Governance Brief

Defining Governance, *Issue 5*
Engaging the Community

This is the fifth and final brief in the Defining Governance series, which summarizes key research on the characteristics and practices of effective school boards. Topics of the first four briefs were: 1) defining school governance; 2) establishing governance agreements; 3) engaging in effective governance practices; and 4) taking action to set direction, align the organization and ensure accountability. This brief focuses on the board's responsibility for community engagement. Governance research identifies the relationship between the board and the institution's stakeholders as a primary governance responsibility[1] and that community involvement is one of seven conditions identified by researchers as necessary for school renewal that leads to raising student achievement.[2] This brief will explore what research says about effective community engagement.

Governance is: 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.

Evolving context of community representation and engagement

Over time, the community engagement role of boards has been dramatically impacted by a consolidation in the number of districts, the increasing size of districts, changes in district demographics, and changes in technology. After 1900, local communities became more diverse, schools became more complex, and direct participatory democracy became increasingly challenging.[3] Between 1948 and 1961, school districts grew fewer in number and larger in size, reducing the total number of districts nationally by more than 50,000. On any given day the 1970s, "three districts disappeared forever between breakfast and dinner." As a result, the relative number of constituents represented by board members increased significantly. In the 1930s, school board members represented an average of about 200 people. By 1970, that number had jumped to an average of 3,000.[4] Local communities are becoming increasingly diverse. For example, 1.4 million English language learners made up 23% of California's K-12 student population in 2010-11.[5] Finally, the rapidly growing access to information and digital devices is impacting concepts and practices of community engagement.

Year	Number of Districts
1948	89,000
1953	55,000
1961	31,000
2007	14,000

Community perceptions of engagement

Recent research on community engagement and participative democracy offer valuable insights regarding how community members value and perceive engagement efforts. A 2009 report suggests that at least two critical elements of increasing engagement include maximizing the relevant and credible information community members need and increasing their capacity to engage with information.[6] However, data alone does not always address people's concerns, particularly if community

members come to the table of engagement with a history of skepticism or distrust. In addition, while many agree that public engagement is essential to school improvement, there is often not a shared understanding of what that engagement should look like.[7] Community engagement has to be a two-way conversation based upon a shared understanding of what the problems are. When conversations are framed thoughtfully, community participants assert that K-12 education is important to them. They believe they have insights worth sharing and that schools do not bear the responsibility for educating children alone.

Effective boards create clear community engagement processes

Effective boards clarify their expectations for community engagement through policy.[8] Information is essential to informing these conversations and district and board leadership is essential to ensuring that these discussions are respectful and productive.[9] Researchers identify some common mistakes that districts and boards make in stakeholder engagement. One is for leaders to assume that good works speak for themselves and as a result, to under-invest in community relations. Another is to communicate only in times of need or crisis. Finally, approaches to stakeholder engagement are often limited and superficial.[10]

In contrast, research by the Public Education Network,[11] a national organization working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education, identifies the characteristics of effective engagement between districts, boards, and community members. Such effective engagement is:

1. **Strategic:** focusing on student achievement with enough specificity to give participants confidence that the engagement will lead to real change.

2. **Systemic:** ensuring participants understand the inter-connectedness and complexity of the school system.

3. **Structured:** establishing processes that capture participants' insights regarding outcomes and courses of action, which can create momentum and lead to accountability.

4. **Cyclical:** these engagement efforts should be ongoing. An iterative process can provide continuous support and pressure for implementing change.

Research conducted by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy, identifies two key strategies that support such effective stakeholder engagement.[12]

1. Provide consistent opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

This may include learning about community perceptions of previous attempts at communication and reform. Information provided by the district in these conversations should be easy to access and understand. Districts should clarify who is responsible for receiving and responding to stakeholder inquiries and ensure that outreach efforts include a wide range of constituents and a variety of approaches.

2. Invest more in existing resources.

   a. Invest in teachers. Teachers are often underutilized for community outreach and communication. Teachers may serve as the first point of contact for parents, students and community members. They are often in the best position to build strong, individual relationships with stakeholders, and to become a trusted source of information. For example, teachers of students who are not proficient in English often have the language skills to communicate with non-English speaking community members.

   b. Work with community-based organizations. These organizations often have deep experience working with communities. If boards and districts can identify shared interests with local community outreach organizations, the district may be able to increase its capacity for effective engagement through partnerships.

   c. Re-invigorate existing local school councils. In surveys, district staff and community organizers agree that these councils are an under-used resource.

Effective boards use engagement processes to support school improvement

In effective districts, these processes for community engagement established by the board are the means through which boards: 1) create a sense of urgency for district improvement; 2) encourage participation; 3) develop partnerships; and 4) build civic capacity.

Effective boards create a sense of urgency

CSBA's Professional Governance Standards[13] assert that effective boards "provide community leadership on educational issues and advocate on behalf of students and public education at the local, state and federal levels." In districts that successfully raise student achievement, boards take responsibility for informing the local community about the status of student achievement, identifying problems, and offering a compelling case for the urgent need for change. This role of sharing data that identifies problems and creates a sense of urgency about the need for change can be a difficult shift for board members, who are accustomed to building confidence in the school system by articulating its strengths and accomplishments.[14]

Research indicates that while data might highlight critical need, the sharing of data alone may not garner support for change.[15] Gaining support for district change requires building trust with parents and community leaders, anchored in a shared concern for the children in their community.[16] Beyond establishing the need for change, effective districts build consensus with stakeholders that the change will be a top priority for the district and will focus on improving student achievement.[17]

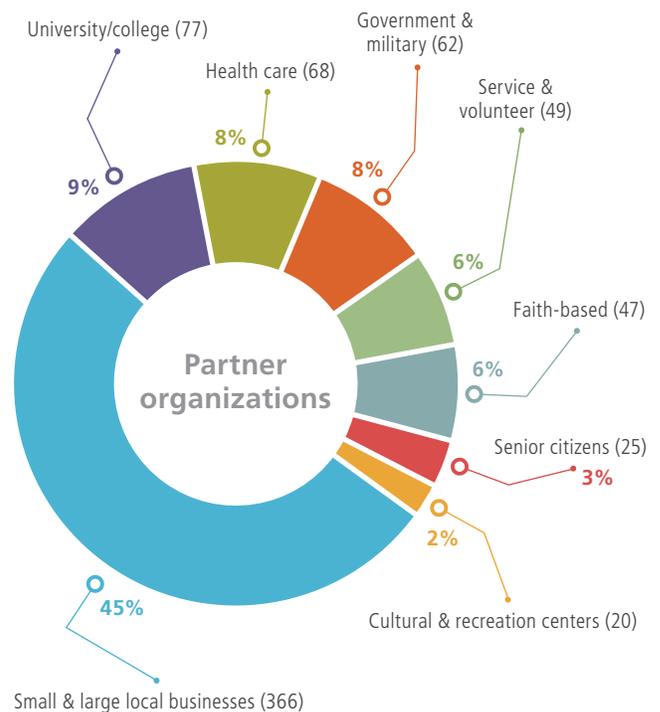## Effective boards involve community in vision and planning

Effective boards create opportunities to hear the views of a diverse range of community members. These opportunities, provided during regular board meetings as well as in other public venues, solicit stakeholder input for the district's vision[18] and long-range planning processes.[19] Ensuring that these processes include all community voices—particularly from community members who may not have been previously included such as non-English speaking groups—can be challenging and may require complex processes.[20] These major efforts to gain community support are considered necessary for implementing district improvement. In studies of districts that have made significant progress in raising student achievement, researchers found that boards not only involved community, they "believed in them as part of the larger team."[21]

Effective boards build community partnerships

Establishing partnerships is identified as a key activity of effective boards.[22] Boards use district policies to define roles and responsibilities for community partnerships,

establish expectations for the participation of district leadership in partnership efforts, and allocate resources to support these efforts. Surveys reveal that schools often 1) construe partnerships too narrowly, focusing on a limited range of student-centered efforts, and 2) focus on for-profit local and national businesses as potential partners (Chart 1). These results indicate that schools have room to broaden their efforts to include family-, school- and community-centered partnerships and to widen their circle of potential partners.[23]

Chart 1

University/college (77) — 9%
Health care (68) — 8%
Government & military (62) — 8%
Service & volunteer (49) — 6%
Faith-based (47) — 6%
Senior citizens (25) — 3%
Cultural & recreation centers (20) — 2%
Small & large local businesses (366) — 45%

Partner organizations

Effective boards build support and civic capacity

Building community support for the beliefs, commitments, and reform policies that the board has established to raise student achievement can help districts avoid the abandonment of reform efforts that can follow transitions in board and district leadership.[24] A 2012 study supports this view: "the best outcomes occur when both district leadership and voters understand that successful reform requires a long-term commitment." When the board, superintendent, and district as a whole reach an understanding with the community about why reforms are needed, the progress being made toward reform goals, and the importance of sustaining reform efforts—community members are more likely to identify potential candidates who can sustain

the reforms.[25] A report by the Academic Development Institute recommends that districts create "recruitment pipelines" that introduce stakeholders to board member responsibilities and the role and work of the board.[26] Effective and shared board self-evaluation processes contribute to these efforts. When boards evaluate their performance and share the results, "it tends to attract the attention of qualified board candidates."[27]

Summary

Effective school boards build and maintain strong relationships in their local communities by clarifying the purpose of community engagement, and ensuring that engagement processes are strategic, systemic, and structured. Through the engagement process, effective boards build a sense of urgency for reform, and involve stakeholders in establishing a vision and long-term plan. Effective boards also create structures and processes for establishing and maintaining partnerships, and build the capacity of the community to support district reform through transitions in leadership as well as to attract future leaders to the work of school governance.

Endnotes

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4   Kirst, M. (2008). The evolving role of school boards. In T.A. Editor, *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation.* (pp. 37-59). Rowan & Littlefield Education

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