



It Takes a Village to Advocate for Public Schools

At a recent conference, the CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings, announced that “... the fundamental problem with school districts is not their fault, the fundamental problem is that they don’t get to control their boards.” Unfortunately, these kinds of statements are no longer surprising given the concerted effort to reduce the role of locally elected school boards across the nation while expanding the control of corporate school governance.

Despite the lack of accountability to local voters or the ability to demonstrate widespread improved student achievement by private entities, some continue to advocate for the replacement of democratically elected school boards.

Here in Wisconsin, there have been repeated (but as yet unsuccessful) legislative attempts to expand so-called “independent charters” outside of the Milwaukee and Racine area. Independent charters cut out involvement by the local school board. They exist by virtue of a performance contract (called a “charter”) that is between a non-school-board “authorizer” and the operator of the charter school.

Although independent charters are typically governed by an unelected board, there is no requirement that the members of these boards be residents of the community in which the independent charter is located or even that they have any connection to the community, period. Independent charters are funded as a guaranteed first draw on general aids, so they get funded before any state aid is distributed to local school districts governed by elected boards.

If we are to continue turning back the efforts to diminish the role of locally elected school boards, we need to engage our communities in advocating for public schools governed by boards accountable to the local voters. Community members should take ownership of their public schools, value their investment in it, and join the cause in standing up for public education.

The National School Boards Association’s *The Key Work of School Boards* and *Telling Your Story* book provide guidance and direction to school boards on building collaboration and community engagement.

Collaboration, admittedly, is not always easy work. Joining together parents, business partners, political leaders, and other community stakeholders involves relationship building. While there is no perfect formula, there are numerous strategies and ideas to consider that might help open your school district to stronger relationships.

Look at your communications. Do they clearly and concisely demonstrate your mission or “brand”? Do they provide for two-way communication? Do they illustrate why your schools and services are of value to the entire community? Are they differentiated to better reach different target audiences (e.g., parents, staff, seniors, businesspeople, etc.)? Engaging your community requires keeping stakeholders well-informed and requires the district to listen to feedback.

Look at your board meetings. Do you model the type of collaborative relationship you want to have with community members? Do you focus on the positive or negative? Are community members invited to participate

in any way? Effective meetings must be run in an orderly fashion and abide by legal requirements, but successful boards find a way to bring others to the table in some manner.

The Key Work of School Boards, provides board members with questions the board can ask itself and its administrators: Do we provide leadership and take an active role in establishing collaborative relationships? What alliances and collaborations would most advance student achievement and support for your schools? Is the community well informed about the district’s vision, achievements, challenges and plans for improvement?

How would your board answer those questions?

It is amazing to see what districts can accomplish when they invest in building relationships with community members and businesses. In this magazine, we’ve featured stories describing some of the great partnerships between Wisconsin schools and business partners. These partnerships improve student learning and build support for your public schools.

It is not easy work, but building and maintaining collaborative relationships with your community is essential to the success of public education. No doubt public education and our school boards will continue to receive criticism and be endangered by new governance methods aimed at removing locally elected school boards from the equation. That is why we need our community stakeholders to help us stand up for our schools and show why public education works in Wisconsin. ■

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