

The School Board as **SERVANT-LEADER**

The school board not only leads but it also serves
and is responsible to others at multiple levels

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It was time for our annual school board retreat. As part of our year-end evaluation, we scheduled a review of board performance, assessing what went right and what went wrong, and committing to improvements going forward. In preparation, we reflected on these questions:

Q: Whom do we serve? Are we meeting our responsibilities to/for them?

Q: Whom do we lead? Are we meeting our responsibilities to/for them?

In his classic 1970 essay, Robert K. Greenleaf introduced the philosophy of servant leadership, in which the first goal of the leader, rather than to command, is to serve. Greenleaf's contribution to the literature on leadership offers a valuable guide for school boards. In their governing role, boards can and should be both servant and leader. As servant, the board is responsible to others. As leader, it is responsible for others. If we accept Greenleaf's definition of servant-leader, we understand that the board not only leads but also serves (is responsible to) others at multiple levels.

At the most fundamental level, the board is responsible for students who do the learning and is therefore servant to their needs. One step up from learning is teaching, which is planned, delivered, and supported by staff. This complex level consists of many teaching and support roles in the

classroom, the school, and the district, all of whom the board serves by assuring a structure of support for their success. Above the staff level is the management level led by the superintendent, the top link in the chain between board and staff.

Voters who elect board members, others who materially support the schools through their taxes, and still others whose children are the learners are all stakeholders at the local level. They collectively constitute the board's immediate boss: the community. A single community member may wear more than one of these stakeholder "hats" at the same time, but a significant majority—perhaps 75%—of community members lack any direct connection with students. Nevertheless, it is the collective community whose values the board must serve. As the constitutional authority that created school districts and their boards of directors, the state gives the board a broad legal mandate and more specific directives in the form of laws and regulations that the board must follow. Although the federal government does not exercise direct authority over schools, boards must comply with provisions at the federal level, beginning with the U.S. Constitution, that affect many school system functions.

The final level of responsibility, often ignored, is that of the board itself. A school board not only carries out duties

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assigned in state law and regulations, but it also complies with its own policies, so it is answerable not only to and for other levels but also to and for itself as the district policymaker.

From bottom to top, arranged by proximity to students in the classroom, each level can be distinguished by what the board must recognize, what it must avoid, and what it must do, as servant-leader.

School Boards are responsible for:

1. **Students**—Success for a school district is not measured by the launch of innovative programs or teaching techniques, but by the student learning that results. When setting goals and measuring progress, boards should focus their attention on student outcomes. Other indicators are simply measures of activity, perhaps necessary as interim steps toward desired results, or to satisfy adult interests, but they are not outcomes for students.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that success can only be defined in terms of results for students, so it must keep its “eyes on the prize” of student outcomes.
- **Must avoid** the urge to declare success upon the launch of exciting new programs or to focus board attention on annual (short-term) goals that take its eyes off the (long-term) prize. Such goals, while they may be instrumental to the district’s mission, are a means toward an end and should be decided by the superintendent, who is then fully accountable for the results of those decisions.
- **Must do:** Define the district’s mission in terms of desired results for students. Prioritize district efforts toward accomplishing those results by setting broad expectations that both guide and restrain superintendent decision-making.

2. **Staff**—At a strategic level, the board takes responsibility for the district’s long-term success. If it dives

into the minutiae of directing staff activity in detail, it risks losing this “whole district” and “long-term” focus. Instead, it should assign broad responsibility to the superintendent for staff performance and hold the superintendent accountable for the work of the staff as reflected in student outcomes.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that the board is fully responsible for everything in the district, so its appropriate perspective is strategic: from an elevation of 30,000 feet rather than at ground level, “in the weeds” of operational detail.
 - **Must avoid** the urge to directly supervise staff activity, rationalizing such micromanagement as the only way to accomplish the mission.
 - **Must do:** Work through the superintendent when guiding staff activity.
3. **Superintendent**—The superintendent is often said to be the school board’s only real employee. If so, boards must be intentionally “hands on” in recruiting, hiring, and leading their superintendents, while empowering (and allowing) them to recruit, hire, and lead all other staff.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that the board is responsible to lead its superintendent, setting expectations for district performance, then monitoring to ensure those expectations are met.
- **Must avoid** the temptation to follow the superintendent’s lead in all things, allowing the individual (by default) to exercise strategic leadership of both the board and the district.
- **Must do:** Hire the best candidate for superintendent, clearly assign responsibility for getting the district job done, delegate sufficient authority and allocate sufficient resources, then hold the superintendent accountable for district success. Finally, ensure that the superintendent job description, hiring documents, and evaluation process are aligned; most are not.

School Boards are both responsible to and responsible for:

4. **The board itself**—The board must take responsibility for its own performance, self-guiding with policy expectations, then holding itself accountable

to those expectations. Self-discipline requires that the board, while supervising the superintendent, simultaneously supervises itself.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that the board has a duty to govern itself. What is good for the goose (accountability of superintendent and staff) is also good for the gander (accountability of the board itself.)
- **Must avoid** arrogance that allows the board to assume its own behavior is OK as is. Such an assumption hinders self-improvement and overall district success.
- **Must do:** Get its own act together, documenting expectations for self-governance, then regularly renewing this responsibility through a routine of self-assessment and planning for improvement.

School Boards are responsible to:

5. **Local**—The school board works on behalf of its local community. The district organizational structure is traditionally viewed as a triangle with a few (the board) at the top and many (the district) at its base. The board should upend that triangle when considering its relationship with its community, so that the board (the servant) is at the bottom and the broad-based community (the boss) is at the top. This inverted orientation reflects the board's position in relation to the local community to which it must answer.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** (and keep in mind) that the community is the boss.
- **Must avoid** arrogance (overt or unintentional) that can lead to contempt for a community that is understandably not as fully informed on issues as is the board.
- **Must do:** Systematically listen to understand broadly held community values and priorities, then act to put those values and priorities into practice.

School boards are responsible to:

6. **State**—Like the school district, the school board is created by state laws that define its role, assign it specific duties, and direct specific actions.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that the board has a duty to obey state law and applicable regulations.
- **Must avoid** any inclination to ignore laws and regulations with which it disagrees. At the same time, it should avoid unthinking obedience to legislative meddling in details best handled at the lowest possible level.
- **Must do:** Direct the superintendent to follow the dictates of state law.

School boards are responsible to:

7. **Federal**—Nothing at the federal level establishes direct control over our schools. Still, constitutional limitations on governmental power must be observed, and funding eligibility conditions and restrictions can often seem like the “tail that wags the dog” of public education.

School boards:

- **Must recognize** that the board has a duty to align its actions with relevant constitutional restrictions and applicable federal laws and regulations, so it must be knowledgeable of them.
- **Must avoid** violation of federal law, including funding requirements. At the same time, avoid allowing the lure of federal money (the tail) to distract the district from doing what is best for student learning.
- **Must do:** Direct the superintendent to keep the district informed of and aligned with federal law that requires as a condition of funding certain district actions and prohibits other actions.

Having assessed our board's performance in terms of responsibility for its own work as well as that of the superintendent, staff, and students, and its obligations to federal, state, and local levels of authority, we made the necessary adjustments and were ready for the next year's challenges.

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