

A Team Sport

Governing is not a hard-and-fast job, but one that functions best as a shared activity. Does your strategic plan reflect this type of effort? Are your efforts successful?

In meetings with K-12 groups, I'm often asked about the line that separates so-called school board "policy-making" from the executive and administrative management functions of the superintendent and senior administrators. Twenty-five years of working with boards and superintendents has taught me that there really isn't a solid line, not in real life anyway.

Rather than thinking of governing in "us vs. them" (policy vs. administration) terms and assuming you can actually draw hard-and-fast boundaries, it's far more productive—and realistic—to see governing work as a shared activity involving a very fluid division of labor. A well-designed school board committee structure provides an ongoing forum for working through the nuts-and-bolts division of labor in the three key governing areas: planning, monitoring performance, and maintaining relationships with the community and external groups like the chamber of commerce.

One of the preeminent processes for board involvement—the gold standard for strong board leadership, in my opinion—is strategic planning. This involves your board making decisions about some truly high-stakes governing "products," such as:

- An updated vision and values statement.

- Strategic issues that demand serious board, superintendent, and executive attention, such as growing unemployment and a declining tax base, a slow-but-sure decline in households with school-age children, a shifting racial balance, and new federal education money allocated through a competitive application process.

- Your district's strategic initiatives to address the highest priority issues.

In the old days, it wasn't uncommon to see a finished strategic plan, often weighing up to a pound and typically handsomely bound, handed to the board for their review and comment. Today, many if not most school boards would reject this passive-reactive role, what I think of as the "thumbing through" approach to governing. So what's the alternative?

The alternative approach

Not long ago, I worked with a school board planning committee that, over the course of a couple of intensive meetings with the superintendent and her top lieutenants, mapped out the board's strategic planning role in a much more proactive and meaningful way than just wading through a monstrosity of planning tome.

The planning committee and superintendent agreed to hold a strategic planning session early in the fiscal

year. The board, superintendent, senior administrators, faculty representatives, and even some key external groups participated in visioning, identifying strategic issues, and mapping out change initiatives. Administrators were asked to put together a briefing on economic, demographic, political, and other conditions and trends that would provide context for identifying key issues.

The committee also agreed on the session follow-up, a mini-retreat for the superintendent's administrative team. Held a couple of weeks after the strategic planning session, the team would massage the draft vision statement and analyze identified issues. Once done, they would return to the planning committee with a recommended vision and set of top-priority issues. This is a creative and meaningful division of labor that does not draw a line separating board and executive/administrative functions.

The strategic planning session was a great example of governing teamwork. All of the district's top leaders, from the board to top administrators, were in the room together doing high-level governing.

It's a great reminder that governing is, indeed, a team sport.

Structure is critical

Experience has taught me that well-designed committees can be powerful "governing engines," helping the board accomplish far more on the governing front than is possible relying on a committee-of-the-whole approach.

A couple of years ago, I worked with the board and superintendent of a medium-size district in the western

U.S. that was going through a kind of nervous breakdown because of the lack of well-designed structure. Board meetings were going on for hours twice each month, exhausting everyone involved.

Complex issues, like the need to redraw boundaries and get a tax levy for capital expenditures on the ballot, were being endlessly debated without arriving at clear decisions. You can imagine the decline in civility, as irritated and exhausted board and executive staff members deliberated into the late evening.

The solution was to put together two “bread and butter” standing committees that would meet once a month to prepare for a full board meeting. One was a planning and resource development committee, the other a performance monitoring/external relations committee. The committee chairs—along with the board president and superintendent—would make up a coordinating committee called board operations.

Quickly, the committees proved their utility:

- Complex issues were examined in detail at the committee level, in a collegial fashion with superintendent and senior administrator involvement. The

monthly full board meeting became much more productive, with decisions made in half the time.

- The rule that only committee members reported and made recommendations at the full board meeting contributed to much stronger ownership of recommendations. It also freed the superintendent from having to use his always-limited line of credit trying to sell recommendations to the full board.

- An unexpected spinoff of the new board structure was a much closer relationship between board members and senior administrators who worked intensively with them in the informal committee setting. The committees proved to be powerful team builders.

Accountability is critical

Boards can't go it alone in governing; they need active superintendent and senior administrative support and involvement in making decisions and judgments. But that doesn't mean that board self-management isn't essential to sound governing.

Three approaches I've seen work well in districts around the country have proved to be very effective accountability builders:

- Assign a governance or board

operations committee explicit responsibility for overseeing board performance.

- Make sure this committee implements a formal program, with a budget, for keeping board members' governing knowledge and skills updated. Include a well-designed orientation process for new board members.

- At year's end, the committee should assess the board's governing performance and identify opportunities to strengthen the governing processes.

Exploring ideas further

These are the key concepts I'll be emphasizing in “Meeting the Governing Challenge,” a daylong early bird workshop that I will present at NSBA's Annual Conference in Chicago on April 9. If you would like to give me your thoughts on these concepts, please e-mail me.

Your input is critical. After all, who is better to advise me than you, the people who actually govern school districts around the country? ■

Doug Eadie (doug@dougeadie.com) is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. A contributing editor to *ASBJ*, he is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership.