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Who's in Charge?

Before you can fix what's broken, you must have the proper tools. Here's how a team of leaders found what they needed in a policy governance model

Washington Post columnist William Raspberry recently aimed his pen at an urban school board that hired a new superintendent as the first step in district reform. Decrying the seemingly never-ending cycle of such searches, he compared superintendent turnover with replacing bus drivers on a vehicle whose brakes are shot, gauges are rusty, and steering is loose.

Raspberry's preferred solution: Fix the bus.

Our school board found this metaphor useful as we embarked on developing our own system of policy governance. Our approach still has shortcomings, and we have learned many lessons along the way, but we believe our story may be of value to others trapped on this wayward vehicle.

Our journey began with a question: What's wrong with the governance bus?

Some common problems can get in the way of a smooth-running district. Boards that want to manage, instruct staff at all levels, and don't know where they are headed only slow a district down. But beneath the hood lie other potentially damaging possibilities. Superintendents who flood board meetings with staff business, for example, or avoid accountability for district results and keep the board in the dark until the last minute also can take a bus out of commission.

WHO'S DRIVING OUR BUS?

Before 2001, our part-time board and full-time staff shared a moderate bond occasionally strained by tension and friction, much of it stemming from confusion over perceived leadership roles. Board members were uncomfortable with the perception that they were rubber stamps. The superintendent chafed at the board's inclination to pick and choose issues of the day. Rather than pay attention to student outcomes, we spent our limited attention as a part-time governing body on the various activities and programs in which our full-time staff was engaged.

While at the National School Boards Association's 2001 an-

nual conference, I came across a copy of *School Board Leadership 2000* by Gene Royer, which highlights John Carver's policy governance model. Reading it on the flight home, I noticed the book addressed some of the same issues we had been wrestling with as a board-superintendent team. We purchased additional copies and before long found ourselves referring to the book's policy governance principles during board meetings. In October 2002, all five board members and the superintendent attended formal training on policy governance. The following month, we passed a resolution to adopt a policy governance system within the next year.

According to Carver's model, the three most important things boards do is write policy, ensure district performance, and connect with stakeholders. (For more information, see www.carvergovernance.com.) Toward this end, we developed "means" policies that outlined how the board and superintendent are to operate. Means policies for the superintendent are "executive limitations" and tell her what "not" to do. Within those limitations, all means decisions are preapproved.

Starting with a single mission statement, we then created "ends" policies, which eventually numbered six—all written from scratch to reflect the values and expectations our community had about the knowledge and skills our students should possess.

THE MEANS

Our transition into a new way of doing business needed to take place in public. Traditional expectations about board behavior can be at odds with what is called for in the policy governance model. The public sometimes believes the board makes all decisions. This assumption is reinforced whenever they see us voting on even routine operational actions.

To counter this, we made a concerted effort to redefine the meaning of board business and clearly define the leadership roles of the superintendent and the board. But employing this new way of doing business isn't as easy as it seems. As Royer observed, "Boards are the least disciplined, least rational, and most disordered element in any school system." While I wouldn't say I fully agree with that statement, we were our own biggest challenges in the conversion to a policy governance system.

We had to fight the urge to divert board attention and time toward supervising superintendent business. We still had that itch to be involved in a hands-on way in what's going on in the district. We also had a habit of relying on the board chair for enforcement, so we needed to emphasize the idea that each of us is independently responsible.

To help get past this traditional approach, we began publicly evaluating meetings to regularly remind ourselves and the community of our agreed-on commitment to the process. At first we left it up to the chair to do this, but we now rotate the responsibility.

Under the traditional format, our board meetings were dominated by staff reports about staff activity or board approval of superintendent and staff business. Now our meetings focus on monitoring district and superintendent performance against criteria written into policy and revising those policies to ensure the community's values are clearly stated. In other words, board meetings now are dominated by board business.

Agendas for our previous board meetings were primarily prepared by the superintendent, approved by the chair, and followed by the board. Now the board develops the agenda at the beginning of the year, effectively delegating old meeting business to the superintendent. Rather than answering the question "What's going on?" our meetings now consider questions like "What is important?" and "Has district performance met our stated expectations?"

While our pre-existing manual, with its 305 policies, remains in place, it is no longer the board's manual. The entire operating policy manual has been handed over to the superintendent, who is free to revise, delete, or extend policies as needed. Operating policies are only valuable if they are useful to the superintendent in meeting her obligations to the board as described in ends and means policy.

Whenever operating policies need adjusting, the superintendent can bring them to the board for approval through the consent agenda. This allows us to provide state-mandated board approvals without tying up board time on something we have already delegated to the superintendent.

THE ENDS

The most important by-product in our first year of policy governance was a clearly communicated board priority of developing and refining ends policy. We accomplished this by consulting with the public. We invited community members to add their voice to board deliberations around a preplanned topic.

