





SIX (NOT SO) SIMPLE RULES FOR SCHOOL BOARD SUCCESS

The right beliefs, values,
and attitudes help boards
govern effectively

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Effective school boards build a base of competencies (knowledge and skills) that help them succeed in their roles. They know the difference between boardsmanship and governance. They use individual board member competencies (boardsmanship) that contribute to the work of the board, and whole-board competencies (governance) that can only be performed by the board working together. These competencies increase a board's potential for success.

However, to fully realize that potential, boards need the right beliefs, values, and attitudes—a mindset for success that prepares them to act. Here are six (not so) simple rules for board success.



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ANSWERING TO THE COMMUNITY

Rule 1: Become the vital link between the community and its schools.

Rationale: The board is elected to reflect community values while governing the schools on their behalf.

Why it isn't so simple: Sometimes elected officials forget who is answerable to whom. Activities such as community engagement often consist of one-way communications designed to portray an image to the public rather than to inform the board by learning from the public.

Boards that follow this rule establish and maintain active and ongoing connections to their communities, listening to learn community values and expectations, then reflecting those values and expectations in board policy.

BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

Rule 2: Take responsibility for everything the district does or fails to do.

Rationale: When paying attention to operational details, boards must never forget that they are at the same time responsible for everything else. Adopting a mindset of total responsibility helps boards focus on the whole system at a strategic level and avoid trying to personally see to every little thing.

Why it isn't so simple: New board members are enthusi-

astic and sometimes single-minded about pursuing specific interests, intent on "fixing" issues that may have prompted them to run for the board. Because voters single out parts of the whole, it is easier to promise and focus on specifics while on the campaign trail. If the board focused energy on what amounts to a tiny fraction of all district work, its choices inevitably would seem arbitrary.

Boards that follow this rule think and act at a higher level and avoid anything that diverts attention from strategic matters.

EMPOWERING OTHERS

Rule 3: Delegate authority and give the superintendent sufficient resources, freedom of action, and support to do the job.

Rationale: If they are going to do the job, superintendents must be empowered to initiate programs and direct staff with freedom and authority.

Why it isn't so simple: After the superintendent is hired, during the honeymoon period, boards often fail to make explicit the extent of authority, freedom of action, and board support they are giving to their superintendents. Bland assurances of board support are inadequate. The superintendent will be hindered when boards, while expressing high expectations for results, reclaim control over selected reins of power. These actions will limit the ability of the superintendent and staff to make timely decisions about allocating resources or administering programs.

Boards that follow this rule ensure their superintendent knows what the board expects, is free to take necessary and timely actions to deliver on those expectations, and can exercise authority appropriate to the job. The superintendent can expect that the board will support those decisions, then will hold the superintendent accountable for the results of those decisions.

ASSURING DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY

Rule 4: Hold the superintendent accountable for following board guidance about what is to be achieved by the district and how those results are pursued.

Rationale: Communities expect their boards to hold the school system accountable to the community.

Why it isn't so simple: Boards are sometimes accused of

going through the motions when it comes to the superintendent evaluation, thereby assuming they meet their accountability obligation. They conduct the evaluation behind closed doors at the end of the school year, without tying it to district performance. Boards too often let the superintendent set the agenda for accountability, selecting and reporting data that supports a scripted conclusion, such as “things are going well” or “things are improving.”

Boards that follow this rule clearly identify the community’s expectations about results for students. They ensure regular and rigorous monitoring of key indicators of success based on documented expectations.

ASSURING BOARD ACCOUNTABILITY

Rule 5: Hold the board accountable to the community for its governance performance.

Rationale: The board sets the stage for the accountability process by paying attention to its own performance before that of the superintendent.

Why it isn’t so simple: A board that does not take responsibility for its own performance is by default asking its superintendent to assume board responsibilities, guide board decision-making, heal board dysfunction, and train new board members. In this role reversal, the superintendent leads and supervises the board. It sows the seeds of conflict when board members eventually resist being manipulated or “guided” by their subordinate.

Boards that follow this rule define their own board role, documenting what the community has a right to expect from its school board. They create a framework for self-discipline and carry out that essential function through a transparent process that systematically (1) reviews the board’s own performance, (2) compares performance against documented expectations, (3) identifies areas for improvement, (4) plans needed improvements, and (5) works toward those improvements.

CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF TURNOVER

Rule 6: Be prepared to hire the most qualified next superintendent to lead the district.

Rationale: We often hear that the most important decision a school board can make is selecting the next superintendent. If so, boards should prepare to perform this important function, even when there is no indication that turnover is coming.

Why it isn’t so simple: Superintendent hiring is not a routine board function. Years may go by between one hire and the next, so board member turnover can be significant between turnover events. If boards ignore this reality, they will be unprepared when vacancies do occur. An unprepared board could feel compelled to rely on outsiders with little community connection to guide the process.

Boards that follow this rule plan for superintendent succession (and board turnover, for that matter) long before there is a need for it. They prepare by documenting the dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed in an effective candidate. They create a plan that begins with identifying community needs and values and extends beyond soliciting, screening, and selecting candidates. The plan continues with a post-selection phase that assigns responsibilities accompanied by appropriate authority so that policy, job description, and contract are aligned. It proceeds with setting the routines for monitoring performance. They require the superintendent to identify and develop designated backups who are prepared to step up in the superintendent’s absence and act as needed. Such depth of planning, once documented, reduces the likelihood of unpreparedness, dependence on outsiders, and an unsuccessful hire.

These six rules seem simple, but when we try to put them into practice, they are not so easy to execute. However, if we acknowledge our responsibilities, and confront each of them head on, school boards can build a healthy and enduring mindset for success, one that will lead to long-lasting benefits for students.

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