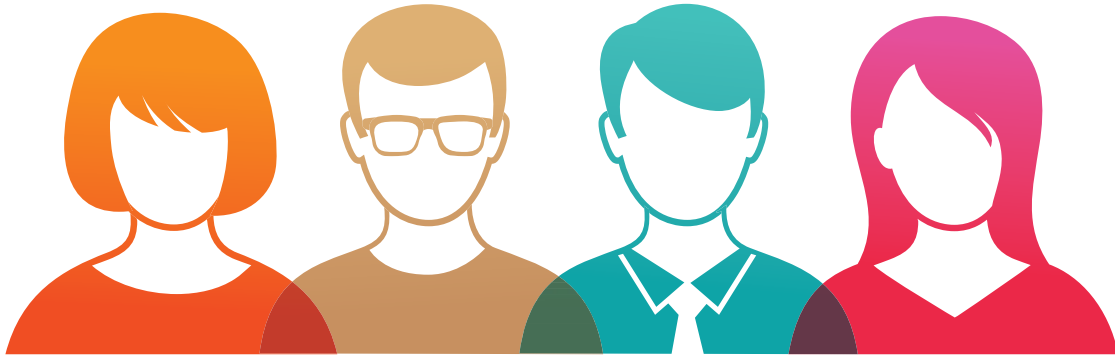


Four Questions

For School Boards



Good governance is a choice. Consider asking these questions from two governance consultants to firm up your board's work

Linda J. Dawson & Randy Quinn

Does your board find itself so caught up with day-to-day issues that you can't see beyond the current crisis? That's precisely when you should stop the machinery and figure out just what keeps you from dealing with true board work and from providing effective leadership.

Here are a few questions for school boards to ponder — and some possible solutions for you to consider.

QUESTION 1: Why do boards do what they do?

Some school boards do things without considering why. We have observed boards spending time approving the payment of bills, mostly for goods or services that already have been purchased or delivered, and sometimes even after the bills themselves have been paid. *Why?*

We also have seen board meetings taken over by dominant outside

groups and individuals to pursue their own agendas. They prevent the board from doing its work and add hours to the crowded personal schedules of individual members. *Why?*

We've observed board members showing up for meetings with no real understanding or knowledge of why certain items are on the agenda, or what the board is expected to do with them. *Why?*

And finally, we have seen board members trying valiantly to make sense of staff reports on topics that have little or no relevance to the board's main job: governing the district. *Why?*

Our answer: The board has not taken responsibility for its own agenda.

Boards have become accustomed to dealing with whatever their agendas ask them to consider, whether it makes sense to them or not. Typically, the responsibility for developing agendas falls on the superintendent's shoulders, along with some input from the board president. If this is your board's routine, you are not deciding what your job is and how you should do it; you are doing the job the superintendent has decided you should do.

All boards have their customs and habits, but some of them just don't make sense.

We do not mean to criticize the superintendent, who probably is doing his or her best to design an agenda that reflects what the board wants. But the result of this method is that the board has deferred the determination and execution of its job to its chief employee, making itself captive to an administrative agenda.

Our solution: Create an annual calendar of board work.

Outline in advance the issues you believe the board should spend meeting time on during the next 12 months. Expect the calendar to drive the development of monthly or semi-monthly agendas. You won't become entangled in the continuing challenge to put together monthly meeting agendas if you have created an annual work plan.

Be diligent in deciding what other matters to place on the agenda as it is finalized. A well-defined purpose should exist for every item the board is being asked to consider. Board members should leave every meeting believing their time was well spent.

Another solution: Tie every item on the agenda to an existing governing policy. If there is no relevant policy, the issue may not be the responsibility of the board. If every item on the agenda is based on board governing policy, the conversation is framed up and placed in context for meaningful board-level discussion.

QUESTION 2: Why do boards do what they do the way they do it?

All boards have their customs and habits, but some of them just don't make sense.

These customs include board presidents routinely recognizing each individual member for comments on every item on the agenda. If an agenda has 10 items for the board to discuss, and if every member of a

seven-member board feels obliged to speak on each one of them for three minutes, the time required would be 3.5 hours. *Why?*

Frequently, we see boards being held captive by one of their own members who has free rein to consume unlimited time by demanding extraordinary attention for their own personal gratification. Members are at the mercy of one who marches to a very different drummer. The majority go home angry and frustrated while the dominant member goes home satisfied and sleeps very well. *Why?*

Our answer: Decide what you want your governing culture to be and institute the rules necessary to achieve it.

Nothing prevents boards from imposing whatever type of discipline they choose to help get their work done effectively and efficiently. Other public bodies do this, including Congress, provincial governments, state legislatures, and city and county governing bodies. Yet school boards, for whatever reason, sometimes allow themselves to be dominated by behaviors that other public bodies would never tolerate.

If a board permits these customs, practices, and unhelpful behaviors to sidetrack and prohibit it from getting meaningful work done, it has only itself to blame.

Our solution: Back away from your current concept of how your board operates and ask a few questions:

If we were meeting here as the very first board ever seated to govern this district, how would we choose to organize ourselves to get our work done?

How would we build an agenda for our meetings?

What rules would we impose on ourselves?

How would we self-discipline poor practices or behaviors?

Would your answers result in a board that looks the same as your board now looks?

QUESTION 3: What is your job as a board and as a member?

Boards carefully define the superintendent's job when they negotiate a contract, and they expect the superintendent to communicate clear job expectations for every employee. But who decides what the board's job is? The superintendent?

We aren't necessarily talking here about the legal duties assigned to school boards by states. Rather, consider the real jobs school boards create for themselves that transcend their legal responsibilities.

