Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration

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In the following report, Hanover Research reviews literature on effective strategies for establishing strong relations between school boards and their superintendents, as well as general best practices for school board governance.

HANOVER RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

In the following report, Hanover Research presents a comprehensive account of literature addressing the components of effective superintendent and school board relationships. The report also highlights effective strategies for board governance, focusing on school boards' impact on student achievement, practices specific to urban districts, and techniques for overcoming political barriers.

KEY FINDINGS

The following points summarize the key findings found within the body of the report:

- **A strong, effective relationship between superintendents and school board members hinges upon clear definitions of each body's duties and responsibilities.** Confusion over roles, most often due to board members overstepping their boundaries by meddling in administrative affairs, can cause inefficiency and conflict. Successful districts require board members to focus on long-term strategic planning and superintendents to focus on successfully implementing policy.

- **Successful board/superintendent collaboration requires frequent, diplomatic communication both in and out of official settings.** To ensure the timely fulfillment of strategic plans, school boards should conduct frequent, informal superintendent "check-ups," as well as extensive formal evaluations. The board should recognize these meetings as more than simply a time to critique the superintendent, and should use the opportunity to self-evaluate and review district performance data.

- **Board members often enter their terms with limited knowledge of the exact nature of the superintendent's administrative role, leading to role confusion and preconceived notions of a superintendent's abilities.** This initial period of unfamiliarity can cause tension between board members and superintendents, but can be avoided through extensive board member onboarding and continuous professional development.

- **While underperforming urban school district boards and superintendents face many of the same problems that other districts encounter, the extensive nature of reform required in these districts poses several leadership challenges**. The length of urban district reform initiatives extends beyond usual board member terms. Urban districts can ensure policy longevity despite board turnover by building strong community relations and resident buy-in. By convincing community leaders to support a reform, a district can help ensure that community members will continue to elect pro-reform board members.

- **Politics at the board and superintendent level plague all school districts.** When school boards fail to act as a single voice and specific members become mavericks or "lone rangers" who appeal to special interest factions rather than the public at large, student achievement suffers. In such a system, superintendents are forced to dilute their potentially successful policy recommendations in order to gain acceptance by a board with questionable intentions. Thus, the literature suggests that board members should use student achievement as the primary barometer for policy decisions.

SECTION I: BEST PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONS

A significant portion of a school district's success depends, undoubtedly, on the performance of its board and superintendent; however, these legislative and executive bodies cannot be evaluated in separate vacuums. Several studies have examined the dynamic between superintendents and school boards, and most conclude that a positive relationship between these two parties ultimately drives the successful governance of a district.[1]

Given the clear importance of school board and superintendent relations, this section explores the best practices used by districts to establish collaborative, effective relationships and governance structures. While Hanover draws on a wide body of literature to inform the content presented here, the section's structure is loosely adapted from the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB), a key organization within one of the first states to recognize the link between effective board governance, collaboration, and student achievement. Recently, in conjunction with the School Administrators of Iowa, the IASB surveyed successful board members and administrators, identifying five key principles for positive board and superintendent relations:[2]

- **Principle 1:** Clarify roles and expectations for board members and superintendent.
- **Principle 2:** Establish and implement a clear process for communication between board members and administration.
- **Principle 3:** Actively work to build trust and mutual respect between the board and administrative team.
- **Principle 4:** Evaluate the whole team.
- **Principle 5:** Actively work on improved decision-making.

As current research largely advances these broad principles, the discussion to follow adheres to this framework, with more specific trends drawn from the literature to support each principle.

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[1] Alsbury, T. "Hitting a Moving Target: How Politics Determines the Changing Roles of Superintendents and School Boards," p. 134. In *Handbook of Education Politics and Policy*. Eds. Bruce S. Cooper, James G. Cibulka, and Lance D. Fusarelli. Routledge: 2008. Retrieved via Google Books.

[2] Bulleted points quoted from: "Principles for Positive Board and Superintendent Relations." Iowa Association of School Boards. http://www.ia-sb.org/BoardOperations.aspx?id=1060

ESTABLISHING CLEAR ROLES

Researchers widely acknowledge the importance of clearly delineating duties and responsibilities among superintendents and school board members. Traditional conceptions of these two governing bodies hold that a board's domain lies in policy *creation*, while the responsibility of the superintendent and his or her administrative team is strictly policy *implementation*.[3] However, these roles have grown increasingly amorphous and disparate across districts in recent years. Superintendents are no longer simply tasked with school management; their duties have expanded into areas of specialization and accountability, including student learning outcomes. Many cite this phenomenon as a shift in the traditional superintendency away from school management and toward "transformation leadership," an approach entrenched in strategy and heavily focused on long-term student learning outcomes.[4] Simultaneously, school boards nationwide are venturing outside of their state- and district-defined roles of strategy, leadership, and policy development, with many members delving into administrative and day-to-day specifics, as well as advancing political motivations.[5] The confusion, inefficiency, and conflict caused by these blurred lines can ultimately prove detrimental to the success of a school district.

SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES OF ROLE CONFUSION

Role confusion between school boards and superintendents occurs when the two parties encroach on each other's responsibilities, reducing district efficiency, inhibiting necessary strategic planning, and causing tension. The most common type of role confusion in districts involves superintendents focusing too heavily on policy and school boards extending too far into administrative functions.[6] According to Caruso, role confusion is often exacerbated by a single "lone ranger"—a board member who becomes unnecessarily involved in day-to-day operations and personnel issues by circumventing the superintendent's authority, meeting secretly with staff members, and applying inappropriate amounts of pressure on other board members and staff. Caruso warns that this outlier behavior can drastically reduce a board's ability to collaborate and effectively govern.[7]

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[3] Price, W. 2001. "Policy Governance Revisited." *School Administrator,* 58, pp. 46-48 &
Kowalski, T.J. 2006. *The School Superintendent: Theory, Practice, and Cases*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Both cited in Nelson, M. "An Exploration of School Board-Superintendent Relationships in Minnesota," pp. 10-11. Minnesota Association of School Administrations, October 5, 2010. http://www.mnasa.org/cms/lib6/MN07001305/Centricity/Domain/28/mnelson_FINAL_REPORT_OF_STUDY_FINDINGS_DOCUMENT.Oct5.2010.pdf

[4] Thompson, R., Templeton, N., Ballenger, J. "School Board Presidents and Superintendents' Use of Transformational Leadership to Improve Student Outcomes." *National Forum of Education Administration and Supervision Journal*, Volume 30, Number 4, 2013. p. 1. http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Thompson,%20Ray%20School%20Board%20Presidents%20NFEASJ%20V30%20N4%202013.pdf; See also Hoyle, J. R., Bjork, L. G., Collier, V., & Glass, T. 2005. *The Superintendent as CEO*. Thousand Oaks, California: AASA and Corwin Press.

[5] Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 126. Retrieved from GoogleBooks.

[6] Ibid., pp. 144-145.

[7] Caruso, N. 2005. "The Lone Ranger on the Board." *School Administrator*, 62, pp. 8-9. Cited in Nelson, M., Op. cit.

McCurdy also identifies key behaviors that can cause—or, alternatively, prevent—role confusion, outlining the difference between board members who function as trustees and those who function as delegates:

- Fulfilling the *trustee role*, board members act rationally to serve broad public interests.

- Conversely, those acting as *delegates* protect personal interests and the interests of factional special-interest groups supporting them.

Trustees typically make independent judgments regarding a superintendent's policy recommendations, remaining as objective as possible. Their decisions ultimately demonstrate a concern for the entire community the district serves. However, delegates project political judgments onto superintendents' recommendations. More often than not, unpredictable board members fluctuate between these two roles, depending on the issue at hand.[8] Such motivations can lead board members to misunderstand their actual roles in the district.

The most common types of role confusion in districts involve superintendents focusing too heavily on policy and school boards extending too far into administrative functions.

Researchers have identified several other possible causes for role confusion between superintendents and school boards. Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn, researchers with the Aspen Group, a governance consulting company for public and non-profit boards, argue that role confusion occurs when boards and superintendents share decision-making at the operational level. In a 2000 study published in *The School Administrator*, Dawson and Quinn assert that the governance processes outlined in most boards' policy handbooks actually *cause* role confusion. After analyzing a large sample of boards, they found that many policies focus more on operational concerns than on governance, further institutionalizing role confusion. Dawson and Quinn note, "The board indeed can control all employees through policy, but it must do so through its only direct employee, the superintendent."[9]

Role confusion can often be partially attributed to the expectations that many board members bring to their term regarding a superintendent's performance and function. Kowalski notes that board members often lack experience in school administration, leading them to perceive superintendent behavior through the lens of their own personal convictions.[10] Among other sentiments, board members often express the following opinions of their superintendents: that they lack respect for board members; that they lack integrity; that they fail to manage; that they are inaccessible; and that they fail to comply

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[8] McCurdy, J. "Building Better Board-Administrator Relations." American Association of School Administrators, January 1, 1993. Cited in Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit. Also cited in Nelson, M., Op. cit.

[9] Dawson, L. and Quinn, R. 2000. "Clarifying Board and Superintendent Roles," p. 2. American Association of School Administrators.
http://www.aspengroup.org/upl/aspen/clarifying_board_and_superintendent_roles_2003_02.pdf

[10] Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 156.

with moral standards.[11] By entering their terms with these preconceived notions, board members are likely to grow combative, rather than collaborative, and ultimately infringe on their superintendent's duties.

The political nature of elected school boards is also commonly cited as a main cause of role confusion. Under a traditional model, school boards function as an authority that benefits the community as a whole, with members functioning as statespersons who strive for objective, effective policy decisions.[12] In reality, factional pressures and personal biases cause many individual board members to overstep the boundaries of their roles and attempt to meddle in administrative specifics. Increased transparency and visibility of the role, brought on by developments such as the broadcasting of school board meetings, can actually worsen this problem, as board members may feel increased pressured to appease specific groups within the community.[13]

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF ROLE CONFUSION

Several general techniques and approaches may be used to avoid issues associated with role confusion. One solution, proposed by scholar Deborah Lands, involves holding school boards accountable for raising student achievement. Donald McAdams, Chairman and Founder of the Center for Reform of School Systems, similarly argues that placing all of the responsibility for raising student achievement with the superintendent is ineffective and sets the executive branch up for failure. Instead, McAdams encourages board members to set student achievement priorities and plan district structures to support the superintendent in reaching those goals. This form of collaboration keeps boards focused on strategy and, according to McAdams, also helps reduce superintendent turnover, a major inhibitor to district performance.[14]

