

Responsibility with Authority

Governance strategy in Howard-Suamico defines school leadership roles and focuses on district priorities



SESSION *Freedom Within Fences — Leading for High Achievement*

Presenters Howard-Suamico School District: Mark Ashley, board president; Lisa Botsford, board member; Teresa Ford, board member; Damian LaCroix, superintendent

School board meetings at the Howard-Suamico School District used to frequently get bogged down in minutia — like what color to paint a school’s wall or how a credit card reimbursement should be handled. And like the meetings, the district seemed to be going

nowhere — three separate referendums had failed, public support was declining and there had been four superintendents in five years.

Fast forward to the present. Adoption of a new district management style known as policy governance that clearly dictates and separates board

and administration responsibilities has turned Howard-Suamico into a high-achieving district with a long list of successes to celebrate.

Howard-Suamico now uses a results-oriented model of management

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in which the district’s “entire focus is on student achievement,” said board member Lisa Botsford.

Instead of a policy book full of detailed guidance from the board on almost every facet of school life, Howard-Suamico has a set of ends policies that explains what the end

result should be — such as what characteristics, experiences, and requirements they want their high school graduates to have. The board also sets up executive limitations for the administration and general guidelines for board behavior and board-superintendent relations. Members establish how to monitor progress toward the end result and what indicators they will accept as well as ways of communicating with the public.

The system streamlines the district’s functioning by eliminating

micromanaging by the board and the traditional committee structure, and setting the administration free to accomplish its job within clearly understood parameters.

“You don’t tell administration what they can do. You set up fences and tell them what they can’t do,” Botsford explained. “Policy governance is a system put in place to allow administrators to do what they are trained to do.”

As proof, she pointed to the aftermath of the district’s successful 2014 referendum that included 11 different building projects. Fast forward 17 months; all the projects have been completed.

“That wouldn’t have happened if we (the board) had been focused on the tiny details,” Botsford said.

Superintendent Damian LaCroix said policy governance is a contemporary model of leadership that reflects changes in education and society as schools adjust to new ways of preparing students for college and careers that may not have been invented yet.

“As a superintendent, I want to lead,” LaCroix said. “There is nothing more frustrating than being given responsibility without authority.”

“As long as I understand what I can’t do, I have a very large field. There’s so much I can do,” he added.

Not having to ask the board for approval of every initiative gives him the freedom to move more quickly than under a traditional model and lets him improvise if he needs to.

Board president Mark Ashley noted that the board still has the responsibility to oversee district operations since it receives regular reports on aspects of district operations with board-set criteria for assessing their effectiveness. The time line for the reports, the types of criteria used for assessment and the overall goals are all set by the board.


Ashley said the district did not make the changes overnight and brought in consultants to help board members and the district staff embrace and implement the changes, which were based on the work of John Carver.” ■

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