

Stand and Deliver

Fine-tuning your board's governing work includes using well-designed standing committees to help refine your decision-making processes

In a column published in the February issue of *American School Board Journal*, I described one of the most important and practical tools for developing your school board's governing capacity: Beefing up your members' governing knowledge and sharpening their governing skills. This column looks at a second, even more important tool for building the board's capacity: Using well-designed standing committees as "continuous governance improvement vehicles."

These board standing committees—in addition to preparing for regular board business meetings—are responsible for incrementally updating and fine-tuning the processes for making judgments and decisions in their respective governing areas, in partnership with the superinten-

dent and top administrators. Keep in mind that you can't make use of just any board standing committees for this purpose. First, you must make sure your committees are well-designed, which means that they correspond to the broad streams of governing judgments and decisions that effective boards make.

The two pre-eminent governing streams in every organization, including school districts, are planning and performance monitoring. These are the bread-and-butter governance functions. A third, narrower stream is important but not as critical: community and stakeholder relations. This modern committee structure has proved to be highly effective in taking the governing performance of school boards to the next level.

Not promoting silos

One reason is that this structure couldn't be more different from the old-fashioned approach of so-called silo committees that correspond to educational and administrative functions, rather than to governance.

Silo committees include curriculum and instruction, buildings and grounds, personnel, and finance. Boards that are broken into silo committees, in my experience, are fighting a losing battle when they try to improve their

governing performance significantly.

Before turning to an example of a board committee engaging in continuous governing improvement, I'd like to mention a structural alternative for boards of five or fewer members: the "virtual committee."

In a nutshell, a virtual committee is the whole board sitting as the planning or performance monitoring committee. Typically, these sessions are held at different times, with different board members chairing each of the virtual committees and, of course, with separate agendas. In practice, for example, the whole board sitting as the virtual planning committee would participate in the annual planning process design session.

Making the right tweaks

I recently participated in the annual design work session of a board monitoring committee. Over the course of almost a half day, the committee reached agreement on a number of tweaks to educational and financial performance reports that it had been reviewing and sending to the full board.

Now, it's very important to keep in mind that we're not talking about opening Pandora's box in this kind of design session by merely asking the committee to come up from scratch with suggested improvements in report contents and formats. Only Dr. Frankenstein could love the results of this kind of open-ended design.

In the session I observed, the superintendent took the lead in the design process, first running by the committee the various reports it already was receiving on a regular basis, then suggesting some practical tweaks that would make them more effective monitoring tools. Committee members identified and discussed their own tweaks, but the superintendent and her top lieutenants had done enough preparatory work to make



the design process workable in only four hours. I've seen this approach used many other times over the years, and it works.

In this particular session, everyone agreed with the superintendent's assessment that the current financial report was extremely difficult to understand. Indeed, the report was so confusing that it was very difficult to educate the wider public about the district's financial status when the materials were presented in the monthly board meeting.

Committee members agreed to receive a high-level overview report that, by employing bar charts on presentation slides, would compare actual to budgeted expenditures by major cost categories for the current period and the year, to date. Also, any developing problems—where expenditures were significantly higher or lower than anticipated—would be highlighted.

In the educational area, the committee reached agreement with the superintendent to have a new report developed that surveys and tracks graduates' education and work experience two and five years after they finish high school. No final decision could be made until the technical and financial details had been worked out, but at least this very important addition to the performance monitoring arsenal would be explored systematically as part of the committee's design responsibility.

You hear the term "empowerment" tossed around a lot these days, and most of the time what's being talked about is political power. In a very real sense, however, when your school board actually plays an important role in shaping its own involvement in the pre-eminent governing processes, planning, and monitoring, it's considerably strengthening its governing work and, hence, empowering itself as a governing body. Now that's empowerment in the truest sense of the word. ■

Doug Eadie (doug@dougeadie.com) is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. A contributing editor to ASBJ, he is the author of 19 books on board and CEO leadership.

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