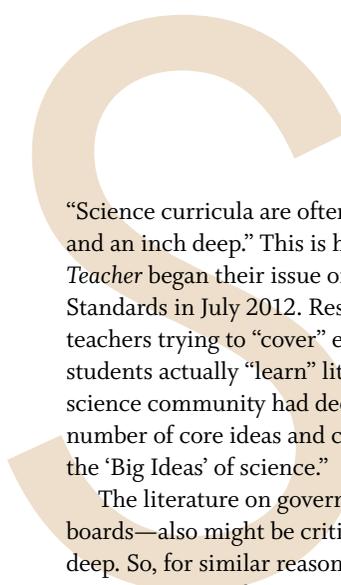


Four 'Big Ideas' of Board Governance

Juggling board responsibilities requires
balance and support

Rick Maloney



“Science curricula are often criticized for being a mile wide and an inch deep.” This is how the editors of *The Science Teacher* began their issue on the Next Generation Science Standards in July 2012. Responding to the challenges of teachers trying to “cover” everything and having their students actually “learn” little in any profound way, the science community had decided to “focus on a limited number of core ideas and crosscutting concepts—that is, the ‘Big Ideas’ of science.”

The literature on governance—the work of school boards—also might be criticized as a mile wide and an inch deep. So, for similar reasons, I offer four big ideas for governance. Three of them describe what boards must do—the primary board tasks. A fourth (really big idea) asserts the board’s ongoing responsibility to orient itself to its role and to organize its work. All of these responsibilities are important, and not just by themselves. Together they are indispensable in ensuring overall board success.

JUGGLING THREE BALLS

When I think about the responsibilities of a school board, I envision the school board as the juggler of three “balls”—each representing a major board task:

Ball #1. The board gives strategic voice to what the community wants: its values, hopes, and dreams for students.

One aspect of strategic voice is advocacy: speaking out on behalf of the district’s students, primarily to state and federal policymakers. The other aspect of strategic voice is “speaking” in writing to the school district staff, ensuring that community values are reflected in the district strategic plan and other documents. The strategic voice is like a “compass” pointing to true north for student learning, and therefore guiding district efforts for the long term.

Another view of strategic voice is to consider the direction in which that voice is aimed. Strategic voice directed “outward” is the advocacy function, while strategic voice directed “inward” is the vision function.

Problem: When the board takes its eye off this “ball,” long-range vision statements (if they even exist) end up collecting dust on the shelf, awaiting the next superintendent to reinvent the wheel of strategic planning and create his/her own vision.

Ball #2. The board provides operational guidance to the district.

Operational guidance consists of directives given by the board to the superintendent and staff through policy, budget, and other decisions that direct not only what to do,

but also how to do it. Compared with the strategic nature of decisions that define desired results, such directives are more operational in nature, yet are still very important. Paying careful attention to its operational guidance function, the board “takes charge” of the district, but also avoids or at least minimizes the intrusive and inhibiting effects of micromanagement.

Problem: Reform has been a top-down effort conducted in a political arena, so Ball #2 has grown immensely over time. The more operational state and federal laws are in dictating board policies, the more that boards themselves become operational. The good news? It doesn’t have to be this way. The board can still choose to fulfill the full range of board responsibilities. Yet many (most?) boards bury their noses in this operational function, unaware of the effect on other board responsibilities, and hence overall board effectiveness.

Problem: Board members tend to think their job is to “fix things” in the operational arena. In many (or most) cases, that’s why they ran for the board. It was not to provide vision (Ball #1).

Ball #3. The board ensures accountability for the district.

Public schools belong to the public, which has the right to know what it is getting for its money. It is, therefore, the board’s responsibility, acting on behalf of the public, to rigorously monitor school system performance and to account in public for results achieved.

There are two questions the board must answer to fulfill the accountability responsibility: “How well has the district achieved long-term strategic outcomes that fulfill the community’s vision of student learning?” and “Has the district satisfied community expectations for the means and methods employed in pursuit of those outcomes?” Ball #3, therefore, is a responsibility to answer for both student results (as envisioned in Ball #1) and district efforts (as directed in Ball #2).

Problem: Because boards allow themselves to be sucked into excessive emphasis on Ball #2, the accountability responsibility gets reduced attention over the course of the year, with board agendas consumed by operational work. Superintendent evaluation should be a huge component of accountability, but it is often handled as an afterthought, with almost no public transparency. It is quickly forgotten when the board moves on to a steady stream of urgent operational matters.

GOVERNANCE READINESS

A fourth board responsibility is getting the board's own act together. Like Stephen Covey's seventh habit (the sharpening of the saw), this responsibility helps assure the capacity a board needs to perform its other major responsibilities.

Governance readiness is a prerequisite for the other three. The board must accept full responsibility, it must orient itself to its role, and it must have a systematic approach for doing the work of the board. In short, the board must have an operating system that governs its governance functions. Like a juggler who must establish and maintain stable footing while keeping those balls in the air, the board must have the stability to launch and keep the three "governance balls" going.

Some examples of "sharpening the saw": A board retreat focusing on self-assessment using a rubric developed by the state school boards association; board training (all board members plus the superintendent present) on how to engage with community members to learn their values and how to align those values; and a board retreat at which the board schedules systematic monitoring of district progress.

Problem: Without a solid foundation for carrying out its work, a dysfunctional board easily is misdirected and even can do harm. At a minimum, it wastes the time of its members and staff when it changes direction every time a new "innovation" surfaces or even any time it changes superintendents. With no "inner ear" to assure balance, it may start out in the wrong direction, or act without any rhyme or rhythm. Its ability to perform the other three responsibilities will be considerably diminished.

The governance readiness function is the board's most important responsibility because it governs the performance of the other three. Once the three more observable responsibilities are launched, it is the board's job to keep them "in the air." At the same time, it continually renews and sustains its capacity for speaking strategically, providing operational guidance and assuring accountability for district performance.

Governance readiness is hard work. Further, it is often neglected and easily forgotten. Why is this? Although board members as individuals may attend training offered by their state association or NSBA conferences, boards

rarely participate in professional development as teams. A cynic would say that boards are "too busy to get organized."

In addition, the invisible "behind the scenes" nature of governance readiness, when compared with Balls #1, #2, and #3, invites neglect because the public doesn't pay attention to it. Board members are elected and reelected by voters who have no awareness of the "big ideas of governance" but who are aware of a particular curriculum or a new program that is "good" or "bad" based on backyard or grocery store or internet opinion. Political winds constantly blow in the direction of Ball #2.

If, despite all influences to the contrary, the board accepts this governance readiness responsibility, it collectively learns its role, adopts a positive mindset, and implements a strategic approach to its work. Periodically reorienting itself and renewing focus and energy, the board ensures its governing capacity is at peak effectiveness. This "first responsibility" of the board is the most important reason for periodic board retreats. The three "balls" of strategic voice, operational guidance, and accountability are appropriate subjects to be discussed in a retreat setting or in board training, but resetting and renewing governance readiness should be the objective.

The importance of ensuring these big ideas work together is effectively illustrated by the board-as-juggler metaphor. Boards never lack for urgent priorities, but it is vitally important that they create and carry out a plan of action to keep those three balls in the air, not letting any one of them distract the board's attention from the bigger picture, and therefore not dropping any of these balls. A board can delegate many tasks to its superintendent, but it should not delegate any of these four board responsibilities to the superintendent. If it does so, it rejects its duty to the community it has sworn to serve. By taking on and following through on all four of these big ideas, the board takes an important step forward in governance.

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