

Foundations of Effective Governance

THE CSBA EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

Citizen oversight of local government is the cornerstone of democracy in the United States. It is the foundation that has lasted through the turbulent centuries since our nation came into being. In their book "Time for Curriculum," Henry Brickell and Regina Paul note that we use citizen control for "...cities, counties, states, regions, the nation. We use it for sewers, police, roads, firefighting, rivers, libraries, airlines, prisons, forests, the military – every government function: all staffed by experts, without exception; and all governed by civilians."

Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary that we entrust the governance of our schools to citizens elected by their communities to oversee both school districts and county offices of education. Today, nearly 100,000 citizens serve local communities as school board members, the largest category of elected public officials in the United States. Governing boards provide direction and oversight for the professionals who manage the day-to-day operations of the schools. School board members also provide accountability to the community.

How a school board governs is important. As the board fulfills governance responsibilities in the areas of vision setting, human resources, policies, curriculum, finance, judicial appeals, collective bargaining, and community leadership, the way in which boards perform the board role is critical. It is as important as what boards do in providing public oversight of the public school systems responsible for educating children and preparing them to be productive citizens.

Maximizing School Board Leadership – Boardmanship

An American Imperative: Public Education - NSBA*

What public education in America means

- A tuition-free education for all students.
- The promise of equal educational opportunities no matter race, religion, or ability.
- A commitment to high standards and high expectations for all students.
- A system of governance that ensures public accountability.
- A benefit to society by teaching democratic principles and common values.

For many, the term public education conjures up the image of a neighborhood school that is open to all children in a community. As powerful as that image is, other characteristics also define public education and give even greater value to the unique role it plays in achieving and reflecting American ideals. Public education means a tuition-free, publicly funded system that must provide an education to each child in a neighborhood school within a publicly governed school system. The academic standards, the teachers and administrators, the values and methods of operation employed in these schools are all subject to oversight and direction by public policy-making bodies. The rights of students and parents are legally defined and are enforceable by the courts.

Public education means that a wide range of decision making resides at the community level through the operation of locally elected school boards and through other avenues of direct citizen participation in the schools. Public decision making also occurs through the election of state and congressional representatives, as well as the various publicly accountable agencies designated to carry out specific school functions.

Public education also means a system in which parents and the general public can obtain detailed information about their schools and be involved in school activities.

What would education and society in America be like if these principles weren't at the core of what is meant by public education? What if education were turned over to publicly funded schools that did not have to adhere to these principles? Which of these principles would be eliminated? Which children would be left behind?

Excerpt from: NSBA: "An American Imperative: Public Education" *published in the Spring/Summer 2004 issues of NSBA's Policy Research Brief series.*

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Education for All in 21st-century America, education is the key to success. Only the public schools are legally required to accept and retain all students, no matter their race, no matter their religion, no matter their educational attainment, social class, family income, special needs, or personal characteristics. Only the public schools must guarantee that — within a legally enforceable range — the amount spent on each student will be equal from school to school within communities and across the state where those students reside.

WHO ARE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS?

School board members are locally elected public officials entrusted with governing a community's public schools. School board members have no individual authority, but serve as part of a three, five or seven member school board: a governing body that has collective authority.

School boards are nonpartisan. Candidates for boards are not required to belong to a political party. In California, a person may be elected or appointed to a governing board of a school district if they are: 18 years of age or older; a citizen of the state; a resident of the school district; a registered voter; and not disqualified by the constitution or laws of the state from holding a civil office.

An employee of a school district may not be sworn into office as an elected or appointed member of that school district's governing board unless and until he or she resigns as an employee. If the employee does not resign, the employment automatically terminates upon being sworn into office.

Any registered voter is eligible to be a member of the county board of education except the county superintendent of schools, any member of his or her staff, or any employee of a school district in that county.

WHAT IS THE BOARD'S ROLE?

Local school boards play a crucial role in preserving our democracy, preparing our children to be productive citizens, and enriching the lives of our communities. School boards also strive to mirror the diverse democracies they serve as representatives of their communities. All school boards derive their power and authority from the state and, at the same time, all school boards generate "law" of their own by establishing the policies by which local schools are governed.

