



Asking the Tough Questions

Is your school board improving student achievement?

At this year's Fall Regional Meetings, we tried something a little bit different. Instead of bringing in speakers to talk about different programs and ideas related to public education, we focused on *you* — the school board members.

We presented information and asked you to reflect on your role as key leaders in your school district. We realize that this was not a simple request. We asked: How is your school board improving student achievement?

We know that many of you have wonderful answers to this question. And, we know that others are not even asking the question. For those of you who have been focusing on the question, we ask it anyway, because as our context continues to change at the rapid pace we are now experiencing, even the best among us will need to do things differently.

For those of you who did not attend the regional meeting, here's a recap of what we talked about.

First, we presented the changing context we live in — ever-increasing expectations and mandates for program changes, and increasing poverty across the state — all of which requires us to rethink leadership.

We used the Key Work framework to think about how leadership could be different. Just to remind you there are two dimensions to the framework. The right side focuses on the technical work of standards, assessment, accountability, and alignment. Federal and state policymakers have

imposed a number of expectations in this area. The left side focuses on adaptive work—vision, continuous improvement, collaboration and community engagement, and climate. This part of the framework is completely available for local leadership work. As a system, leaders in public education have not focused on these components of the framework as much as we could. Bringing the left side of the framework into balance with the right will accelerate the improvement of student achievement.

WASB Executive Director John Ashley closed out the Regional Meetings describing how several districts are focusing on the adaptive side of the framework to get results.

Cashton engaged in a visioning process that brought the community into the conversation and created a new vision for the district. This vision serves as the basis for the creation of new initiatives including building powerful partnerships for health and wellness, safety, and technology access.

In the Wausau School District, the school board has taken continuous improvement to heart and engages in an annual retreat to reflect on their work and reestablish goals for the next year. New school board members are welcomed to the team, and they take time to ensure that everyone understands how they are going to work together.

Collaboration is another component of the adaptive side of the framework. The Heartland-Lakeside school board is working with its

teachers to create an evaluation system that includes pay-for-performance. Because the staff is involved, they are more likely to support the program, as people support that which they help create.

In the Elk Mound School District, low reading scores for third graders resulted in a frank discussion between the school board and administration. Plans were created and progress tracked. In third grade, reading scores indicated that 72.5 percent read at the Advanced and Proficient levels, by fifth grade this same group of students surpassed the AYP benchmark with 87 percent proficient/advanced in reading.

The Key Work of School Boards provides a framework that can help school boards provide the leadership through governance that will create the conditions under which excellent teaching and accelerated student learning can take place. Let us know how we can support the important work you do, leading your school districts in this incredible time of change and transformation.

I'd like to end with the question I asked at the beginning of this article — how is your school board improving student achievement? Each district has to address this question in their own way but I hope the examples in this article provide some guidance as you ask these tough questions in your school district. ■

Gurke is the WASB director of Governance and Leadership Development (GoLD).

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