During all of our combined 60 years of working with school boards, one constant has been our challenge to help boards define their jobs. Role definition generally has been a seat-of-the-pants decision, depending on the crisis of the moment.

Our answer: Boards must deliberately craft their own job description and performance expectations.

You and your colleagues must decide: What do you expect of your board and how will you do your job? What is the relationship and clear accountability you will establish with your superintendent?

As school boards recognize the wisdom of adopting more formal governance operating systems, they also adopt the understanding that their own job is not merely an extension of the superintendent's job. Their job is entirely different. The superintendent's job is to lead, manage, and execute while the board's job is to lead, direct, and govern. They are fundamentally

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different, but complementary, roles.

Our solution: Sit down as a board, perhaps with professional coaching, and thoughtfully and clearly define your job. Some job-related questions include:

- Is it the board’s job to determine the vision and expected student outcomes for the district? Or does the board hire a superintendent to develop a vision?
- Should the board deliberate and approve the superintendent’s “how to” strategies? Or should the board decide “what” the district is expected to achieve, and then hold the professionals accountable for making it happen?
- Who decides the non-negotiable standards for all district operations and determines successful performance?

QUESTION 4: How do you evaluate your superintendent?

Many boards struggle with superintendent evaluation. Some years ago, we wrote an article on superintendent evaluation. It was based on our experiences with boards dealing with this issue.

We have worked with boards that rated their superintendents on superficial elements such as their choice of automobile or where they lived. Others dinged their superintendents for out-of-district professional travel. One superintendent, incredibly, was faulted for spending too much time dealing with underperforming students.

Our answer: Superintendents need to know and understand their boards’ expectations.

They are entitled to clear information on what they are accountable for before any evaluation is made. Otherwise, there are no standards against which the evaluation will be relevant.

Make the district’s performance and the superintendent’s performance the same. That’s a different

concept from the norm, we understand, but let’s step back and think this one through.

We believe the superintendent is hired to do two things: to ensure that students learn to the standard the board defines; and to make sure that the district meets the board’s standards of operation in all functional areas. If that is a comfortable concept, then two crucial steps must be taken to make it work:

1. The board must deliberately define its expected student achievement outcomes and agree on the metrics that are acceptable for monitoring reasonable performance progress; and
2. The board must define the standards for all operational areas of the district and agree on the monitoring measures and resulting data that prove whether the district is meeting those standards.

If these two steps are taken in advance — with the participation and support of the superintendent — both student performance and the district’s

‘It’s an Important Job’ | *Long-time school board member reflects on 45 years of service*

In April, Phil Markgren, a school board member in the Spooner School District, attended his last school board meeting. He had served on the Spooner school board for 45 years. At the Spooner High School graduation ceremony this spring, Markgren will perform his last official duty as a school board member when he hands out diplomas. Among those receiving their diploma will be his granddaughter.

Q. What are some of the biggest changes you’ve seen in your time on the school board member?

“When I got on the school board, there was no teachers’ union, it was just getting started. Of course, that grew and grew and we had to contend with it. It really seems weird now that we basically have no teachers’ union. We’ve always treated our teachers well and we still do, but it seems strange that they don’t really have the hammer that they used to have.”

Q. What makes a good school board?

“The most important thing you can do is let the people in your district do their job. Board members, for the most part, are not educators. We’re there to represent the public. Once the board does its job of hiring the right people, you just

need to let them go and do it. It makes it easier on the board too. We don’t second guess or micromanage.”

Q. What have you learned from your time on the board?

“It’s made me more tolerant and made me realize there are two sides to every story. I’ve learned you better listen to both sides otherwise you can look foolish if you don’t.”

Q. What did you get out of serving on the school board?

“People say ‘why do you want a thankless job like that?’ But I don’t think it’s thankless. You get to watch these kids come up all the way through elementary school through high school and turn into good people. It is an important job.”

Q. Do you have advice for new school board members?

“You can’t have an agenda. It’s a board and you’ve got to try and get along and hash things out among yourselves. If you’ve got an axe to grind or your own agenda, it just doesn’t work. That also keeps other people from considering to run for the school board if they see the board is fighting all the time.” □



Annual BOARD PROCESS Review

The WASB and School Perceptions can help boards set a course for district success

As highlighted in this article, school board members face complex issues and unique governance roles. The *Annual Board Process Review*, a tool offered jointly from the WASB and School Perceptions, can help school boards understand where they agree and where they do not.

The *Annual Board Process Review* is an in-depth, online poll that school board members take individually. Board members are exposed to a comprehensive array of governance areas to evaluate. After all board members complete the review, a report is provided to the district. The WASB can help districts form a plan based on its data.

For more information, on the Annual Board Process Review, visit wasb.org. Select "Governance" and then "Services." Or contact Barry Forbes, WASB associate executive director and staff counsel, at 608-512-1707 or bforbes@wasb.org.

operational performance are formatively monitored throughout the year.

At the end of the annual monitoring cycle, the superintendent is credited with the summative judgments of the board, based on agreed upon data points. In this way, the district's performance becomes the superintendent's performance, and the latter now becomes meaningful.

Make a choice

We believe that, if boards have the vision and the will, they can elevate their governance performance to levels they rarely even dream of. They merely need to exercise the choice that is theirs to govern better, more effectively, and more powerfully.

We consider the linkage between the boardroom and the classroom to be critical to the overall success of the districts for which boards are responsible.

All of us have seen the results of boards that are truly outstanding, that

have led the charge for improvement, and that are setting the standard of governance excellence and district performance for others to follow.

We also have observed the consequences when boards have set a different kind of example. Those boards have allowed a lack of role clarity, focus, self-discipline, or preoccupation with management to break down morale, trust, and progress.

Both kinds of boards made con-

scious choices. In fact, not making a choice in itself is a choice. ■

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