

Good Governance and the Influence of the Superintendent

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Abstract

While there is a link between the work of school boards and positive outcomes for K12 students, some elected boards and superintendents continue to struggle with effective governance practices, a dynamic which can contribute to diminished public confidence. This article explores the most common challenges, their impact, and the role of superintendent leadership in navigating them. The authors conducted personal interviews with current and former superintendents and school board members, observed board meetings, and reviewed the literature on school board effectiveness. Through this work, they determined superintendents must focus on being lead “influencers” of good governance among both board members and the public. They offer proactive strategies for superintendents—and those seeking the superintendency—to consider. This article asserts that influencer superintendents can increase board effectiveness, public confidence, and expectations for effective democratic governance by building trust and better school board practices.

Key Words

K12 system governance, effective school boards, influencer superintendents

“**S**uperintendent Call It Quits ... and Said School Board Member is the Reason.”

Ongoing headlines like this one from the *Connecticut Post* in 2016 illustrate the link between school district governance and the superintendent’s ability to get the job done. While many districts have governance teams with stable tenures and shared norms that empower superintendents to negotiate a clear avenue for action, others experience leadership churn and erratic practices in which both members and superintendents struggle.

Well-governed school districts are associated with positive student academic outcomes, so superintendent leadership for improvement requires understanding what gets in the way of and what can be done to foster consistent board effectiveness.

To surface common school board governance tensions and seek solutions, we embarked on an inquiry into school board effectiveness. Our exploration included a broad review of the literature as well as interviews with current and former superintendents and school board members.

This process illustrated five of the most common challenges, how they impact superintendents, and actions we believe superintendents can take to build an effective governance alternative that supports rather than impedes their work.

The Challenges

Confused roles and authority

This challenge is so pervasive it appears across the literature (for example, Boyle & Burns, 2012; Walser, 2009; Mayer, 2011). In some cases, board members or administrators do not have a full understanding of their respective roles; in others, “swim lanes” get crossed,

board members overstep their authority, or administrators create obstacles to board authority.

The most common challenge cited in the literature around role and authority is “micro-managing,” when board members engage in issues that should be overseen by the school administration or attempt to manage staff who report to the administration.

Walser (2009), for example, includes micro-managing as one of the top three pitfalls limiting school board effectiveness; one case example involved school board members in a district who made a practice of going directly into schools and providing live feedback to teachers, leading to staff distrust and decreased confidence in the superintendent.

Examples exist on the other side of this challenge as well, when school boards rarely challenge or question the superintendent, deferring all major decisions to him or her. Giving up board authority in this way can present difficulties between the governance team and a public that expects shared decision-making informed by multiple perspectives.

Ineffective decision-making

Poor decision-making can play out in various ways. It may occur, for example, when board members choose not to ask questions in efforts to speed up a meeting or to avoid looking uninformed, or when board members fail to prepare for meetings.

It can also happen when board members insert new agenda items within a meeting, a dynamic which doesn’t allow for proper advance preparation among staff or leadership. Board members may come to meetings with pre-conceived notions or independently-formulated plans; while this might seem to speed decision-making, it presents a number of

negative consequences. It prevents the full group from engaging in the plan making; blindsides the administration, impeding the superintendent's ability to provide needed context and background information; and circumvents public input on outcomes.

Poor communication

Breakdowns in communication occur when superintendents and board members do not have a joint understanding of what information needs to be shared, when it should be shared (particularly with respect to fast-developing district or school-based issues), and/or how it gets presented.

In some cases, the superintendent does not provide sufficient information, or relays information after the fact. In one interview, we heard about struggles that arose when a group of parents brought an issue to the board's attention after the superintendent had made decisions without relevant board input.

In other cases of poor communication, board members publicize individual opinions about issues without sharing those opinions with fellow members or the superintendent.

This diminishes trust among members and between members and the administration. Opinions that are not discussed with the full governance body can cause longer-term damage than differing opinions shared while debating a given issue.

Communication struggles between the board and the community also arise when board members limit public voice or take actions with limited transparency. Mayer (2011) notes that the community may feel that the board and school leadership are intentionally hiding information when communication occurs out of the public eye. Further, historically excluded minority groups may feel unheard,

deprioritized, and distrustful of board and system leadership.

Conflicting values

In any community, groups of people hold fundamentally different beliefs and priorities for schools and for education broadly. Boyle and Burns (2012) argue that this stems from a natural tension between America's core ideals of liberty, prosperity, equality, and community.

Decisions that prioritize liberty and individual prosperity may compromise equity and a sense of common good, and vice versa. Further, differing values arise from the history of public education and the evolution of their perceived purpose.

Whereas schools were initially charged with creating good citizens, their purpose has shifted in some minds to one of workforce preparation. Others see public schools primarily as a tool for economic development.

Debates around the purpose of schools in relation to the core ideals of our nation continue today, and differing opinions on many contemporary issues arise from which purpose a board member or a community prioritizes.

It should come as no surprise, then, that elected governance often brings members who hold conflicting values. Board members make judgments reflecting their own values and those of their constituents.

At the extreme, major swings can occur in board membership, from a group that predominantly represents one set of values to a group that represents an opposite set of views. These swings may create instability in district policies and practices, turbulence in teaching and learning practices, and leadership turnover that affect students in significant ways. A superintendent can be the fulcrum in balancing

the values of a board—and a district—that operates in a diverse and distinct community context.

Competing agendas

Members with different reasons for serving on a school board can bring competing agendas. Boyle and Burns (2012) raise the idea of competing agendas in their discussion of some school board critics, who describe “three unlovable types: 1) aspiring politicians for whom this is a rung on the ladder to higher office; 2) former employees of the school system with a ‘score to settle’; and 3) single-minded advocates of one dubious cause or another” (p. 157).

Even when school board members don’t fall into one of these categories, incumbent members seeking re-election can bring competing agendas; in these situations, a school board member may feel tempted to focus on the desires of an important constituent group to gain favor and further support.

This may also manifest as a focus on the agenda of a particular political party, which may or may not be relevant or optimal for the broader community. Although it is a natural temptation for any elected official to seek support from parts of the community that share political preferences or to use a position of authority to promote an agenda of her supporters, tensions arise when those members are making difficult decisions that impact the system (which must include community members outside of a particular member’s constituent base).

In each of these cases, competing agendas can diminish individual and board effectiveness. Further, competing agendas can thwart equitable decision-making and impede superintendent actions that must be taken on

behalf of all students, not just those in a particular community or constituency.

Mitigating impacts

Regardless of the location or size of the district, without superintendent engagement, each of the five challenges can play out as a loss of confidence and trust amongst various critical actors. Players and scenarios can include:

Staff. School and district staff in our micromanaging case feared angering the board, but the deep tensions over roles and authority ultimately ended with a series of destabilizing superintendent and board transitions. Staff trust in district leadership is essential for superintendents as well as boards; yet ineffective board decision-making can damage credibility with staff and divert staff time and finite resources from key priorities. This reduces capacity to do the demanding work involved in systemic improvement.

Board. Trust can spiral downward and outward when poor communication or competing agendas create obstacles for boards to make decisions that truly reflect the interests of the community and of the students. Further, dysfunction arises if trust erodes to the point that members refuse to listen to the views of others or to continue along an agenda when their strong opinion is not shared by the majority.

Public. When public confidence erodes in school board leaders, voters show up to replace those leaders. *The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation* (Alsbury, 2008) illustrates a predictable pattern resulting from discontent: dissatisfaction with the board and school system progress gets demonstrated in elections that remove board members, and this board turnover carries over to superintendent dismissal. Breaking this

cycle of public dissatisfaction requires both intention toward improving board effectiveness and increasing community understanding of how effective boards operate. Expectations for good governance as a community norm will help voters elect members who will uphold it.

So How Can Superintendents Be Influencers of Effective Governance?

Although some superintendents see board relations as a frustrating add-on to an already overwhelming role or as the primary responsibility of the boards themselves, superintendents can play a key role in changing these common challenges to opportunities.

We conclude that success with democratic school governance requires the superintendent to be a lead “influencer” of good governance. To navigate through these common challenges, “influencer superintendents” can use key strategies to build both the capacity of the governance team and public expectations for good governance:

1. Influencer superintendents leverage key inflection points to foster good governance

Two critical moments offer great opportunity for influence. The first is the superintendent search process. Typically viewed as the board’s opportunity to pick a leader, this is also the time for candidates to screen the board.

Candidates can assess board governance effectiveness ahead of time through research on a board’s history, including long-term election results, board tenures, board actions and the way the board conducts its meetings. Strategic questioning about those findings demonstrates that the candidate knows what makes an effective board; it also gets the board to assess and debrief its own progress.

For veteran superintendents considering moves to new school districts, being strategic

in considering board governance and members’ willingness to grow helps determine fit with the community.

For more novice district leaders eager to earn their first superintendency, understanding the barriers to effective governance is critical if they take the job in districts with less-than-ideal governance practices. The advance intelligence prepares the new superintendent for the challenges so they can craft an immediate plan for building relationships, trust, and influence.

The second inflection point to leverage comes each time new board members join the body. Influencer superintendents reach out quickly and frequently to new members to hear concerns and ideas to incorporate into the board’s work. A proactive approach not only builds the 1:1 relationship but also helps to bridge current board practices with what needs to happen as the team changes.

The superintendent armed with knowledge about what matters to each incoming board member—and the differences in values and rules of engagement between the old board and the new board—is the superintendent the new team will depend upon to help navigate the changes.

2. Influencer superintendents focus on interaction with board members

Common recommendations for increasing school board effectiveness include board training, retreats, norm setting, and ongoing advance meetings to craft agendas and update board leaders on district actions. These are positive steps that can and should be taken to move existing boards forward in the spirit of continual improvement. But just as district professional development for teachers cannot be a “one and done” effort, board development must not end when a training session does. An influencer superintendent leverages ongoing

opportunities to promote effective practices and institutes communication and decision-making structures which foster trust and collaboration.

Proactively discussing roles and governance processes can prevent significant board confusion and dysfunction in the long run. Explicit understanding about board members' roles also supports positive interactions with school staff who may feel disequilibrium about reporting to multiple people or pressure to ensure board happiness, as opposed to focusing on student learning.

Strong communication and regular advance planning between the superintendent and board leadership is another way influencer superintendents catalyze their impact for students. Interviews with high functioning governance teams identified regularly scheduled meetings with the board chair and vice chair to discuss percolating district issues and agree on agendas for board meetings.

Both superintendents and board members noted a profound difference in board comfort-level and perceived effectiveness of that superintendent once recurring interactions were in place. This level of confidence was driven not necessarily because the board agreed with the superintendent more, but because board members knew they would hear about the issues and the superintendent's stand on each directly from the source. By lessening the board's feelings of surprise about new district issues, tensions decreased, and trust in the superintendent rose.

Influencer superintendents actively promote the democratic purpose of the board; therefore, they espouse a belief that board members can bridge connections between the system and the surrounding community, highlighting that each member represents diverse community opinions.

Reminding board members and the public about the link between seeking diverse viewpoints, getting critical feedback, and making better decisions also helps pave the way for the inevitable tensions and conflicts that arise in the democratic process. With the commitment to democratic principles and the need for diversity established, the superintendent can advocate for how to approach decision-making.

The best practice involves anchoring decision-making processes in student achievement data and involving teachers, families and school leaders. Walser (2009) highlights a district that made five smooth transitions within a ten-year period in redrawing school boundary lines, typically one of the toughest activities boards can undertake. This suggests that clear decision-making processes focused on student data can build public confidence and help the governance team navigate difficult decisions.

3. Influencer superintendents create a process of—and public demand for—transparent accountability focused on student achievement

Superintendents have at least three key opportunities to create and model transparent accountability to the board, the district, and the public.

First, as the district sets goals, the superintendent should ensure clear links between these goals and the expectations of the board about how the superintendent will lead progress toward achieving them and how the board will enable progress through policymaking.

Second, influencer superintendents should work with the board to create annual governance plans with a master calendar that

includes ongoing and recurring decision-points and training options for the board; this can establish clarity between the superintendent and the governance members on the supports needed throughout the year to maximize the board's ability to make positive, sustaining change for students.

Third, the district's public accountability instruments should include those governance goals. Many districts generate some version of a balanced scorecard to report and track systemic goals and outcomes, but few include within them metrics of success for the board itself. Promoting public accountability for board outcomes as well as school outcomes creates a connection between board actions and community expectations. Strengthening that link also builds social capital with the public,

something that keeps goodwill from dropping too precipitously when challenges arise.

In our era of high expectations for public schools, governance expectations are shifting too. Superintendents willing to exert proactive influence towards effective board practices can build better governance teams and increase public confidence.

Leveraging key moments, intentionally promoting trust and collaboration, and putting an emphasis on transparent accountability and democratic decision-making processes are all strategies that take time and effort. But the commitment to being an influencer of good governance clears the path for superintendent leadership in concert with the support of the board and the expectations of the community.

Author Biographies

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