

A Call for **BALANCED** GOVERNANCE



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Over the past decade school districts have been under increased pressure to address and improve student achievement, especially for those students who have traditionally performed poorly on academic assessments.

State and national reform efforts initially focused on improving teacher quality, but recently the focus has shifted to the possible effect of school leadership on student achievement. The attention turned first to building-level principals and superintendents, but now questions have been raised on whether school boards can influence improvements in school academic performance.

The initial discussion must include two questions, the first being whether school boards should get involved in these matters, or whether they should be left entirely to the school administration and personnel. And if the board determines that they should get involved, the next question is how that should be accomplished. Even if one agrees that improving student achievement is a worthwhile goal, it is reasonable to ask whether school boards actually have this capacity.

■ Do School Boards Matter?

Current research makes it clear that school boards do indeed make a difference in student achievement. Undeniably, increases and declines in student performance link to board

member values and beliefs, actions, teamwork, and political conflict and turnover.

Previous studies provide evidence that beliefs influence board member actions at the board table and that those decisions influence the beliefs in the system and affect school culture. When the structures and norms of behavior within the school culture positively affect instructional practices, improved student achievement is expected and typical.


Even school board critics suggest that boards can harm student performance and thus agree that they do exercise influence. A recent study conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute concluded, “The fact that board members can influence achievement, even loosely,



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— Thomas L. Alsbury



merits much more attention — surely by scholars but also by voters, parents, taxpayers, and other policy-makers.”

This is a particularly significant conclusion considering that Chester Finn — president of the Fordham Institute and former assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education — has asserted, “The local school board, especially the elected kind, is an anachronism and an outrage ... We need to steel ourselves to put this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery and move on to something that will work for children.”

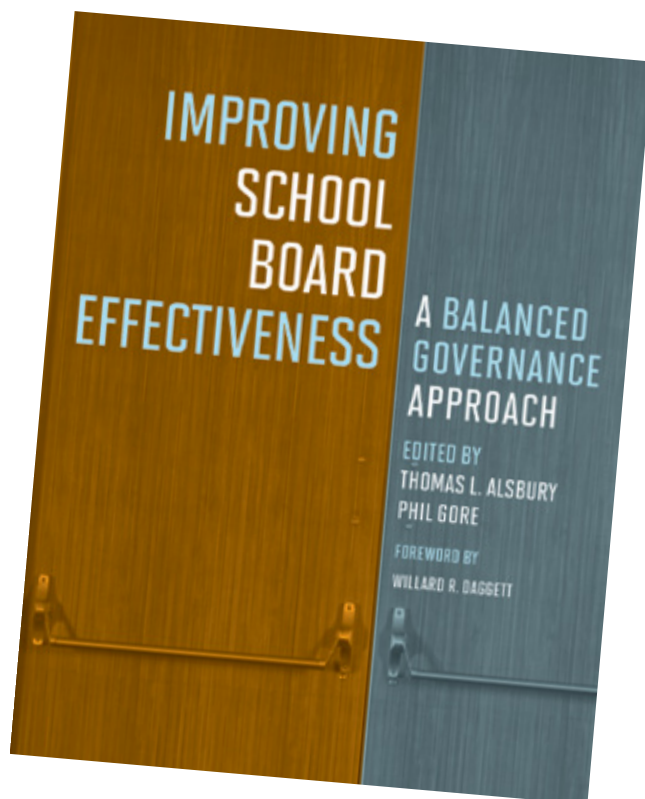
It appears that both supporters and opponents of elected school boards seem to agree: school boards do indeed affect the schools they govern. This answers the first of our two critical questions. If board members on elected school boards do make a difference, then the next broad question is how that difference is actually made.

I take the position that school boards can and do make a positive difference in the performance of school personnel and consequently in student achievement. How board members might set about accomplishing this task would seem, on the surface, to be a relatively straightforward question. Traditionally, this would include hiring the superintendent, approving budgets developed by the school staff, approving policy written by school leaders, and influencing the local community to support the passage of bonds and levies.

