

The Role of the School Board

FOCUS ON IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. That's it and nothing else. Improving student outcomes is the only reason school systems exist. There are many details involved in improving student outcomes but from the perspective of the owners of the school system (the community), they all collapse into two primary considerations: which student outcomes should be focused on (the **vision**) and which circumstances should be avoided along the way (the **values**). But it is impractical to have everyone making routine decisions regarding the vision and values. So it was decided that the community would select representatives who would act on behalf of the legal and moral owners of the school system.

The function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community. Effective representation of the community's vision and values largely breaks down into three categories: **listening for** the vision and values, **identifying** the vision and values, and **implementing** the school system's work to ensure alignment with the vision and values.

Listening for the Vision & Values of the Community

- Listening to Community - The board must make time to hear from the school system's community both systematically (for the purpose of learning the vision and values) and routinely (for the purpose of gaining insights into whether the vision and values are being honored).
- Engaging Community - After the board has listened, it must go back to the community to check whether or not they heard correctly. This process is most often repeated iteratively to ensure accuracy.

Identifying the Vision & Values of the Community

- Setting Vision-specific Policy - Once the board has adequately identified the vision it writes it into policy, most commonly in the form of a vision statement, goals, and interim goal.
- Setting Values-specific Policy - Once the board has adequately identified the values it writes them into policy, most commonly in the form of a theory of action, guardrails, and interim guardrails.
- Reviewing Policy - Policy (vision and values adopted in writing) only remains meaningful if it is revisited -- at least once per year -- to ensure that it still matches the vision and values of the community.
- Modeling Cultural Norms - How the board and board members choose to behave provides clear direction to the Superintendent regarding how they should treat administrators, how administrators should treat teachers, and how teachers should treat children. Said differently, what happens in the boardroom echoes in the classroom.

Implementing the Vision & Values of the Community

- Selecting a Superintendent - After listening and identifying the vision and values, the board selects a chief executive to implement the community's vision and values. To empower their work, the board delegates full operational authority over the district's day to day business to the superintendent.
- Approving a Budget - As part of their duties, the Superintendent develops an annual budget for the school system. State law requires that the board votes to approve the

budget. To maintain the integrity of its delegation, the board refrains from modifying; it either votes to approve or not.

- **Monitoring Progress** - One of the board behaviors most aligned with improvements in student outcomes is monitoring progress toward the community's vision. Ideally at least 50% of the board's meeting time each month is invested in this activity. In addition, the board must also make time to monitor district performance relative to the community's values.
- **Communicating Progress** - Once the board has monitored progress, it must also share what it has learned. Whether progress is being made or not, stakeholders have a right to know and it is the board's responsibility to ensure conveyance of updates routinely and broadly.

COMPLYING WITH LAWS

Legal requirements are sometimes placed on school boards. These requirements, when beyond the aforementioned items, rarely have the effect of improving student outcomes but nevertheless must be conducted.

- **Selecting an Internal Auditor** - Some State laws allow for the board to hire an internal auditor who reports directly to the board instead of to the Superintendent. When done well this can be a powerful monitoring instrument and when done poorly -- as is common -- this just becomes another political football with which to distract the board from a focus on monitoring progress toward the goals.
- **Evaluating Employee Grievances** - Often State law requires the board to hear grievances from staff. In such circumstances, the only function of the board is to either overturn decisions of the administration if laws/policies were violated or sustain the decision of the administration. The creation of an effective school system focused on improving student outcomes breaks down when the board uses this legal requirement to undermine the Superintendent by second guessing them.
- **Determining Employee Termination** - Most State laws require the board to cast the final vote to terminate certificated staff. In such circumstances, the only function of the board is to either overturn decisions of the administration if laws/policies were violated or sustain the decision of the administration. The creation of an effective school system focused on improving student outcomes breaks down when the board uses this legal requirement to undermine the Superintendent by second guessing them.