The results from a collaborative research effort of the National School Boards Association, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Iowa School Boards Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation, published in 2010, suggest that school boards vary in the degree to which they establish specific goals, as opposed to broad expectations. Based on a survey of 900 board members and 120 superintendents nationwide, the study found that 28.6 percent of superintendents reported that their school boards "set broad expectations and leave it to the professionals to determine specific goals," while 34.5 percent conversely noted that their school boards set *specific* student achievement goals. The responses of school board members demonstrated a similar breakdown, with districts relatively split on the specificity of goal-setting.[15]

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 124. Cited in Nelson, M., Op. cit., p. 12.
[13] Ibid.
[14] See "Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding the Right Fit," p. 7. Education Writers Association, 2003. http://www.ewa.org/docs/leadership.pdf
[15] Hess, F.M. and O. Meeks. "Governance in the Accountability Era." 2010. p. 30. Published by the National School Boards Association, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and the Iowa School Boards Foundation. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED515849.pdf

To combat role confusion, districts must lay out of clear responsibilities for governance bodies. In their report published in 2000, Richard Goodman and William Zimmerman comprehensively outline the responsibilities of school boards, superintendents, and board/superintendent teams. Figure 1.1, on the following page, lists the outlined duties for board/superintendent teams.

The broad view of shared responsibilities offered in Figure 1.1 shows that these two branches are generally expected to collaborate on long-term planning and strategy regarding student achievement. Not included in Figure 1.1 is Goodman and Zimmerman's outline for board-specific responsibilities. The scholars exclude from that list administrative responsibilities such as the management of business and financial matters, bids and contracts, facilities, and personnel. Those powers are explicitly granted to superintendents.[16] While Goodman and Zimmerman argue that these responsibilities should be incorporated into state law, districts may still choose to individually adopt the delineated responsibilities and repeatedly reference them to ensure that board members and superintendents do not confuse their roles.

Figure 1.1: Responsibilities of Board/Superintendent Teams

RESPONSIBILITY
• Having as its top priority the creation of teamwork and advocacy for the high achievement and healthy development of all children in the community
• Providing education leadership for the community, including the development and implementation of the community vision and long range plan, in close collaboration with principals, teachers, other staff and parents
• Creating strong linkages with social service, health, and other community organizations and agencies to provide community wide support and services for healthy development and high achievement for children
• Setting district-wide policies and annual goals, tied directly to the community's vision and long-range plan for education
• Approving an annual school district budget, developed by the superintendent and adopted by the board
• Ensuring the safety and adequacy of all school facilities
• Providing resources for the professional development of teachers, principals and other staff
• Periodically evaluating its own leadership, governance, and teamwork for children
• Overseeing negotiation with employee groups

Source: Goodman and Zimmerman[17]

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[16] "Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding the Right Fit," Op. cit., p. 7.

[17] Goodman, R. and Zimmerman, W., "Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement," Educational Research Service and New England School Development Council, 2000. Cited in "Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding the Right Fit," Op. cit., p. 9.

BUILDING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

While clearly-defined roles ensure that school districts properly divide labor for the advancement of student achievement, research also shows that these two bodies cannot carry out tasks in isolation. Successful governance requires effective collaboration, which hinges upon strong communication skills and, at times, policies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG SUPERINTENDENT/BOARD COMMUNICATION

Research on the dynamics between superintendents and school boards unanimously agrees that effective communication contributes significantly to successful governance. Peterson and Short argue that a superintendent/board relationship built on strong communication skills influences school board decision-making more than any other factor.[18] Kowalski adds that a superintendent should, first and foremost, be an "expert communicator."[19]

Regardless of the specific practices behind "good communication," it is clear that communication between boards and superintendents is often insufficient. A five-year survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators shows that most superintendents (62 percent) "spend three hours or less per week in direct communication with board members."[20] This tendency to delay communication until board meetings increases the likelihood that goals will diverge or priorities will shift in opposite directions.

With agreement on the importance of communication, school boards and superintendents can carry out several active measures to maintain a healthy level of dialogue. As shown in Figure 1.2, David Else, Director of the Institute for Educational Leadership at the University of Northern Iowa, lays out several of these strategies.

Figure 1.2: Best Practices for Superintendent and Board of Education Communication

STRATEGIES
• Establishing a clear, well-defined system for the events and procedures that take place during a board meeting
• Creating a workshop system to bring all board members up-to-speed on issues relevant to their decision making responsibilities
• Establishing a routinized strategic planning system for developing short and long term goals
• Setting up a communications system for special issues that may arise such as school closings and boundary realignment
• Creating a crisis information system that quickly provides communication to board members in the event of an emergency
• Nurturing an informal cabinet of additional official contacts between board members and superintendents to build a trustworthy support system for both parties to share

Source: David Else, UNI[21]

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[18] Peterson and Short, 2002. Cited in Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 134.

[19] Kowalski, T. J. "Evolution of the school superintendent as communicator," *Communication Education*, 54(2), 101-117, 2005. Cited in Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 134.

[20] Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 134.

[21] Else, D., "Strengthening Board of Education / Superintendent Relationships in America's Schools," University of Northern Iowa Institute for Educational Research, 1993. http://www.uni.edu/coe/iel/monographs/bs.html

MONITORING RELATIONSHIPS

While many school boards and superintendents make commendable efforts to communicate frequently and efficiently, positive relationships can dissolve as quickly as they crop up. In order to prevent the deterioration of strong communication channels and overall diplomacy, Kowalski recommends that boards and superintendents carefully monitor their relationships. In its simplest form, this involves frequent, informal check-ups between board members and superintendents during which grievances are expressed and addressed.[22] In a more extreme measure, relationships can be monitored and re-aligned through board and superintendent retreats that allow both parties to focus on broader strategy instead of time-consuming, day-to-day issues. An effective starting point for conversations intended to monitor and strengthen relationships may involve board member and superintendent self-evaluations. The conversations that result should not replace formal evaluations, but instead improve overall communication and prevent latent issues from blocking district progress over time.

> *A five-year survey by the AASA shows that 62 percent of superintendents "spend three hours or less per week in direct communication with board members."*

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Despite efforts to communicate effectively, most school boards and superintendents will experience periods of significant conflict during their time in office. However, research shows that not *all* conflict between boards and superintendents is necessarily destructive. An understanding of the alternative underscores this point. Alsbury finds that, because superintendents are vulnerable to termination by the school board, they rarely criticize or strongly demand much of the board.[23] In fact, many superintendents admit to frequently modifying their recommendations to much less effective compromises in order to gain board approval.[24] Political barriers to healthy conflict may ultimately prevent the policies most pertinent to academic achievement from being implemented. Thus, some debate between school boards and superintendents is called for.

On the other end of the spectrum, too much conflict, or conflict perceived by the public as hostile or motivated by factors outside educational goals (e.g., reducing another party's resources, damaging someone else's reputation), can prove destructive for a district. Thus, superintendents and boards should work to keep any conflict that arises distanced from personal issues and focused on the success of the district. Research finds that responsibility

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[22] Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 153.

[23] Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 135.

[24] See *The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: A Look at the Superintendent of Education in the New Millennium* (Glass, T., L. Bjork and C. Brunner, Eds.). Additional context is provided in Glass, T. 2001. "Superintendents Leaders Look at the Superintendency, School Boards, and Reform." ECS Issue Paper, July 2001, Education Commission of the States. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED468335.pdf. Both cited in Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 135.

for mitigating conflict often lies with superintendents. Superintendents, then, should be aware of the five different types of conflict that can arise:[25]

- Philosophical (value differences);

- Resource-based (competition for scarce resources);

- Interpersonal (e.g., personality clashes);

- Territorial (power and jurisdictional disputes); and

- Perceptual (e.g., assumptions not validated).

When conflict does arise, superintendents must identify which of the above factors are at play and adapt their strategy accordingly. This approach allows school executives to use conflict to their advantage. For example, arguments over funding distribution between two departments could be used to prompt useful, thorough conversations about a district's curriculum more broadly.

BEST PRACTICES FOR FORMAL EVALUATIONS

Research presents a general consensus that well-executed, apolitical evaluations of superintendents are integral to an overall strategy for collaborative board and superintendent relations. First and foremost, Kowalski notes that districts should take care to conduct formal evaluations on an annual or semi-annual basis. A national study of school districts conducted in 2000 found that 20 percent of superintendents were never evaluated formally.[26] Furthermore, historically, leadership evaluation models have been "defined by overly subjective and vague judgments, little feedback or guidance on performance, and few analytics or relevant metrics to define strengths and weaknesses," issues that have left superintendents and school boards alike unsatisfied with the process.[27]

Successful superintendent evaluations are the result of rigorous planning on the part of the board.

While most school boards understand the importance of superintendent evaluations, confusion still reigns regarding effective processes for conducting evaluations. Sandy Gundlach, of the Minnesota School Board Association, recently identified best practices for conducting superintendent assessments. Ultimately, Gundlach argues that successful superintendent evaluations are the result of rigorous planning on the part of the board. That is, effective school boards recognize the formal evaluation as an opportunity to affect change in a superintendent's

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[25] Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 159.

[26] Glass, et al., 2000 (op. cit.). Cited in Kowalski, T. J., Op. cit., p. 159.

[27] DiPaola, M.F. "Revisiting Superintendent Evaluation." *School Administrator*, June 2007. Cited in "Effective Superintendents: ECRA Literature Review." 2010. ECRA Group.
http://resources.aasa.org/ConferenceDaily/handouts2011/3000-1.pdf

future performance. Utilizing it as such requires a thorough review of district priorities and past performance. Gundlach outlines three measures school boards should take before conducting an evaluation:[28]

- Gather and review relevant documents and identify emerging issues and any areas of concern that need special attention.

- Hold a meeting for the purpose of developing the evaluation process and procedures.

- Agree on the evaluation method, instrument, criteria, and timeline to be used.