However, defining the effectiveness of board service is not always as clear a matter.


BALANCED GOVERNANCE: A New Model for School Board Effectiveness

Given the pressure to improve student outcomes on everything from content knowledge to skills identified as necessary for career and college success, school boards cannot be passive actors. Neither can they replace the specialized knowledge of superintendents and administrators trained in the complex matters



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“Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach”.*

Thomas Alsbury to Present Pre-Convention Workshop at the 2017 State Education Convention



Dr. Thomas Alsbury, a professor of Educational Leadership at Seattle Pacific University, will be leading a Pre-Convention Workshop on Tuesday, Jan. 17 from 2-5 pm in Milwaukee. The workshop will address school board governance, specifically covering Dr. Alsbury’s “Balanced Governance” model. Learn from Dr. Alsbury about how to apply the latest board research so that you can be more effective both individually and as a whole board, avoid the typical political challenges faced by most board members, and better support students.

The Pre-Convention Workshops are held in conjunction with the State Education Convention. To sign-up, use the convention registration system at wasb.org/convention.



of running school districts.

However, boards that leverage their own expertise as engaged and

knowledgeable representatives of their communities can play a critical role in increasing student achievement. As shown in Figure 1 below, the Balanced Governance model seeks a middle ground between overly centralized and overly decentralized control on the part of the school board. In particular, it differs from the dominant governance model established in the Progressive Era and other centralized models being promoted by various political constituencies in the United States.

Proponents of eliminating local governance of schools point to the success on international test results of countries with more centralized governance. However, recent evidence indicates that these governance systems often result in unintended shortcomings, leading some international policy makers to call for a more Balanced Governance-style approach. They are looking at the U.S. system of locally elected school boards in combination with central governing boards.

The 2012 report of the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) test results indicate that “school systems that grant more autonomy to schools to define and elaborate their curriculum and assessments perform better than systems that don’t,” and that there is “a positive correlation in school autonomy for resource allocation and improved student performance.”

BALANCED GOVERNANCE: School Board Role and Function

Balanced Governance is not a single prescribed model or program, but describes a school governance approach that supports and promotes “balance” — discouraging micromanaging on one end of the governance continuum and a disengaged, rubber-stamping board on the other. A board is practicing Balanced Governance if it generally operates within the range shown in Figure 2 on page 21.

In terms of the school board member role, a Balanced Governance model instructs and encourages board members to play a constructive part in monitoring and supporting student progress through informed oversight. A Balanced Governance approach encourages boards to go beyond only establishing district end-goals or approving management-

crafted policy without board input or understanding. It empowers a board to set and monitor high end-goals for student learning, and to understand the means necessary to reach those ends.

Balanced Governance equips boards to use detailed knowledge of learning and teaching to better interact with community stakeholders, and craft targeted policy language that intelligently oversees formative progress on adopted processes and programs. The following are a few examples of how a board might apply the Balanced Governance approach in the areas of policy writing and community relations.

Balanced Governance in Policy Writing.

In the area of policy writing, a board practicing at the uninformed delegation end of the governance continuum adopts the following policy regarding student achievement in math:

Math scores will increase by 20 percent by spring on the State achievement exam.

Notice that this policy follows the “rules” of uninformed delegation by simply setting the numerical outcome standard and remaining uninformed about the processes to achieve the outcome. As a comparison, the board operating at the micromanagement extreme of the

FIG. 1 Balanced Governance: The School Board Structure



FIG. 2 Balanced Governance: **The School Board Member Role**



governance continuum might adopt a policy as follows:

Math scores will increase by 20 percent by spring on the State achievement exam. Board members will spend time in schools to ensure the adopted program is implemented properly. Those teachers not meeting the goal will have reduced pay and be put on a plan of improvement.

