

Excellence by Design

Board committees are the best way to make sure you are continuously improving your governance practices, but only if the committees have a process and plan in place

The Place: Superintendent Harry Angstrom's conference room at the district administrative office.

The Cast: Angstrom and his top six district executives, who make up the Executive Cabinet.

The Agenda: Presentation by Susan Koerner, associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction and chief staff liaison to the board's Planning and Development Committee, on recommended changes in the district's annu-

al planning process and calendar.

The Decision: To recommend two important changes to the Planning and Development Committee at its next meeting. The first would add a daylong, committee-hosted, strategic work session early in the planning process. The second would be to kick off budget preparation later in the year with a half-day operational issues work session that the committee also would host.

The Immediate Outcome: A great discussion at the Planning and Development Committee meeting, resulting in unanimous agreement to hold the two work sessions and review the staff's recommended detailed agendas the next month.

The Long-term Impact: These two work sessions resulted in substantive board input early in the planning process, when it could make a difference, and as a result, strengthened board members' commitment to and ownership of their planning role.

Defying conventional wisdom

This scenario draws on plenty of real-life experience, but it will certainly jangle some readers' nerves. Why?

Simply put, the above sce-

nario challenges conventional wisdom in the field of school governance.

On more than one occasion, you've probably heard people say school boards should focus on the "what" while your superintendent and senior administrators determine the "how." Indeed, you wouldn't want your school board to micromanage and meddle in matters such as detailed curriculum development or building management. But it makes no sense to say the board shouldn't map out its time for important governing functions such as strategic planning, budget development, and educational and financial performance monitoring.

School boards around the country, such as Teton in Jackson Hole, Wyo., have found that working closely with the superintendent and senior administrators is critical in updating the processes for board involvement in key governing areas. This is how continuous governing improvement happens.

Two key elements make it possible. First is a forum in which board members and senior administrators can discuss process enhancements aimed at strengthening the board's involvement. The second is strong executive support.

The forum

No vehicle, in my experience, equals well-designed board standing committees. These groups help keep the board's governing processes up-to-date and ensure that the investment of time and energy results in effective decision-making. Committee meetings are posted and the public is welcome, but the informal setting is much more



comfortable than your monthly business meeting. Committee members, the superintendent, and senior executives can discuss in detail how to involve the board in key governing processes.

This column opens with an example of a board's planning and development committee reaching an agreement with the superintendent on two important enhancements to the district's annual planning process. Recently I sat with a board's performance monitoring committee, which discussed at some length how to strengthen financial reporting to the full board, including a more creative use of graphics and more incisive analysis.

Committees are incomparable continuous governing improvement vehicles, but only if they are well-designed. That basically means that each committee corresponds to a broad board governing function, such as planning and performance monitoring, rather than to a narrowly focused programmatic or administrative silo such as curriculum and instruction, buildings and grounds, or personnel.

Narrowly focused or siloed committees make high-level board decision making well-nigh impossible while inviting micromanagement. Even with well-designed standing committees, board members must agree—formally and explicitly—that this process design role is part of their committee's job description. Otherwise, continuous governing improvement tends to drop by the wayside.

Executive support

It's not reasonable to expect that the board members on standing committees can take the lead on the process design front. The most we can expect is that they'll consciously commit to participating in process design and follow through by making time available at committee meetings.

The superintendent and senior administrators must take the lead role, fashioning recommendations on the process design for committee review and discussion. This executive support function consists of two key components:

- Each board standing committee is provided with a chief staff liaison—a senior administrator assigned by the superintendent to take the lead in providing executive support. Of course, this person doesn't do all the staff work to get material ready for committee meetings, but is responsible for making sure that it's done in a full and timely fashion. A key facet is thinking through possible process improvements in planning and performance monitoring that can be reviewed with the superintendent and his or her executive team and ultimately recommended to the committee.

- The superintendent and executive team members meet, probably once a month, in a session wholly dedicated to committee staffing, including the review of possible process improvements that the staff liaisons have developed. This dedicated executive team meeting is the essential quality control point in the process design process, involving a detailed examination of the pros and cons of particular improvements under consideration.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, involving board members in mapping out the "how" of board involvement in key governing processes—through well-designed and strongly supported committees—is the most effective way to upgrade board participation over time and prevent micromanagement from occurring. ■

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COMMUNICATIONS

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Effective communication may not prevent a tragedy, but a poor response clearly can make a bad situation even worse.

Stop the blame game

It's human nature to find fault when tragedies occur. When someone dies, particularly children or young people, tough questions should be asked. Responsible parties should be held accountable.

Answers are elusive when it comes to something as inscrutable as teen suicide. Bullying often plays a role, as do underlying mental health conditions, family dynamics, and other issues that defy easy categorizing.

The difficult truth is that we likely won't ever know the real answer about Phoebe's suicide, or how pervasive bullying is in the rural community the beautiful Irish immigrant briefly called home.

Were popular students given a free pass to terrorize classmates? Did teachers knowingly ignore bullying that occurred right in front of them? Did staff dismiss concerns expressed by Phoebe's parents and others? Has the school had a toxic culture for years?

Better awareness, training, procedures, intervention, discipline, and communication are all positive steps to take. Expecting educators to prevent every tragedy and intervene successfully in every student's life simply isn't realistic.

South Hadley could be any school. Let's stop the blame game. While we're at it, let's stop dismissing bullying and mean-spirited attacks—by children, teens, and adults on others they perceive as being different from them—as normal, acceptable, or inevitable behavior. It's not. ■

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