In addition to thorough planning, Gundlach urges districts to limit discussion to a superintendent's performance related to a few, specific, predetermined goals. Because school board members often have limited knowledge of the specifics of a superintendent's job, this tactic keeps discussion targeted and digestible for all those involved. By evaluating the superintendent against a few specific goals, the board also sets the tone for future expectations and better communicates their overall priorities to the superintendent.[29]

During the evaluation itself, school boards should assess the superintendent's performance on selected goals using the following framework: "What progress has been made and what evidence exists to validate that progress?"[30] Superintendents can facilitate this process by ensuring that the written report they submit prior to evaluation is as thorough as possible. Finally, Gundlach encourages school boards to allow superintendents ample opportunity to evaluate their own progress, ask questions, and discuss plans for future growth.[31]

While each district is unique, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has established a model timeline for assessments. Figure 1.3 on the following page outlines this cycle.[32]

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[28] Gundlach, S., "Developing a Fair and Effective Superintendent Evaluation," Minnesota School Boards Association, MSBA Journal, 2008. pp. 18-20.
http://www.mnmsba.org/Public/MSBA_Docs/DevelSuptEval.pdf?CFID=4500607&CFTOKEN=88138630
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] "Implementation Guide for Superintendent Evaluation," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, January, 2012. pp. 6 – 7. http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/model/PartVI.pdf
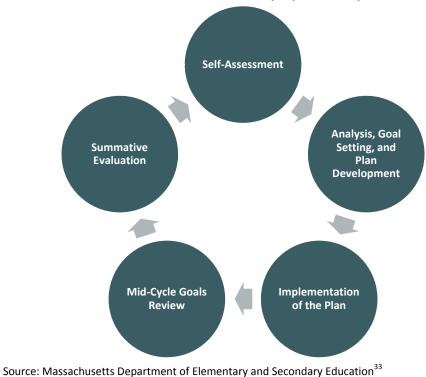
Figure 1.3: Massachusetts DESE Annual Five-Step Cycle for Superintendent Evaluations

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education[33]

A description of the general best practices associated with each step follows:

- **Cycle Step 1 - Superintendent's Self-Assessment:** During this phase, the superintendent compares his or her own performance to a predetermined rubric, looking at student learning data and past progress toward district goals. The superintendent then sets goals for his or her own future performance.

- **Cycle Step 2 - Analysis, Goal Setting, and Plan Development:** In this phase, the superintendent works closely with the school committee to develop the superintendent's annual plan, which is later used to assess his/her performance.

- **Cycle Step 3 - Superintendent Plan Implementation and Collection of Evidence:** Here, the superintendent implements the goals laid out in the annual plan, and committee members track progress on these goals periodically.

- **Cycle Step 4 - Mid-Cycle Goals Review:** This phase of the cycle allows the superintendent to receive constructive feedback on his/her current progress and to make adjustments to goals as deemed necessary.

- **Cycle Step 5 - End-of-Cycle and Summative Evaluation Reports:** The final performance review entails a thorough evaluation of the superintendent's progress toward each goal previously laid out.[34]

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

MODEL COMMUNICATION POLICIES

Given the prevalent theme of communication within the literature and its importance to promote smooth board/superintendent relations, one practice that has emerged is for districts to embed communication guidelines within their overall policy. The following pages examine practices at two exemplar districts, Aldine Independent School District and Seattle Public Schools, which show how policy can promote better communication among superintendents and school boards.

ALDINE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Recipient of the 2009 Broad Prize for Urban Education, Aldine Independent School District attributes part of its success as a district to strong communication practices between its school board and superintendent.[35] This constructive dynamic has become institutionalized, in part, through the adoption of clear communication policies laid out in the district's "Board Procedure Manual." This comprehensive set of guidelines includes mandates that clearly communicate how the board and superintendent should interact, with specific details such as the recommended frequency of contact and how the board should request information from the superintendent. The published guidelines related specifically to board/superintendent relationships are presented and briefly summarized in the following five general subcategories:[36]

- **Communicating with team members before board meetings:** When asked by the board, superintendents are required to submit information packets detailing progress on board goals, answers to board questions, administrative updates, etc.

- **Requesting information not related to agenda items**: Board members are permitted to request additional information directly from the superintendent; however, if this information is not readily available, superintendents should be granted additional time to draft a report.

- **Attending school events and visiting schools:** Board members are encouraged to attend as many school events as their time permits.

- **Responding to community or employee complaints:** The board must inform the superintendent of all complaints from staff and the community; however, it must not direct the superintendent to take specific action. The superintendent must notify the board upon the resolution of such complaints.

- **Communication with the community**: Any non-anonymous letters addressed to the board must be forwarded to the board president or superintendent for inclusion in the board information packet.

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[35] "Aldine Independent School District," The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2009.
http://www.broadprize.org/asset/1334-tbp2009factsheetaldine.pdf
[36] "Aldine Independent School District Board Procedure Manual," Aldine Independent School District. pp. 13-17.
http://www.broadprize.org/asset/1357-aldine%20board%20procedure%20man.pdf

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) also takes a policy-based approach toward encouraging a strong relationship between its board and superintendent. In addition to clarifying the unique roles of these two parties within its policy handbook, SPS also lists several tenets specifically related to communication:[37]

- The board and its members shall not issue directives to staff except through the superintendent or the superintendent's designated representative(s).