By overseeing public education and representing lay involvement, local school boards provide a structure for public accountability and a means for parents and the community to influence vital policy issues affecting schools. The school board

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remains the tried and true governance mechanism for delivering excellence and equity in public education for all our children.

School boards deal with local educational conditions, and decide local educational policies. The board's power and authority are established in the California Constitution, the California Education Code, other California government codes, and in the federal constitution and federal regulations. School boards have the primary responsibility to conduct the business of a school district in public, or, as permitted by the California Open Meeting Law (The Brown Act), in executive session.

WHAT GOVERNING EFFECTIVELY MEANS

Private citizens, once elected to schools boards must work with other board members and the superintendent to keep all district efforts focused on student learning. Working as a group, the governance team, (the board and superintendent), leverage the efforts of the professional staff by:

- setting a direction for the district reflective of the community's wishes for its children,
- establishing a structure for action in the district,
- creating a supportive working and learning environment,
- holding the system accountable through mutually agreed upon mechanisms, and
- demonstrating community leadership.

Board members must respect the work that has taken place before they joined the board, the depth of effort that daily takes place in individual classrooms, and the commitment that has motivated each member of the board to dedicate a portion of his/her life to public service.

The demeanor of board members and the board as a whole sends as important a message to the public as do the actual decisions made by the board about the quality of leadership of the community's schools. When boards govern effectively, the chances of a climate for excellence being created in which students thrive increases dramatically.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOLS?

In California, the public schools serve more than 6 million students – a collective student body larger than the total population of many other states. Over 5,000 school board members govern the more than 1,000 school districts and county offices of education in our state. Ours is the largest public school system in the nation, with the most diverse student body. Approximately 40 percent of the state budget goes to support California's K-14 public schools.

California school districts vary widely, from isolated rural districts with fewer than 20 students to the largest urban district with over 700,000 students. There are "elementary districts" with grades kindergarten through 6 or 8, "high school districts" with grades 9 through 12 and "unified districts" with grades kindergarten through 12

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– all overseen by local boards of education. California’s county offices of education are governed by county boards of education.

The school districts and county boards of education for which board members are responsible are multi-million dollar enterprises. Often they are the largest employer in a community, have the largest transportation and food service operations, and have the greatest number of facilities to maintain.

EIGHT AXIOMS OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

1. Board members are part of a governing body with collective authority.
2. **All** children must be the priority.
3. Perceptions of demeanor have dramatic consequences and board members must act accordingly.
4. Diversity of style and perspective must be respected.
5. Board members must understand and operate within the board’s role and responsibilities.
6. Confidential information must be kept confidential.
7. Board members must strive to know district policies and guidelines and abide by them.
8. Being effective requires a commitment of time and energy.

WHY EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IS IMPORTANT

Board members do not have individual power or authority. Authority is only granted to the board as a collective body.

As a school board member we can’t ever be the boss. Even on our best night we only have one vote, and a majority of the votes of the board are required to give direction to the superintendent.

This means the board can only set a direction for a school district and ensure it delivers improved student learning to the community’s students when acting collectively. The board must come to agreement about the direction for the school system and provide credible community leadership for public education.

Effective governance can increase the governance team’s ability to utilize the critical leverage points board members and superintendents have and can use to govern the community’s educational system.

How a board governs – board members’ relationships with each other, with the superintendent, other district staff and with the public – has a profound impact on a board’s effectiveness, and on the ability of staff and students to succeed.

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Governing effectively enables the board to create a climate for excellence that elicits the best effort from staff.

When board members and the superintendent work well together, a climate of trust and confidence is created which enables staff members to feel supported and positive about the district's future, encouraging them to work as hard as possible at supporting students in their quest for learning.

Effective governance keeps the focus on improved student learning.

Not deterred by dealing with the fallout of nonprofessional behavior, the governance team is able to devote energy to moving the school district toward achieving the district vision for student success.

Boards who govern effectively elicit support from the community.

A community that observes a school board and superintendent acting professionally, with integrity and respect for each other, and with a joint undeterred focus on improving student learning and achievement for all students will have confidence in the leaders of the school district and provide much needed public support for the community's schools. Student achievement is enhanced when schools have community support reinforcing the efforts of the district staff.

Lack of confidence in leadership ultimately limits the education of students. Board members must conduct themselves in ways which engender confidence and trust.

