

# NEWSLETTER

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## Defining the Role of School Boards: *Architect, Communicator, Leader*

**I**N THE WORLD OF *school reform and improvement*, attention is seldom paid to the role of the school board. Yet most school districts across the country are governed by an elected or appointed school board whose members are the ultimate architects of the district's plan for increasing student achievement. Therefore, a clear understanding of the purpose, role, and appropriate functions of school boards—on the part of both board members and school and district practitioners—can contribute greatly to accomplishing ambitious improvement goals. This month's newsletter

*explains the difference in purpose and function between a district's school board and its administration, summarizes different approaches to school board organization, and illustrates the significant role school boards can play in supporting increased student achievement.*

### School Boards and District Administration

Many models exist that illustrate appropriate relationships between school boards and school district administrations, but they all share one common principle: *The school board governs and the superintendent administers the school district.* Although it sounds straightforward, this underlying principle can be very difficult to fully understand and even more complicated to implement. A book published by the National School Boards Association

titled *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000) delineates the differences between the two. The school board provides high-level guidance and direction for the school district. Its job is to do the following:

- Build community support by pursuing a broad base of involvement.
- Communicate clearly with all school district stakeholders.
- Adopt policies to support district initiatives.
- Approve comprehensive plans developed by the superintendent.
- Allocate adequate funding and align resources.
- Monitor progress toward the achievement of district goals.

The superintendent, on the other hand, serves as the chief executive officer of the school district with more concrete responsibilities for leading and managing day-to-day operations. The superintendent must do as follows:

- Implement school board decisions.
- Lead strategic planning initiatives.
- Make recommendations to the board.
- Develop, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of programs.
- Model support for district change initiatives and ensure that they are implemented.

Confusion about these roles can cause problems and have a negative effect on the operation of a school district. Boards that attempt to micromanage policy implementation, circumvent the superintendent by working directly with employees, or operate as individuals rather than as a team can be both divisive and disruptive. In high-functioning school districts, roles are clearly delineated, and the relationship between board of education members and the district administration is clear. Before defining his own and the board's role, says one Colorado superintendent, "I had no clear direction, board members were in the day-to-day business, and I spent my time trying to please five people"

(Dawson & Quinn, 2000). Successful efforts to clarify roles and responsibilities resulted in a productive transition; the superintendent later reported: "I have a clear picture of my job and my relationship with the board acting as one—not five individuals."

## Models for School Boards

Several models exist that help to paint a picture of how a board of education can establish a productive relationship with school district administration. Some researchers suggest a *corporate model*, in which the school board is seen as a board of directors whose chief responsibilities are designing the district's "comprehensive educational strategy," selecting an operations manager for the organization, and answering to the "shareholders"—in this case, the community, all of whom have a stake in the success of the school district (Brown, Peterkin, & Finkelstein, 1992).

Another author suggests that an *accountability model* can address the common problem of school board interference in the daily administration of the school district. A relationship based on accountability reassures school board members because it provides them with data about district operations that they want and need and establishes a framework for the ongoing collection and use of data. Author D.B. Reeves (2000) suggests that a relationship built on accountability "can provide board members with a blend of very specific school-level information, along with qualitative and narrative data that puts this information in proper context" (p. 206). District operations also benefit from the accountability model since it ensures that administrators have access to the same information. This system, says Reeves, becomes a functional framework "within which all other initiatives, programs, evaluations, plans, and other educational policy matters" facing the district can be considered (p. 208).

A collaborative *learning communities model* offers a third picture of constructive school board

and district administration interaction. Within this model, the board and other members of the school community work together and learn together for the benefit of the school district. Author Peter Senge and his coauthors (2000) emphasize trusting relationships rather than a data or functional structure as the basis for board-district interaction. To establish a trusting relationship, Senge suggests it is good practice to make public as much information as possible, including creating a public record of private conversations. He stresses that if school board members model the civil behavior they would like schools to demonstrate, their own tendency to disagree for the sake of public drama will be eliminated. The school board also can deflate emotionally charged decisions such as closing a local school or funding special programs by focusing discussion on the observable data that have been collected. Senge further suggests that a school board that wants to operate as a learning community needs to practice talking about its values and take steps to ensure that discussions occur with calm consideration.

## How School Boards Support Increased Student Achievement

Regardless of which mental model school boards and district administrations use to define and implement positive working relationships, they do best when they remember that the primary responsibility of everyone is to focus on improving student achievement. Two of this year's winners of the *American School Board Journal's* Magna Award illustrate the positive effect that school board leadership can have on efforts to improve student achievement.

The Board of Education of Lincoln Public Schools in Nebraska capitalized on its obligation to involve the community and capture its support by creating the Lincoln Community Learning Centers project in 2001. This initiative, designed to address the achievement gap in the district's schools, emphasizes the role of the community in supporting student achievement. School

Neighborhood Advisory Committees ensure that residents are involved in analyzing the needs of each participating school and creating a plan to address them. A district leadership council is charged with supporting the continued growth of the learning centers and securing financing for them through community partnerships. Leadership council members include school board members, the superintendent, the city's mayor, newspaper publisher, and other high-profile community participants. These partnerships, says the board president, "broaden public discussion, increase accountability, and strengthen the connections between parents, schools, and the community" (*American School Board Journal*, 2006a, p. 22).

Taking a similar approach to fulfilling its leadership role, the school board of San Jose Unified School District in California developed a two-step plan to address the lack of trust and confidence in the schools and low student achievement that had plagued the district for years. Called the Public Engagement Model, the initiative provides the school board with a set of data-gathering tools that allow it to conduct widespread, regular, and structured conversation with constituents. "This program was developed to increase parent and community participation and understanding within our school district," says the San Jose superintendent (*American School Board Journal*, 2006b, p. 18), and it appears to be working. In the 10 years the program has been in existence, the board estimates that it has conducted more than 6,000 conversations with community members that have resulted in specific plans for improvement. The district now records high rates of satisfaction on annual surveys and has noted a correlation between schools that score high on satisfaction surveys and increased student achievement in those schools.

## Conclusion

These two school boards and many others like them throughout the country have made a difference in the lives of students by understanding and embracing their important leadership role. By focusing on their key functions of communication, leadership, and direction

setting, school boards can make a significant contribution to improved district functioning and increased student achievement.

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For more information about the American School Board Journal's Magna Awards and to read profiles of other winners, visit <http://www.asbj.com/magna/index.html>

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P: 877-277-2744 > W: www.centerforschool.org  
P: 202-223-6690 > F: 202-223-6728

1100 17th Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036

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