- Individual board members shall not request from the superintendent or staff the preparation of a report or compilation of materials not readily available and involving significant staff time unless the majority of a committee or the board […] approved the preparation of the report [...]

- Members of the board shall refer all personal appeals, applications, complaints, and other communications concerning the administration of the school district to the superintendent or his or her designated representative(s) for investigation and report to the board member.

- Communications between the board and the superintendent will be governed by the following practices: exercise honesty in all written and interpersonal interaction; demonstrate respect for the opinions and comments of each other; maintain focus on common goals.

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[37] Verbatim from "Board-Superintendent Relationship," Seattle Public Schools, June 1, 2011.
http://www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Policies/Board/series1000/1620.pdf

SECTION II: EFFECTIVE BOARD GOVERNANCE

While the preceding section focused on building effective relationships between superintendents and school boards, this section addresses the literature and best practices related to effective board governance more broadly. Specifically, this section highlights strategies for engaging community members, best practices for urban districts, and techniques for navigating board politics.

BOARD GOVERNANCE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Communities often view the function of their school boards as completely removed from impacts on student achievement. In fact, many solely expect their board members to fulfill the duties associated with traditional board roles, such as "setting budgets, establishing school boundaries, and setting school policy."[38] Some community members even perceive school boards as "amorphous blobs" that suck up resources and constitute unnecessary overhead costs.[39] However, across the available research on school board governance, an overall theme emerges: a school board's actions and level of success in governing the district impact student achievement.

A publication of the Iowa Association of School Boards, "The Lighthouse Inquiry," represents one of the first and most extensive attempts to measure this correlation.[40] The study finds that school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts.[41] Similarly, a meta-analysis of 27 studies on school board governance finds a statistically significant correlation between five specific district governance practices and higher student achievement (positive correlation of .24).[42] Finally, the Education Writers Association finds clear differences between "functional" and "dysfunctional" school boards as they relate to student achievement. Thus, all three of these comprehensive studies illustrate a relationship between board governance and student achievement, and they identify many of the same behaviors and characteristics of successful school boards. The following strategies represent an overview of the best practices for school boards in affecting student learning, as determined by the three studies outlined above:

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[38] Thompson, R., "School Board Presidents and Superintendents' Use of Transformational Leadership to Improve Student Outcomes," *National Forum of Education Administration and Supervision Journal*, Volume 30, Number 4, 2013. http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Thompson,%20Ray%20School%20Board%20P residents%20NFEASJ%20V30%20N4%202013.pdf

[39] Waters, J. T. and Marzano R., "School District Leadership that Works," Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, September, 2006. p. 11. https://www.cosa.k12.or.us/downloads/profdev/SuperintendentLeadership.pdf

[40] "The Lighthouse Inquiry," Iowa Association of School Boards, October 2000. http://www.ia-sb.org/assets/FADFDF72-BE9D-48D7-8CF9-19B823F0CDA1.pdf

[41] Ibid., p. 6.

[42] Waters, J. T. and Marzano R., Op. cit., pp. 3-4.

- Districts with higher levels of student achievement show clear alignment of board, district, and school efforts in support of non-negotiable goals.[43]

- While school boards at low-achieving districts often view students as limited by external factors, those at high-achieving districts perceive social and economic conditions as "challenges in the quest to help students succeed."[44]

- Board members in high-achieving districts are highly aware and informed of school improvement initiatives, while low-achieving district board members can rarely articulate the specifics of these projects/goals.[45]

- In districts with high-achieving boards, staff members are consistently able to identify building-specific practices that are aligned with overall board-stated goals; low-achieving districts lack this alignment.[46]

- "Functional" school boards have put processes in place for orienting new board members in order to reduce the negative effects of turnover. In addition, these districts seek out continuous training opportunities for school board members.[47]

- "Functional" school boards keep regulations to a minimum.[48]

- "Functional" school boards communicate as one body and interact with media in an "ethical manner."[49]

BUILDING POSITIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Research on effective board governance consistently points out that high-achieving school districts almost always show strong ties between the community and board members. More than simply a courtesy carried out by board members, the maintenance of this relationship can ultimately determine a school district's results. In fact, the Center for Public Education lists strong "collaborative relationships with staff and the community" as one of its "eight characteristics for effective school boards."[50] A report by the Center for Public Education elaborates on this priority, stating that these relations involve informing and engaging external stakeholders in the establishment and attainment of district goals.[51] David Else, of the University of Northern Iowa, underscores and adds to this argument, laying out specific best practices related to community relations:[52]

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[43] Waters, J. T. and Marzano R., Op. cit., p. 4.
[44] "The Lighthouse Inquiry," Op. cit., p. 6.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] "Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding the Right Fit," Op. cit., p. 7.
   http://www.ewa.org/docs/leadership.pdf
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] "Eight characteristics of effective school boards: At a glance," Center for Public Education, January 28, 2011.
   http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-
   boards#sthash.rWR4vLtL.dpuf
[51] Ibid.
[52] Verbatim from Else, D., "Strengthening Board of Education / Superintendent Relationships in America's Schools,"
   University of Northern Iowa Institute for Educational Research, 1993.
   http://www.uni.edu/coe/iel/monographs/bs.html

- Protect board/superintendent credibility by communicating only truthful, substantial messages to the public.

