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Governance Brief

Defining Governance, *Issue 3*

Governance Practices

This is the third in CSBA's Defining Governance series which summarizes school governance research on the attributes of effective school boards. The first issue developed a definition for school governance. The second issue addressed the importance of developing board commitments in the areas of core beliefs, productive partnerships and board values, norms and protocols. This third issue focuses on practices that contribute to effective governance. These effective practices begin with board commitments and increase the board's capacity to fulfill its responsibilities. Governance research identifies three major areas of effective school board practices, including improving governance, using data, and focusing on the foundations of successful education reform.

Effective school boards focus on improving governance

Effective boards are intentional about developing their own capacity to govern through practices specifically designed to focus their attention on improving their board skills. These practices include board development and monitoring and evaluating board performance.

Board development

Board development can improve the board's ability to work together successfully¹ and translate into more effective leadership and governance.² However, school board members—and newly elected board members in particular—often receive little or no training for their governance work.³ Board development includes learning about education trends and practices, but also focuses on learning about governance roles, knowledge and skills.⁴ When boards are better educated about the work

School governance defined: School boards ensure success for all students by making decisions that fulfill legal mandates and align district systems and resources to ensure the long-term fiscal stability of the district. To do this, boards must act collectively and openly, be guided by community interests and informed by recommendations of the superintendent and professional staff.

of governing, they are more likely to form an effective team.⁵ Learning together about board roles has been identified as one of the key practices of boards in districts that effectively advance student achievement.⁶ Similar findings are evident in governance research outside education. Exceptional non-profit boards build learning opportunities into their regular governing activities both in and out of the boardroom.⁷ These learnings ensure that board members are well informed about the organization and the professionals working there, as well as the board's own roles, responsibilities and performance.⁸

Monitoring and evaluating board performance

School board researchers conclude that boards in successful districts create mechanisms for accountability within and across the system,⁹ including holding themselves accountable.¹⁰ This is the second core aspect of strengthening a board's capacity to govern: to set governance performance targets, monitor performance toward those targets and conduct board evaluations. CSBA's Professional Governance Standards (2000) assert that an effective board periodically evaluates its own effectiveness. Eadie makes the point explicitly.

"...every truly high-impact board I have ever worked with has played an active, formal role in managing its own performance as a governing body, not only by taking accountability for the board's collective performance but also making sure that individual board members meet well-defined performance targets."¹¹

—Doug Eadie

To sustain their focus on improving governance, boards must create protected time for their developmental work and integrate these practices into the board calendar and meeting agendas.¹² A fundamental aspect of the board's development is the effectiveness of its meetings. Boards can only perform their governance work at board meetings, where they have limited time and often extensive issues that require their attention. So the effectiveness of these meetings is critical to effective governance. According to Donald McAdams, founder of the Center for Reform of School Systems, public board meetings can influence community perception about the district and its leadership. "Crisp, efficient, well-ordered meetings send the signal that the board knows its business and is taking its stewardship of the schools seriously."¹³

Effective school boards focus on the foundations of successful reform

Research and literature on the effectiveness of school districts and boards reveals three core elements of successful reforms that effective boards embrace as foundational to their change efforts: systems thinking, a culture of continuous learning, and distributed leadership.

Systems thinking

K-12 school districts and county offices are complex organizations with many interacting parts. Changes in any one part of the organization will have consequences, often unintended, in other parts of the institution. Embracing systems thinking means that boards are intentional about learning the dynamics of the systems they govern and recognizing how changes will impact the entire organization.¹⁴ Approaching school governance with a systems thinking mindset includes the understanding that large, complex systems are inherently resistant to change without careful planning and strong implementation.¹⁵ Because the systems are complex, the changes cannot be isolated; "... improvement doesn't mean doing one thing exceedingly well,

it is doing many aligned things well."¹⁶ This alignment is not theoretical, but experiential. Systemic change requires support for the change in every school, with all elements of the system interconnected and involved, day after day.¹⁷