True accountability is possible only in districts where authority is clearly defined.

Authority is clear only when boards set the direction for the district, provide resources and a supportive framework for the efforts of the professional staff, and hold all district staff accountable through mutually agreed upon policies and mechanisms. Individual board members who attempt to evaluate people or programs cause confusion within the school system, and may open the district to legal problems.

WHY THINK ABOUT GOVERNANCE?

"Each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children and grandchildren is ultimately linked to the welfare of other people's children. After all, when one of our children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it. If one of our children is threatened or harmed by violence, someone else's child will be responsible for the violent act. The good life for our own children can be secured only if a good life is also secured for all other people's children."

-Lillian Katz, International Leader in Early Childhood Education

Defining the Leadership Role of School Boards in the 21st Century*

School boards today govern a system that has higher and higher expectations for its students, that must address a tremendous diversity of student needs, and that by and large is inadequately funded. Furthermore, the full complement of the nation's social, economic, and environmental ills appears at our classroom doors in one form or another. Maureen DiMarco, former Secretary of Child Development and Education for California, and a former school board member, described the complexity of the school board member's job in her Southern California school district:

Take another look at what a school district and school board are: My colleagues and I were the members of a five-member board of directors of a \$190 million annual corporation.... We were responsible for 4,500 employees at 67 different plants. We negotiate annually with four - count them - four different unions. Our plant managers manage four to five times the number of employees that [private sector] managers manage. We're responsible for 38,000 units of production on an annual basis, but we have a 13-year production cycle, rarely with any of those products staying within our company for the entire length of time. We have no control over our raw materials. We have to take all of them in the numbers in which they arrive and in the condition in which they arrive, and all of our products go out to the marketplace because we have no backroom in which to discard our flawed or damaged merchandise.

Incidentally, on the side, we operate the second largest transportation agency in the county. We serve 22,500 meals a day. We operate, if we're lucky, on a 2 to 3 percent fiscal margin. We have more regulation than the worst nightmare of a corporate attorney, and we're required to provide supervision in over 89 languages.... I dare you to try to operate a California business in the manner in which we operate our public school system.

In order to perform the job described by DiMarco, the contemporary school board member must command a deep understanding of governance in all its complexities. However, even mastery of content is not enough. Board members must also carry out their responsibilities in an extremely difficult, politically charged environment. They are expected to confront the community's economic and social problems as they are reflected in the classroom, rise above political pressures, and govern in a highly ethical and professional manner. The responsible exercise of power within the authority granted by law is the ultimate challenge to any individual board member.

* Excerpt from: *Defining the Leadership Role of School Boards in the 21st Century*, Davis W. Campbell, Diane Greene, authors / Phi Delta Kappan, Volume: 75. Issue: 5., 1994

An American Imperative: Public Education

1. *What are the five guiding principles behind the concept of public schools in the United States?*

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

2. *What would education and society in America be like if these principles weren't at the core of what is meant by public education?*

3. *What if education were turned over to publicly funded schools that did not have to adhere to these principles?*

4. *Which of these principles would be eliminated?*

5. *Which children would be left behind?*

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About the _____ SD Board of Education

We are a (three, five, seven) Member Board of Directors of a \$ _____ million corporation.

Members are elected (or appointed) to fulfill four-year terms and are responsible to more than _____ shareholders.

The Board assumes responsibility for the education of _____ students during a _____ year education process.

We provide public oversight of the education of students who are not required to begin with us in (Kindergarten, seventh, ninth grade) or to remain within our district through the (sixth, eighth, twelfth) grade.

We oversee the education of students who speak more than _____ primary languages other than English, and who come to us with a wide variety of backgrounds and readiness for school.

The Board is responsible for more than _____ classified and certificated employees at _____ different facilities that are all maintained by district staff.

We negotiate annually with _____ employee unions.

Our percentage of managers (administrators) to other staff is _____. Our managers manage four to five times the employees that private sector managers manage.

We provide for BEFORE (list) and AFTER (list) school programs for _____ students.

We serve _____ meals to students and staff every day.

Provides transportation to and from school daily to _____ students.

Prospective board members are not required to have any specific skills or knowledge in order to seek a school board position.