- Ensure that messages are consistently communicated to all internal and external publics over time by the original source.

- Recognize the unique role and influence all staff members and students have on reaching external publics.

- Develop links that are comprehensive, addressing the diverse educational needs of all members of the community.

- Reach out to provide meaningful involvement for all segments of the community.

- Understand the important role mass communication plays in our society and develop means for working with it.

- Develop direct dialogue with boards of other entities.

SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE IN URBAN DISTRICTS

Much of the research on school board governance specific to urban districts echoes the broader findings on effective board practices in general. However, Don McAdams finds that urban districts must remain particularly focused on a few specific strategies when attempting to increase student achievement.[53] He repeatedly points out that the strong reform needed in urban districts requires the support of community members.[54] He notes that boards and superintendents will experience debilitating pushback and feet-dragging from the public they serve if reforms are created and implemented without community consent, involvement, and support. This type of support can be garnered through grassroots-style campaigning, in which community leaders are first convinced to embrace a board's core beliefs and theory of action. This system makes use of the clout that other community members hold in a district, allowing these individuals to carry out the often difficult legwork of convincing district residents to support a new initiative.[55]

Urban district superintendents and boards will experience debilitating pushback and feet-dragging from the public they serve if reforms are created and implemented without community consent, involvement, and support.

McAdams also notes that the sweeping nature of urban district reform requires timelines that often outlast the terms served on school boards. Thus, urban district reform involves the work of gradually evolving teams. Failing to recognize this issue can undermine a board's goals for academic achievement, according to a separate report on school board turnover by Thomas Alsbury. He finds a statistically significant negative correlation between

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[53] McAdams, D., "What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools," Teachers College Press, January 1, 2006. Retrieved from GoogleBooks.
[54] Ibid., pp. 19-20.
[55] Ibid.

school board turnover and student test scores.[56] To avoid this issue, McAdams urges urban districts to implement systems for managing succession to uphold reform initiatives. He states, "Broad public understanding and support of the board's theory of action enables succession planning to become effective succession management." Under this system, strong community support of an initiative ensures that only board members who support such reform will be elected, guaranteeing the longevity of a strategy.[57]

A separate report on urban district governance supports McAdams' claims and adds an additional strategy to the policy toolkit. It finds that urban districts can better implement reform policies when utilizing a 'triage' approach. That is, successful urban school boards target resources at the most underperforming schools within their districts, rather than equally distributing reform resources to all schools. Similarly, the report finds that reform is consistently more effective at the elementary school level than at high schools, and encourages school boards to fund strategies accordingly.[58]

NAVIGATING POLITICS

As elected officials, school board members inevitably face political hurdles when attempting to improve district performance. Special interest group activism, ideological divides in the community, and the public's general loss of confidence in a district's educational leaders can place school board members in political, reform-inhibiting binds.[59] Cassel finds that school board members often ignore potentially effective recommendations from their superintendents, opting for safer, more centrist policy options.[60] One proposed solution to this gridlock involves board members engaging in "closed-door, one-on-one negotiations." These sessions allow a board to resolve conflicts in order to present a more unified, politically-favorable appearance to the public.[61] McAdams underscores this recommendation, stressing that board meetings offer an opportunity to gain political favor among the public. He urges boards to appear as organized, diplomatic, and well-informed as possible in order to secure support for reform.[62]

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[56] Alsbury, T., "School Board Member and Superintendent Turnover and the Influence on Student Achievement: An Application of the Dissatisfaction Theory," April 18, 2008.
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15700760701748428#.UoInJsSsim5

[57] McAdams, D., Op. Cit., pp. 20-21

[58] "Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement," MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools, September, 2002. p. xviii.
http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/foundations_for_success_fr.pdf

[59] Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 126.

[60] See Cassel, R.N. 1999. The American Academy of School Psychology Offers Promise for School Problems and a Nation at Risk. *Education*, 119(4), pp. 584-587. Cited in Alsbury, T., Op. cit.

[61] Alsbury, T., Op. cit., p. 135.

[62] McAdams, D., Op. Cit., pp. 84 – 88.

POLICY GOVERNANCE

Education leader John Carver proposes a specific model for effective board governance, dubbed "policy governance" (also commonly referred to simply as the Carver Model), which has been widely adopted by school boards across the country.[63] According to Carver, policy governance involves a board exercising power as a group rather than a collection of individual members. It also involves a strong focus on reaching board-stated goals, measuring achievement in terms of ends rather than means, and governing by explicitly laying out "unacceptable" and "acceptable" practices within the district (i.e., clear policies).

In addition, policy governance requires boards to solely focus on long-range planning and to grant their superintendents authority to decide on all other issues. The bulk of board meeting time is spent planning future policy, rather than reviewing past performance.[64] Ultimately, this approach to board governance reaffirms many of the best practices outlined in the broader literature on the topic. Carver identifies several key areas of divergence of the Policy Governance model from other types of governance structures; comparisons along various dimensions, as outlined by Partners in Policy Governance (a consulting firm specializing in Policy Governance implementation), are shown in Figure 2.1, below.

