

# **School Board Leadership: Best Practices**

**Brian T. Sims**

**Pittsburg State University**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to identify school board best practices in K-12 education. Research suggests that school boards must continue to be actively involved in the governance of local policies and practices regardless of the size of the school district. In addition to monitoring progress and taking corrective action when school goals are not met, school boards must work collaboratively to create a vision, remain committed to the goals they set, and continue to use data to make educational decisions.

**Key words: School Administration, Organizational Objectives, Organization**

**Communication, Institutional Mission**

## **School Board Leadership: Best Practices**

Local school boards in America are older than the country itself (Walser, 2009). Unfortunately, the role of school board leadership is often minimized compared to school district administration leadership. This lack of recognition for the impact of school board leadership is unfortunate. Regardless, board members are charged with governing a school district that decides the future of their local and global community. The purpose of this report is to discuss school board best practices identified by reviewing current literature. A thorough review of this literature will help educational leaders better implement strategies to improve school board leadership within their school district.

### **Essential Board Leadership Practices**

Do school boards have an impact on student learning? Hofman (1995) found that school boards do actually make a difference in school effectiveness. Similarly, Johnson (2010) identified twelve essential practices affecting leadership of public school districts. In addition to Johnson's work, others have written about the effective practices among school board members (Delagardelle, 2008; Marzano & Walters, 2009; Rice et al., 2001).

Much of the research on the effect of school boards on student achievement and effective schools discuss the importance of student-centered policies (Johnson, 2010). Student achievement and instruction must be the foundation of school board policies for effective schools (Black, 2008; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). The following work details effective school board practices found during a review of relevant research.

## **Creating a Vision**

The vision of an organization provides a clear picture of where the organization is headed and what it wants its future to look like (Northouse, 2013). Yukl (2002) stated, that an organization’s “Vision conveys an image of what can be achieved, why it is worthwhile, and how it can be done” (p. 284).

Johnson (2010) argued that effective school boards work closely with district staff and community stakeholders to develop a long-range vision for the school district. Furthermore, the vision for the school district should embody the belief that all students can learn (Delagardelle, 2008; Rice et al., 2001) and that all staff members can positively affect student outcomes (Johnson, 2010). In addition to the vision focusing on the belief that all students can learn, Black (2008) wrote that the most effective school boards focus their efforts and resources upon academic achievement for all students.

Because the school board and district administrators must have a shared vision in order for the district to be effective (Johnson, 2010), it is important that the vision be developed as part of a collaborative process and not dictated by one person or an elite group of people (Gill, 2010). Once a vision has been established, school leaders must collaborate to develop goals that will guide the district in the attainment of the vision of the district and community.

## **Setting Goals and Remaining Committed**

Schools fail and school boards may prove ineffective if decisions not are guided by the district goals. Johnson (2010) observed that goal setting for school boards must be a collaborative process that includes input from board members, school personnel, and the community. Similar to the school vision, the goals of the school board must have a

student-centered focus (Johnson, 2010; Marzano & Walters, 2009). Student achievement and instruction should be the foundation of school board policies for school districts to be effective. In fact, Murphy and Hallinger (1988) studied effective schools nearly three decades ago in California, and found that almost two-thirds of the goals from schools being studied were designed to impact curriculum and instruction.

If establishing non-negotiable goals that lead to increased student learning is essential, then remaining committed to those goals is also imperative. Johnson stated, “effective school boards demonstrate commitment to the district’s vision and goals by ensuring that district resources support district goals, and that school board members spend time together learning about district programs, initiatives, and issues” (2010, p. 37).

The importance of setting clear and measurable goals is further highlighted by authors in the field of leadership (Bush, 2003; Northouse, 2013; Yukl, 2002). The field of educational leadership is no different. For educational initiatives to sustain beyond the often-short tenure of school board members and administrators, much thought must be given to the sustainability of board policies (Delagardelle, 2008; Johnson, 2010).

It is clearly important for local school boards to develop a vision collaboratively with the community. Additionally, setting non-negotiable goals and remaining committed to those goals are equally important for school boards. However, it is virtually useless unless the school board has a plan for monitoring progress and taking action if goals are not being met.

### **Using Data**

As part of their service, school board members are accountable to the voters who elected them to lead the school district. They are charged with ensuring that the school district is

successful. Within this pursuit of success, board members must be able to effectively use data to make decisions (Johnson, 2010). “The best boards use data to make informed decisions and develop policies” (Black, 2008, p. 34). It has been suggested that effective school boards gather data together as a group prior to making a decision (Johnson, 2010).