Note that in the second example, the school board members are micromanaging by directly influencing methods of implementation of the math improvement. While most micromanaging boards or board members may not construct policies like this, they engage in actions like those depicted in the policy language. The Balanced Governance approach would support the practice of neither unin-

formed delegation nor micromanagement. Highly effective boards engaged in Balanced Governance might construct a policy that reads:

Cohort-tracked math test scores on multiple measures (classroom work, class content tests, State exam) showing student growth (classroom assessments and district scores on standardized exams), and disaggregated by socioeconomic status and

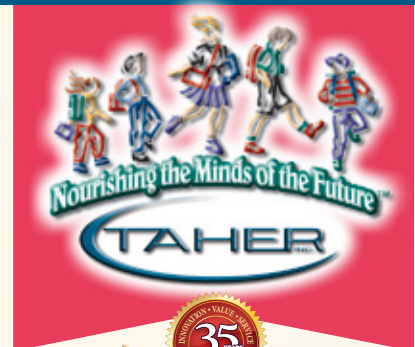
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ethnicity, will be presented quarterly to the school board. The board will use the data to

monitor the effectiveness of focused math reform programs, track progress toward district strategic goals, and consider recommendations to retool or replace existing reform programs.

A board creating this example of a Balanced Governance policy is practicing Informed Oversight. The board members are knowledgeable about which students are experiencing which math issues. Board members understand the component of the math reform that addresses and promises to resolve deficiencies. Board members hold the superintendent accountable to report the progress on the reform, identify challenges, and make recommendations for improving the reform.

Note that Balanced Governance board members, while staying

informed about the needs and the remedies, do not engage in suggesting what program should be used or how it should be implemented. Neither does the policy allow board members to influence school personnel directly in the implementation of the program.

Finally, Balanced Governance avoids all-or-nothing numerical goals. Board members understand that some students may need more time and special instruction to succeed. As such, if achievement standards are set, they tend to be achievement growth, and not absolute one-size-fits-all achievement numbers.

Balanced Governance in Community Relations. Another area of importance is the board members' role of interacting with the community. The Balanced Governance approach applies to this area as well. For example, a board member practicing at the uninformed delegation side of the governance continuum might communicate to a concerned community member as follows:

"You don't understand how hard our teachers work."

"We use research-based best practices to ensure all kids can learn."

"It is not the school's fault ... it's broken families."

Note that using this approach, the board member operates as either a benign cheerleader, general critic, or buck-passer. In general, this approach does not lead to community support for the district nor to substantive improvement of district programs. In this case, the public will likely conclude that the board member is uninformed and uninterested in leading real improvement and functioning in a rubber-stamp capacity.

A board member operating at the micromanagement end of the governance continuum might say the following:

"If our teachers and administrators don't meet the goals, they will eventually not work here anymore."

"Board members must monitor what is happening in schools because school employees will naturally spin things for their own benefit."

"I have no problem criticizing failures in board meetings to demonstrate that I am doing my job of ensuring accountability."

In this response, the board member suggests that he or she possesses more power than their office provides and encourages community members to "end-run" the school leadership and bring complaints directly to them. This typically does not result in problems being resolved efficiently and introduces fear among district personnel. The outcome likely is increased conflict, a more highly politicized board, higher forced turnover of superintendents and board members, and lower student achievement.

A Balanced Governance approach



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would support a response to a community member as follows:

“Let me describe what we’re currently doing to improve our math scores. We measure individual student growth and for any student with slower than expected improvement, all schools use a proven program [name it] adapted to meet individual student needs and local community goals. We monitor the student progress quarterly and show 150 percent growth for most students. Alternative programs [name them] are being

used for the 10 percent of students not showing growth. For example, [share a specific intervention story].”

This response demonstrates the Balanced Governance approach of informed oversight. The school board member is knowledgeable about the district needs and the programs used to address those needs. Their support or criticism of the district efforts is informed and constructive. Efforts for solutions are expressed as a joint responsibility without placing blame, abdicating oversight responsibility, or

promising to micromanage.

Highly effective boards can be identified by their use of a balanced approach to governance and could have come to use a Balanced Governance style through an organic, iterative process. Indeed, high-achieving boards currently function in a Balanced Governance manner even if they don’t use the term.

As such, Balanced Governance serves as a descriptor of values, beliefs, and actions that we have found to be highly effective for elected school boards. ■

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