Figure 2.1: Comparison of Policy Governance and Alternate Governance Structures

FUNCTIONS	TRADITIONAL NONPROFIT	POLICY GOVERNANCE	EXECUTIVE-CENTERED	WORKING BOARD	CORPORATE	COLLECTIVE
Board Functions *(development, recruitment, structure, etc.)*	Board driven, executive driven	Board	Executive	Board	Either	Shared
Board Process *(how the board does its work)*	Board	Board	Executive	Board	Either	Shared
Managing the Business	Board delegates to executive, but stays involved in operating detail	Executive	Executive	Board directly involved	Executive with close board oversight	Primarily executive, but board may help
Doing the work	Staff	Staff	Staff	Board	Staff	Staff/Board
Setting Direction	Board sets direction with executive guidance; board or committee often creates the plan	Board defines expected results; executive develops the plan within limits set by the board	Executive	Board defines big picture and operational detail	Board with executive leadership	Board with executive direction

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[63] A succinct overview of the model and example implementers is provided by Partners in Policy Governance, a consulting firm specializing in the implementation of the model. See: "Policy Governance." Partners in Policy Governance. http://www.policygovernanceconsulting.com/the-carver-policy-governance-model/resources/articles-and-tools/38-policy-governance-in-a-nutshell-by-john-carve. Carver maintains his own authoritative website detailing the model, based on his foundational works, at http://www.carvergovernance.com/model.htm.

[64] Ibid.

FUNCTIONS	TRADITIONAL NONPROFIT	POLICY GOVERNANCE	EXECUTIVE-CENTERED	WORKING BOARD	CORPORATE	COLLECTIVE
Representing Membership	Board	Board	Board	Board	Focus on outcomes and performance (ROI), not representation	Board
Executive/Board Relationship	Executive subordinate to board, relationship not explicitly addressed	Explicit division, interactions clearly defined, executive subordinate to board, board sets parameters	Board de facto subordinate to executive, as they control process and direction	Executive subordinate to board, relationship not explicitly addressed, much cross-over	Executive sits on board, plays leadership role, roles not explicitly addressed and sometimes crossover, but rarely does the board become involved in operations	Partnership, executive *pilots* the board, relationship not explicitly addressed
Committees	Do much of work and oversight, report to board, extensive committee structure supported by staff, board receives reports	Relatively few, task forces okay, only do work related to the board, operational committees report to the CEO/ED	-	Committees support work of operations, board member workload heavier	Often task forces on strategic issues, some committees	-
Board Role	Direction, oversight of operations, fundraising	Primary role to establish policies on ends, executive limits, board/executive relationship, board process	Final decision-maker on issues brought forth by executive	All issues, strategic and operational	Strategic issues, major operational issues	Final decisions on matters, monitors operations
Executive Role	Guidance to the board, management of the business	Responsible to the board, not for it; operational issues, strategic and tactical decisions	Fundamental role guide and manage the board	If exist, implement board decisions	Leads direction and operations	Guides the board, manages operations
Fiduciary Responsibility	Board, but control is delegated to the executive	Board	Board, but executive has control of mechanisms	Board	Board, but executive has control of mechanisms	Board, but executive has control of mechanisms

FUNCTIONS	TRADITIONAL NONPROFIT	POLICY GOVERNANCE	EXECUTIVE-CENTERED	WORKING BOARD	CORPORATE	COLLECTIVE
Financial Decisions	Treasurer and Finance Committee see procedures and oversee; full board reviews full financials	CEO/ED has full decision-making power within the limits set by the board	CEO/ED makes decisions, may or may not require board approval of budget	Board is largely in control of all financial decisions	CEO/ED led, board approval of major decisions	Board and staff work on financial matters as a team
Human Resources	Board sets personnel policy, ED/CEO reports to chair, communication between chair and CEO	ED reports to full board only, all staff report to CEO/ED, personnel policy is operating policy and is set by CEO/ED	ED/CEO controls and sets policy	Board is personnel, sets policy, CEO reports to chair or full board and may be on the board	CEO controls HR, reports to board but also often is chair	HR decisions are made as a team, reporting lines are obscure
Monitoring for Accountability	Committee oversight	Executive limitations, aggressive executive evaluation	Executive brings information forward to the board	Board, if at all	Executive brings information forward to the board	Executive brings information forward; board inquiries into areas of concern
Resource Securing	Board	CEO/ED (Board optional)	Either	Board	Executive	Shared
Decision-Making Power	Board with executive input	Clear division of authority between board and executive, each free in their own areas (but can choose to seek input from each other)	Board has final say but agenda and preferences are driven by executive	Board, often uses grassroots or collective method of problem-solving	Board has final say but agenda and preferences are often driven by executive	Shared

Source: Partners in Policy Governance[65]

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[65] Reproduced from Partners in Policy Governance (Ibid.). Original figure cites Brown, W.A. 2000. *Understanding Organizational Configuration and Models of Board Governance in Nonprofit Organizations*; Fletcher, K. "Four Books on Nonprofit Boards and Governance." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Summer 1999; and George, L. "Board Models Comparison Chart." In *Board Basics Manual*, United Way of Canada.

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