission. The superintendent articulates the mission to staff and community and takes the actions necessary to make sure the mission is accomplished.

We believe every board meeting should include acknowledgment of successful mission-critical activities within the district, discussions or actions that enable the district to accomplish its mission, and/or the monitoring of progress toward achievement of the mission. The board meeting itself is mission-critical—or at least it should be. It is one of the most important opportunities to articulate to students, staff, and community exactly what the district is all about and what is being done to educate all the students well. If the agenda does not acknowledge the importance of this critical work, what is the message sent to the community?

Schools are institutions of teaching and learning. If learning is the product, then teaching is the means to ensure that learning occurs. As superintendent, it is your role to educate the board as to the conditions and activities necessary if learning is to occur. The board through its governance role does its best to encourage, provide, and reward these conditions and activities. All board members and the superintendent need to be absolutely clear as to the characteristics of powerful teaching and learning and then model those in their work.

Whatever we want to happen in the classroom and schools should be modeled at the board meeting. Activities inhibiting powerful teaching and learning should be avoided and eliminated. As an example, we know that properly done, learning in groups can improve student achievement. Board meetings, then, should reflect what we know about positive group-learning conditions. We also know that learning occurs when people

discover something as a result of a "listening" perspective that means to listen and respect. Board members place on superintendents, board members this at the board meeting.

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Vision

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discover something they did not know before. Usually this happens as a result of a "listening" experience—especially when it introduces a perspective that might be new. Do board meetings reflect a willingness to listen and respect different viewpoints? We hope so. How the board listens, considers, and discusses sends a message about the value its members place on teaching and learning. Our belief is that just like superintendents, board members are learners as well as teachers and will model this at the board meeting.

The New England Governance Study, *Getting There From Here* (Goodman, 1997), provides us with thoughtful perspectives on how board meetings might stay focused on this mission-critical work. While they are intended to guide relations between the superintendent and board in general, the concepts of vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity may be used as a framework for agenda planning and board meeting conduct. We will look at each to see how it might be useful in this regard.

Vision

The superintendent and board, with input from others, develop a vision of a high-performing district. What will it look like around here if everyone—students and staff—is achieving at a high level? Vision is important because it defines direction. It helps maintain an important sense of focus in districts where there is a constant tug to add more and more to the plate or undertake one innovation after another. We recommend that at least four board meetings a year be devoted to a vision-related discussion. Strategic planning includes environmental scanning, assessing needs, and goal setting. Each of these is an important component of the vision discussion. This discussion, by the way, also affords a unique opportunity to get staff and community involved in charting the direction of the district and in building support and understanding of the teaching and learning mission.

Structure

Every organization needs to have a system in place to help it move toward its vision and accomplish mission-critical work. That system is the structure of the organization—namely the policies, plans, processes, and human, fiscal, and physical resources that encourage growth and improvement. Almost every board meeting should have one or more structure-related topics on the agenda. However, a word of caution: The structure discussions must be related to the board's governance responsibilities, not the superintendent's management responsibilities. Examples in personnel and finance are instructive.

In the area of personnel, the board's job is to establish policies that help the district hire and maintain high-quality staff. Working conditions,

compensation, and expectations for professional development and evaluation are all appropriate policy areas for the board. But there is a big difference between saying the board expects evaluation of staff performance to be done and engaging in that activity itself. The latter is clearly the responsibility of the superintendent, who cannot and should not be held accountable for staff performance without the authority to conduct evaluation. When the board takes on the superintendent's job, it weakens the entire accountability system. The exception, of course, is the evaluation of the superintendent and the board's evaluation of itself. Both are board responsibilities.

Finance is also an important governance responsibility. The board should have policies in place that guide and regulate such practices as bidding, purchasing, auditing, and protecting reserves and fund balances. To exercise this responsibility, the board must receive accurate and reliable financial information from the superintendent. The board should also establish budget priorities, make sure these priorities are aligned to the vision and strategic goals, and work to ensure resources are allocated to these priorities. As a wise superintendent once reminded a board, "A goal without resources is not a goal, it is an illusion." Planning and conducting the board meeting so the board can exercise its fiduciary responsibilities under the law is critical. The board's job is not to engage in discussions of line items in the budget such as the telephone bill. Remember, when the board is spending time on items it should not, it is not spending time on items it should.

Accountability

A good way to think about accountability is through a process called "the cycle of inquiry." This process is data driven. Information is gathered from a variety of sources and is used to develop both strategic long- and short-term goals. Superintendents and boards then work together as a leadership team to set targets and identify indicators to track progress toward reaching the goals. These indicators are then used to determine what is working well and where improvements are needed. As a result, new goals may be set.

When it is working well, the cycle of inquiry clearly establishes who is accountable for what. At the board meeting, for example, the board and superintendent together review data that indicate the extent to which established goals and indicators are being met. Completed goals are celebrated and removed from the list. Existing goals are refined and new goals added. Responsibility for achieving the goals is assigned to the superintendent who in turn directs the work of the staff to meet goals and report on indicators of progress. The superintendent and staff also identify barriers to success and plan for improvement. The superintendent communicates progress on the plan to the board. This report of progress and

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achievement would constitute the fundamental basis for the superintendent's evaluation.

To keep the focus on teaching and learning, we suggest that student achievement and the conditions which support it, such as a high-quality teaching staff, sufficient resources, and a strong leadership team, become the basis for the cycle of inquiry in general and accountability in particular. We believe every board meeting should include items on the agenda that have something to do with the efforts of the superintendent and board to strengthen student achievement, whether it is goal setting, allocation of resources, or evaluation of progress toward established goals. In that sense, accountability is not an annual event involving the superintendent's evaluation or the board's assessment of itself, but an ongoing activity that sends a message that data-driven accountability is how we do things around here.

Advocacy

Board meetings provide an opportunity for boards and superintendents to advocate for the cause of public education. When that occurs, the public understands that the board–superintendent team is united in the belief that public education is the vehicle for helping all students irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status meet high standards. The advocacy role includes reporting on interactions with legislators or having elected officials come to the meeting. This is a good opportunity for the legislators, the board, and you to promote policies and practices that improve opportunities for all students.

Other advocacy actions include acknowledgments and recognitions of individual and group accomplishments and inviting presentations from schools and community groups. Time for a report from each individual board member, a section that appears on many board agendas, too often provides an excuse to bring up topics that are not on the agenda. Instead, work with the board to report on efforts to influence legislation, communicate with the community, and promote partnerships and alliances with the public and private sectors.

Unity

The board meeting is an opportunity for staff and community to watch interactions between the board and superintendent. If the community sees the board and superintendent working together to move toward achievement of the district's vision, honoring their respective governance and management roles, and doing mission-critical work, it is far more likely to have confidence in the district's leadership. The purpose is not to eliminate conflict or disagreement. In fact, it works to the betterment of the system if the public knows that decisions are made after consideration of different

perspectives and thorough discussion. We agree with those who advocate that we should be tough on the issues, but soft on the people.

Modeling what we expect to occur in every classroom and school should be the guiding principle. In that sense, the leadership team should model effective problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies, keeping personal interest and ego in check. As Goethe said, "Things which matter most should never be at the mercy of things which matter least." The welfare of students always comes first.

While we recognize that state laws require boards to approve a wide variety of actions, those pertaining to vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity matter the most. These five concepts are one set of criteria by which boards and superintendents can evaluate the effectiveness of board meetings.

In summary, we suggest that for board meetings to build a strong foundation for the accomplishment of district goals and demonstrate a positive, united superintendent-board leadership team, they must do the following:

- Have an agenda that respects the leadership roles of board members and superintendents, but differentiates between the governance role of the board and the executive officer responsibilities of the superintendent.
- Develop and maintain steady, unrelenting focus on the mission and what it takes to accomplish that mission.
- Model the principles of good teaching and learning.
- Use the guiding principles of vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity to keep the board and superintendent focused on the unique responsibilities of each and function as a high-achieving leadership team.

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