### **Monitoring Progress and Taking Corrective Action**

Northouse (2013) described leadership as the process of directing a group of individuals toward accomplishing a goal. But how do school board members, as educational leaders, assess whether or not a goal has been met? Team leaders, including administration and school board leaders, may foster accountability by requiring results, reviewing those results, and rewarding results (Northouse, 2013). School board members may review data from district and state assessments, financial data and data provided from community surveys. Stringfield (2008) suggested school boards members are inundated with data from many sources about the governance of their school district. It is therefore important for school administrators to help teach school board members how to analyze these data and determine its value to the decision-making process.

Johnson (2010) described the process of evaluating school goals and holding school staff accountable as an ongoing assessment of all aspects of education. Part of this accountability assessment should include feedback from all stakeholders: students, parents, staff, and community members. Delagardelle (2008) also suggested that effective school boards hold both themselves and the district staff accountable for meeting the district goals. In addition to ensuring the goals of the school are being met, the board must engage the community in the decision-making process.

## **Engaging the Community**

Effective school boards look towards the community in which they live to gain assistance in developing the district's vision and subsequent goals. However, the community involvement must not stop at the school's vision; it must extend to community forums that allow the board of education to receive community feedback on educational issues (Johnson, 2010). Effective school boards seek numerous methods of involving parents and stakeholders (Rice et.al, 2001). Hofman (1995) found that school boards with increased community involvement and shared decision-making had better educational results. Black (2008) stated that gaining input from a panel of community members can be very valuable as long as the board of education is willing to take that advice. While it is true the school board must consider input from community members, they must also be able to work productively with district leaders to ensure the success of the district.

## **Connecting with District Leadership**

The school board and district administration represent the traditional leadership team of the school district. Lencioni (2002) stated that a team must have many things, but each is predicated upon trust in each team member. Without a sense of trust and community, team members may become "bogged down" by being concerned about what other team members think about their ideas rather than generating and voicing ideas that enhance the growth of their organization (school). The process of building trust within a team and connecting with district leadership requires similar activities. These activities may include retreats and other social events where board members can discuss viewpoints and begin to build trust in one another (Johnson 2010; Lencioni, 2002).

School board members and administration teams quickly unify within effective school districts. The team that is formed has a common vision with shared responsibility for the school district. This vision again must be based on the fundamental belief that all school goals have to be student centered (Black, 2008; Johnson, 2010).

### **Summary**

School board members have the difficult task of continuing to set policy that ensures their district is successful. Several effective practices of school boards have been identified. It is very clear the school board and other district leaders must always make student –centered decisions. Effective school boards collaboratively create a vision for the district with assistance from the members of the community. In addition to setting a clear vision, effective school boards set and measure goals consistent with their vision. Working closely with district staff, effective school boards hold professional educators accountable for meeting the goals of the district, which in turn ensures a successful school district.

### **References**

- Black, S. (2008). The keys to board excellence. *American School Board Journal*, 195(2), 34-35.
- Bush, T. (2003). *Theories of educational leadership and management*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). London, England: Sage.
- Delagardelle, M. L. (2008). The lighthouse inquiry: Examining the role of school board leadership in the improvement of student achievement. In T.L. Alsbury (Ed.), *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation* (pp.191-223). Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Education.

- Gill, S. J. (2010). *Developing a learning culture in nonprofit organizations*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, P. A. (2010). Leading for learning: Leadership practices of effective boards. *ERS Spectrum*, 28(4), 27-42.
- Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.
- Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1988). Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts. *Journal of Educational Research*, 81(3).
- Northouse, P. G. (2013). Team Leadership. *Leadership: Theory and practice*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Rice, D., Delagardelle, M., Buckton, M., Jons, C., Lueders, W., Vens, M., Joyce, B., Wolf, J., & Weathersby, J. (2001, April). The lighthouse inquiry: School board/superintendent team behaviors in school districts with extreme differences in student achievement. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Stringfield, S. (2008). School boards and raising student outcomes: Reflections (Confessions?) of a former urban school board member. In T.L. Alsbury (Ed.), *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation* (pp.273-292). Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Education.
- Walser, N. (2009). *The Essential School Board Book: Better Governance in the Age of Accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Yukl, G. A. (2002). *Leadership in organizations*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.