A culture of continuous learning

Boards maximize the performance of educators by creating a culture of continuous learning at all levels. In the field of K-12 teacher professional development, professional learning communities (PLC) have gained strong momentum and wide acceptance. One of the most important characteristics of PLC's is focusing on collective rather than individual development. The board, working with the superintendent, creates and sustains this ongoing development through goals, policies and resource decisions that create dedicated time and space for collaborative learning. This time is dedicated to collectively studying and addressing classroom challenges in instruction and assessment.¹⁸ In a culture of high trust, it provides educators the freedom and confidence to openly share mistakes and constructively analyze classroom practice.¹⁹ Building this culture of continuous learning requires boards to understand the characteristics of quality professional development and to invest in it through intentional changes in the allocation of people, time, and money.²⁰

Distributed leadership

Boards and superintendents provide the top-level leadership that moves an education system towards fulfilling its mission. Recent research has revealed the importance of expanding leadership throughout the system. McAdams argues that capacity, accountability, and empowerment—giving adults as much power as possible to do their work—are the foundation of any successfully theory of change.²¹ Delagardelle (2008) identified a balance between districtwide direction and building-level autonomy, extending the relationship between the board and the superintendent to other district leaders, including central office staff, site principals and teacher leaders. Other researchers have described this empowerment as defined autonomy—giving authority and responsibility to principals within clear parameters for outcomes,²² or as a balance between system-wide consistency and flexibility.²³ This is also described as building instructional and leadership capacity systemically and is predicated on the belief that sustained improvement can only be achieved when all the educators—principals and teachers together—are focused on improving learning.²⁴

Effective school boards use data for their governing work

The use of data by boards is well-established. Research in the non-profit sector reveals that effective boards are well informed about the institution and the professions that serve there.²⁵ These boards are analytical and embrace a culture of inquiry by seeking information and pushing back on assumptions and conclusions.²⁶ Effective school boards also use data.

Data at the system level

School systems are complex and boards need a variety of data to have a complete picture of the system. The kinds of data boards need includes district and school level student outcomes data, demographic data, business operational data and perception data. Boards act strategically by not only focusing on the district level data, but through the board's system-wide response to the data.

Data guides decision-making and accountability

The National School Boards Association's framework of eight interrelated board actions that lead to raising student achievement includes continuous improvement: "Good data empowers the board and staff to refine, strengthen, modify, correct, and/or eliminate existing programs and practices to get better results."²⁷ This is echoed in the Center for Public Education's eight research-supported characteristics of board effectiveness: "Effective boards are data savvy: they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement."²⁸ The Lighthouse Study identified seven areas of board performance that lead to improvements in student achievement, including using data to set expectations, monitor improvement and apply pressure for accountability.²⁹ The board, with the superintendent, works to reach agreement on what the data means qualitatively—the story behind the data. Boards also determine which data will be used to share progress towards district goals.³⁰

Data use guided by policy

Data collection and analysis is an intensive task, and not all data is worth gathering. The processes for the use of data and data dashboards should be guided by board policy that clarifies its purpose, content, cycle of review, and sample displays as exhibits to accompany the policy.³¹ Boards need to work with their superintendent to develop a clear and focused plan for collect-

ing data that is necessary for monitoring district performance, and provide sufficient funding for the data functions that the board requests.³²

Summary

The research on effective K-12 school governance surfaces three practices of governance that are correlated with board effectiveness. First, effective school boards commit to improving their capacity to govern. They create protected time for their developmental work and model the culture of continuous learning by concentrating their efforts on learning about governance, setting performance targets, and monitoring and evaluating their performance. Second, effective boards focus on the foundations of successful reform of employing systems-thinking in their governance work, building a culture of continuously learning and extending leadership for learning throughout the system. Finally, boards use data to make decisions and monitor district performance. They study demographic, operational, outcome, and perception data. Boards use this data to reach agreement on the relative strength of the district's systems so that they can set goals to address areas where growth or improvement is desired.

Visit www.csba.org/effectivegovernance for more governance resources.

Endnotes

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