

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are “standards”?

Standards are commonly agreed upon principles often used as criteria for comparison or measurement. In public education, the standards movement has led to the development of new student standards which describe what students should know and be expected to do at each grade level. California has adopted some of the most rigorous academic standards for students in the world. There are professional standards for teachers as well.

What are the Professional Governance Standards?

Professional Governance Standards describe the commonly agreed upon principles for the effective local governance of California’s public schools. The standards reflect consensus among hundreds of elected board members, superintendents and policy experts and are based on the California School Boards Association (CSBA) Effective Governance System and Masters in Governance curriculum. The 270-plus member CSBA Delegate Assembly formally adopted Professional Governance Standards for district boards in November 2000. Standards for county boards were developed in collaboration with the California County Boards of Education and approved in October 2001. A set of district superintendents governance standards have also been adopted jointly by CSBA and the Association for California School Administrators.

What do the standards describe?

Individuals representing diverse viewpoints and experiences are elected to serve on school boards, but once elected, these individuals must work together as a team with the superintendent to govern effectively. The standards seek to generate a greater understanding about what constitutes effective governance by describing: 1) the responsibilities of individual trustees, 2) how boards can work together with the superintendent to achieve a unity of purpose, and 3) what the board’s specific jobs are as they relate to vision, structure, accountability and community leadership.

What is the intent of the Professional Governance Standards?

The intent of the standards is to support boards in their efforts to govern effectively and to enhance the public’s understanding about the critical responsibilities of school boards.

Why did CSBA develop Professional Governance Standards for boards?

CSBA, which represents 1,000 of the state’s local school districts and county boards of education, is committed to providing school leaders with the support they need to effectively carry out their vital jobs. As part of the statewide and nationwide discussion about accountability, many individuals and entities have been taking a closer look at school board governance. We recognize that any efforts to define the role of boards must be led by the practitioners themselves – locally elected board members – based on the research and training that has proven to be effective. Research also shows that true education reform must be led and sustained by local boards.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

What does the term “governance” mean?

CSBA defines governance as the “act of transforming the needs, wishes and desires of the community into policies that direct the community’s schools.” One of the hallmarks of our democratic society is that lay citizens are elected to “govern” our public institutions.

What is the “governance team”?

The “governance team” includes all members of the board and the superintendent.

What are the benefits for districts and county boards that adopt and utilize the new Professional Governance Standards?

First, the standards can enhance the effective governance capabilities of school boards, including promoting greater self-accountability. Second, the standards can help raise awareness among the public, media and local education stakeholders about the critical jobs boards are charged with carrying out. In the long run, any steps we take as school leaders to enhance the public’s understanding of school governance and to enhance our own effectiveness will only help to maximize the public’s confidence in the most vital of public institutions – the public schools.

How should boards adopt and utilize the standards?

CSBA has provided each district and county board with an initial Professional Governance Standards packet that includes information about adopting and utilizing the standards. These materials are also available on the CSBA Web site at www.csba.org. Once adopted, the Professional Governance Standards can be utilized in an ongoing manner. After all, educating the public about school boards and striving to operate effectively as a board are ongoing commitments. Adopting the Professional Governance Standards signals the board’s commitment to effective governance – but the standards serve as only part of the framework for the board’s ongoing efforts.

Our board already has an effective governance team. The members are experienced and work well with the superintendent. Should we adopt and use the new Professional Governance Standards?

Absolutely. Boards that have established a highly effective organizational culture can benefit from adopting the standards. First, the standards provide a way for these boards to help their local media and communities to better understand what the board is already doing well. Adopting the standards also helps to formalize the components of the culture, so that over time the same principles of effective governance can be commonly understood and practiced, even though the membership of the board may change. By helping to communicate the complex jobs of school boards, the Professional Governance Standards also help support the board’s pursuit of continuing education.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Our board has experienced some serious challenges. How will the standards help us?