Because the topics are preselected, these "linkage" meetings are for listening to "owners" rather than to special-interest customers. Unfocused and unsolicited input is saved for another time. Our obligation in return is to give people our attention and to listen.

We scheduled four linkage meetings in our first year of policy governance. Two focused on academic achievement, one targeted lifelong learning and the world of work, and one concentrated on citizenship, character, and service. Notes from the discussions were compiled, sent to attendees, and posted on our website. Later, we discussed at a board meeting what was said and deliberated on its policy implications. Ultimately, the input we received from these meetings meant significant revisions to five of the six ends policies

For example, as a result of community input at linkage meetings, we revised our academic standards policy by setting a standard of exceeding national rates of participation on AP tests, exceeding statewide averages for required remediation coursework among community college students,

and achieving grade-level benchmarks in reading, writing, and math.

PLANNING AND BUDGETING

Policy governance has radically changed our strategic planning process. We had a very good long-range plan, with a stable mission statement, clear long-term goals, and parameters to which the district was firmly committed. But our strategic planning system fell short when we tried to supplement the long-range plan with strategies and action plans to guide day-to-day decisions.

The two perspectives, strategic and operational, seemed disconnected. Policy governance addresses this disconnect by splitting traditional strategic planning into business that is reserved for the board and business that is delegated to the superintendent. The board deals with board-reserved issues by communicating values and priorities through ends and means policies. It delegates the remainder to the superintendent. By monitoring its ends and means policies, the board controls both strategic and operational planning but avoids perpetuating the illusion that it is "running" the district.

For example, our previous strategic plan included board approval of beliefs, parameters, mission, goals, strategies, and action plans. The first four are now written in board policy, and the last two are delegated to the superintendent, who is free to set and adjust strategies and take action without slavishly following a formalized board-approved document. As long as the board-approved ends are achieved while unacceptable executive limitations are not violated, the superintendent is free to "get the job done."

The budget process is another area that has changed. Instead of ad hoc meddling with the budget document itself, the board is encouraged to make adjustments through written policy by defining values and priorities for staff to follow in preparing and executing the budget.

We adopted both ends and means politics to guide the budget. In our means policy, for example, we included restrictions on incurring debt and spending beyond certain limits. In our ends policies, we clarified what must be achieved through the use of available resources. It is the superintendent's responsibility to develop a budget that will achieve desired ends while avoiding unacceptable conditions. With the benefit of the board's written policy guidance, the superintendent is free to formulate a budget that meets policy guidance as a whole, rather than on an item-by-item basis.

MONITORING AND EVALUATING

Delegating board authority to the superintendent or to the board chair without monitoring performance would be an abdication of our responsibility. Hence, we scheduled policy monitoring sessions nearly every month during our first year.

Through monitoring, the board needs to answer these questions: Was sufficient information provided to enable the board to judge whether ends were achieved and means were in compliance with criteria spelled out in policy? Does our policy need further refinement? During our first year of policy governance, we revised nine of our 41 policies and in our second year revised six policies.

When we judge district performance against written policy criteria, we give our superintendent the courtesy of knowing ahead of time how we will judge her success. Under policy governance, she is not left wondering in April how things may come out in June; now she knows from month to month how the monitoring has gone.

For many years, we used a checklist of desirable superintendent qualities and behaviors. That approach failed to give enough priority to overall district results—it hardly matters if the superintendent does things in accord with a checklist of desirable behaviors if the outcome for students is less than desirable.

Under policy governance, our superintendent evaluation depends on answering one crucial question: Are district results for students (ends) being achieved without violating executive limitations? Monitoring reports are not by themselves enough. As a board, we had to judge the data in those reports against criteria written in policy and publicly state whether the superintendent exercised a reasonable interpretation of that policy.

Just as we owe our superintendent an ongoing public declaration of her performance against board policy, we also owe it to ourselves and the community to publicly judge the extent to which we are following our own policies for governance process and board-superintendent relations.

The final item on our board agenda for each meeting is board self-evaluation, which takes only one or two minutes. Each board member, in turn, completes a written meeting checklist and gives an oral brief; the assessments are then gathered by the vice chair and presented at the end of the year for board discussion and decision. The meeting checklist includes such items as:

■ Board actions occur at the policy level rather than at the operational level;

■ The board supports the superintendent in any reasonable interpretation of its policies; and

■ The board spends most of its time deliberating issues, defining and clarifying its vision, and linking with its community, as opposed to "fixing things."

We began by asking, "Who's in charge?" Under policy governance, our answer is clear: For board business, the board is in charge and must do the work. For all other business, the superintendent runs the show and is accountable to the board. As for William Raspberry's analogy of the bus and the bus driver, our board has joined with our superintendent to spend our time, talent, and energy on the bus.

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