

The Keys to Board Excellence

For your work to be highly effective, a data-driven approach to improving teaching and learning is necessary. And you must have a plan in place to pull it off

School board president Carol Frank left her post at the 1,500-student Marcus Whitman Central School District in upstate New York with a parting message: “I have learned that excellence in the classroom begins with excellence in the boardroom.”

During her tenure, the board hired an assistant superintendent to oversee K-12 curriculum in the district’s four schools and revised the budget process to focus on the district’s primary mission: educating kids.

Frank urged the new president and board members to “move to a higher level of governance that is truly student centered.” And she advised them to make teaching and learning the board’s top priority, noting the district’s “mediocre to poor student achievement” despite the board’s high per-pupil spending.

In Arkansas, Danna Schneider, president of the Clarksville School District’s board of education, said board members used the National School Boards Association’s *Key Work of School Boards* to examine “all aspects of a school board’s functions.” The board grappled with its shortcomings and then developed a mission statement, a vision, and a plan to encourage community involvement in Clarksville’s five schools.

Schneider says the board is con-

centrating on improving teaching and learning. It’s exerting stronger leadership over curriculum, making policies to fit with federal and state requirements, and holding public forums to discuss the future of the schools.

Effective school boards

Carter Ward, executive director of the Missouri School Boards Association, and Arthur Griffin, with 18 years of service on North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, say the best school boards focus on academic achievement.

Ward and Griffin, both associated with CTB/McGraw-Hill, publisher of standardized achievement tests, say the company’s panel of top educators studied school boards and found that highly effective boards work on these priorities:

■ **Focus on student achievement.** The best boards target policies and resources to promote achievement for all students. They concentrate on high standards, a rigorous curriculum, and high-quality teachers. They make decisions based on the core business of schools—student achievement.

■ **Allocate resources to needs.** The best boards allot time, money, and personnel to the lowest-achieving schools. They create policies and bud-

gets to support teaching and learning, and they refuse to protect so-called sacred cows.

■ **Monitor returns on investments.** The best boards hold their members and school employees accountable. They ask, “What services are we providing to which students at what cost, and what are the benefits and results?”

■ **Use data.** The best boards use data to make informed decisions and develop policies. They review disaggregated data on students’ gender, race, and socioeconomic status to ensure that all students are treated fairly and have equal opportunities to learn. They demand truthful and complete data on new programs to gauge results.

■ **Engage communities.** The best boards develop partnerships with parents and residents. They invite constituents to help determine the district’s vision, values, and short-term and long-term priorities.

The panel’s list is valuable, but it won’t help if board members simply file it away. Ward and Griffin say board members require extensive training to turn the panel’s recommendations into practice.

Factors for improving achievement

The Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) also urges boards to focus on teaching and learning. IASB advises boards to study these factors that, taken together, “paint an overall picture of student achievement.”

■ **Attainment.** How are students performing at a given point? Look beyond more than one set of scores, such as math results for all fourth-

graders. Develop a precise picture of achievement by examining student subgroups according to school buildings, grade levels, and individual classrooms.

■ **Growth.** Are all students progressing at an acceptable rate? Compare the current year's attainment with previous years. Combine growth rates with attainment to determine how well achievement is improving. Target funds to high-need groups.

■ **Gap.** Do attainment and growth differ according to student subgroups? Disaggregate test scores according to students' gender, race, ethnicity, economic level, and special needs. Look for achievement gaps in student data, such as attendance, grade level retention, and student mobility.

Board members should never accept excuses for poor performance and disparities in achievement, IASB says. Members should become "informed activists" by studying tests and assessments, sorting and classifying student data, updating district goals, and supporting reforms to improve teaching and learning.

Another way to be effective: Stick around for awhile. Iowa State University researcher Tom Alsbury's seven-year study of school board turnover and student achievement in 176 Washington state districts suggests that high board turnover corresponds to lower student achievement. Boards with high turnover—the result of election defeats, resignations, and retirements—spend more time "tinkering with organizational minutiae" than on improving teaching and learning, Alsbury says.

Hands-on for achievement

In the 1990s, many school boards abandoned their long-standing "low-key, hands-off" approach to achievement and adopted achievement as their "central concern," according to

the 2006 *Informed Educator* report of the Educational Research Service.

ERS's Gordon Cawelti, former senior research associate, and Nancy Protheroe, director of special research projects, examined six districts that had rapidly improved student achievement. Board members and superintendents in each district publicly acknowledged poor student performance. Then they went to work, forming partnerships to design school improvement plans, studying assessment data, setting high expectations for all students, and accepting "no excuses" for low achievement.

Reforms can be tough to enact, especially in inner city schools, says Fred Doolittle, director of policy research and evaluation for MDRC, a social policy research organization based in New York and California.

Doolittle and his research team studied three large urban districts—the Houston Independent School District, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and the Sacramento Unified School District—that managed to raise academic performance and reduce racial achievement gaps district wide.

The districts' achievements are all the more notable given the array of serious challenges they faced at their lowest points.

School boards were "divided into factions," feuding over power to control promotions, hiring and firing, and contracts for supplies and services. Disputes among board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers were "serious and personal." Central offices were overly bureaucratic and budgets poorly managed. Low-income students frequently changed schools. Teachers were largely inexperienced, poorly trained, and likely to leave after a year or two. Furthermore, they typically expected little from poor and minority students, and their lessons were seldom

challenging.

But the districts didn't plunge straightaway into tackling these problems. They began by adopting "pre-conditions for reform." Boards, for example, were expected to focus on policies related to student achievement and superintendents to plan reforms in consultation with board members.

The districts' plans varied somewhat, but Doolittle says they shared similar strategies:

■ Make academic achievement the district's primary objective. Develop a district-wide curriculum that corresponds to state standards. Ensure that teachers apply the standards, and hold district officials and building-level staff accountable for results.

■ Focus on the lowest-performing schools by raising the quality of teachers and administrators and providing adequate resources. Concentrate on improving elementary schools first, and then move on to middle schools and high schools.

■ Provide professional development for all teachers, and require intensive training in reading and math for middle and high school teachers.

■ Use data to make decisions about teaching and learning and to target areas for improvement.

Trends indicate that the districts have made progress, even outpacing statewide gains in some areas. Achievement improved most in elementary schools, somewhat in middle schools, and least in high schools, MDRC reports.

I hope every school board member will remember Carol Frank's parting words. Excellence in the boardroom is the first step to excellent achievement in your schools. ■

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