The standards provide a framework for boards to enhance their effectiveness. They are designed to focus a board's efforts and enhance understanding about what it takes to operate effectively as a team. For a board that has been experiencing challenges, reaching a common understanding about the key building blocks of effective governance is often an essential first step. It is also helpful for parents and the local media to understand the jobs that boards are charged with carrying out. The Professional Governance Standards help provide this foundation. Many governance teams will want to enhance their commitment to effective governance by pursuing continuing education.

What types of training and support for the standards are available to boards?

CSBA offers a wide range of continuing education programs that are fully aligned with the standards. In particular, the Masters in Governance program offers comprehensive coursework in all areas of the standards. This program is offered both regionally and at statewide locations. The participation of multiple members of the board and superintendent are encouraged. In addition, CSBA provides Single District Governance Services that help individual governance teams agree on a governance framework that incorporates the standards. CSBA's extensive menu of conferences and events including the Annual Education Conference, Legislative Action Conference, Curriculum Institute, New and First-Term Board Member Institute, Policy Institutes and Board President's Workshop also provide opportunities for board members to strengthen their skills in a number of areas related to the standards.

Additionally, CSBA has an online Standards Support Center on its Web site (www.csba.org) which provides additional information about the standards, and a clearinghouse of ideas from other districts that utilize the standards. CSBA also sends periodic communications to participating boards with updates and tips for utilizing the standards, including sample articles for local publication.

Many of CSBA's programs and services also directly support the board in carrying out its jobs. For instance, CSBA's Policy Services program offers a range of vital support to assist in the board's job of adopting, evaluating and updating policies consistent with the law and the district's vision and goals. Executive Search Services help boards with the hiring and evaluating of superintendents based on the district's vision and goals.

How can the standards be used to help the local media and public understand school governance and the responsibilities of boards?

This is a major purpose of the Professional Governance Standards. Educating the public and media should be an ongoing commitment. At the state level, CSBA actively promotes the importance of local school governance. Locally there are many ways for district and county boards to utilize the Professional Governance Standards as part of this effort. First and foremost, boards should take every opportunity to share the standards with parents, the local media and local community groups. The standards provide a concise, structured, easy-to-understand way to talk about school governance. Included in the implementation packet, there are several tips and sample documents to help engage the community and media. CSBA is also very interested in sharing the ideas and strategies that have proven successful in local districts and county offices of education.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Can we distribute the Professional Governance Standards to future school board candidates?

Yes. The Professional Governance Standards are designed to provide a description of what an effective trustee and board should do, as agreed upon by hundreds of local school board leaders. We expect that individuals considering running for a board would want to receive the standards so they can gain a better understanding up front about what it takes to be an effective member of a governing board. In fact, most county election officials now provide a copy of the standards to all prospective candidates.

Do any other elected officials have standards?

In California, no other elected officials currently have such standards. There are ethics requirements for other elected officials, many related to campaigning activities. We view the development of the Professional Governance Standards as an act of leadership among school board members as well as a significant act of self-accountability. Leadership sometimes means going where no one has gone before. Board members are the only people elected on behalf of their communities to advocate solely for the best interests of students. At a time when some other elected officials are trying to exert control over local school governance, it is imperative that school boards assert their appropriate role. Tools such as the Professional Governance Standards can help in this effort.

Will adopting and utilizing the Professional Governance Standards really make a difference?

Board members know better than anyone: there are no magic formulas. Professional Governance Standards for boards are not a panacea. They are a tool, a framework to assist boards in the very complex and difficult job of governing effectively. As such, the standards can be an important part of a board's overall commitment to excellence.

Are there any consequences for boards or board members who are not in compliance with the standards?

The Professional Governance Standards are voluntary and advisory. Local boards can utilize the standards in a number of ways to enhance effective governance and to help the public better understand the role of boards. We encourage boards to conduct periodic evaluations based on the standards, and boards should, as appropriate, encourage the local community to assess their progress toward achieving the standards as part of an effort to engage the public.

It is also hoped that an additional beneficial result of these standards will be to increase awareness by the media and public about the value of professional development and continuing education for all those involved with public education, including governing boards.