

Five Characteristics of an Effective School Board

In Fayetteville, Arkansas, a parent complained about a controversial book in a school library and then threatened, “ There will be a next step” when the school board accepted the recommendation of a school-materials evaluation committee and let the book stay on the shelves. More recently, the Seattle school board required that high school administrators review a school newspaper before its distribution; students sued in federal court, claiming their free-speech rights had been violated. The ruckus in Washington continues.

School boards often deal with controversy. That’s part of the job. But their predominant duty is to establish policies that serve as administrators’ guides for the day-to-day management of schools. Most of the school board decisions are not controversial or inflammatory, and few of them are reported in the news. As a result, the public often holds inaccurate perceptions about what they really do.

Historically, school boards have been formed to keep the “public” in public education. They are uniquely American and provide the conduit that delivers the community’s values and will into its schools. This truth implies that in our democracy, the functions and decisions of school boards are important. Certainly, we believe this. It’s not an exaggeration to say that decisions they make often have a greater long-term impact on our communities than those of any other elected body at any other level of government. However, in the dialog about meaningful school improvement and reform, due to a misunderstanding of their policy-making responsibilities and their relevance to the American way of life, school boards are sometimes left out.

Today, the relevance of school boards is dependent on doing what matters. A panel of educators from across the country recently convened by CTB/McGraw-Hill, the leading publisher of standardized achievement tests for children and adults in the United States, explored the role of school boards and outlined five characteristics of an effective board of education. Our direct experience in working with school boards over the years suggests the

panel was right in its analysis. The five characteristics, and discussion about them follow:

Effective boards focus on student achievement

The best school boards understand that student learning is job one. This emphasis necessarily means that policies and resources of schools are targeted to promote achievement for all students. School practices, which have their genesis in policy, ought to have a laser-beam orientation on high standards, a rigorous curriculum, and high-quality teachers. Issues a school board must consider are evaluated against the contribution toward student learning—the core business of schools.

Effective boards allocate resources to needs

Not all students walk through the school doors with the same needs. Good school boards recognize this fact and allocate resources such as time, money, and personnel and adjust practices accordingly. Documents of the school district, such as the annual budget, are viewed as tools to reach student-learning priorities, and the district's spending and practices do not protect sacred cows.

Effective boards watch the return on investment

We are all accountable to somebody. Effective boards are mindful of their own accountability to the communities that entrust their children to public schools; effective boards routinely and regularly measure and report the return on investment of the education dollars they spend. Effective policy makers today make their greatest gains by asking appropriate questions, and productive boards recognize the self-instructive value in making the following query an ongoing refrain: What services are we providing to which students at what cost and resulting in what benefits?

Effective boards use data

It has been said, "In God we trust. All others bring data." By definition, informed policy making requires using data. Otherwise, effective boards cannot be assured that all students, regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic status, are progressing toward and reaching high standards. The challenges to student learning, and particularly to providing equity among all students in achievement, are complex. Intuition-based assessment of student learning is tricky at best and certainly is an insufficient basis to determine education policy. Further, without data, reports to communities about the education return on investment are hollow and unconvincing. Communities expect measurable results, through data, from their tax dollars.

Effective boards engage the communities they serve

The best school boards look for ways to institutionalize parent and patron involvement in providing policy-making input. Specifically, effective boards have established mechanisms for community involvement in setting the vision for the school district, representing the values of the community, and identifying the district's short-term and long-term priorities. The Blue Springs, Missouri, school board, for example, named as that state's Outstanding Board of Education for 2005, strongly emphasized its shared partnership with its community in educating the district's 13,000 students.

Do all school boards in the United States meet these five characteristics? Obviously not. Can all school boards in the nation improve their performance with some or all of the characteristics? Probably. It is noteworthy to mention that the CTB/McGraw-Hill panel believes school boards can best champion education initiatives when their members are trained to exercise responsibility, possess a vision, demonstrate progressive leadership, and provide accountability. Combined, these attributes result in school board decision making that improves student performance. (Some states such as Missouri require, by law, training

for newly elected or appointed school board members.)

Does the school board in your community measure up? If so, your local school district is likely to be headed in the right direction. If not, you might consider doing something about it—perhaps even serving on it.

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