

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Policy, strategy key to increased achievement

In my previous two columns, I shared the concept of an aligned system to increase student achievement at scale and how individuals' beliefs and the district's vision, mission and theory of action when aligned start a district on the path to scaling student achievement. In this column, I'll examine how policies and the strategic plan work together to make increasing student achievement at scale reality.

Policies

In Charlotte, our theory of action specifically cited the need to align all district systems around this theory and to develop board policies consistent with this approach. Reviewing policies to determine if they align with the theory of action and support its implementation is a tedious process at best. But once complete, it can provide support in unexpected and unpredicted ways.

An example: In the financial downturn of 2008, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools faced budget cuts of about \$146 million. Our theory of action stated, "In a Managed Performance/Empowerment system, schools should be given some degree of control over operations as well as instruction. The amount of control will be based on student, teacher and school performance as measured by the district's accountability system. Schools will be given as much latitude as possible to manage budgets, procurement, hiring and firing, the configuration of workforce, schedules, student affairs, extracurricular activities, and parent and community relations." Policy had also been written to support this part of the theory of action. To make the budget cuts, we had to do layoffs – and because of policies based on our theory of action, we could make the layoffs using the criterion

of effectiveness rather than seniority. It was a controversial move — but it was also the right thing to do for the needs of our students. Without an aligned system where policy was written to support our theory of action, it would not have been possible.

Strategic plan

A theory of action can facilitate effective strategy development and a coherent strategic plan puts a theory of action into practice. We developed a strategic plan that included a goal focused on effective educators. When we wrote the plan, we had no inkling that a financial crisis and layoffs were coming our way. We just wrote a goal that made sense to us at the time. It read in part, "CMS will increase the percentage of its schools with effective teaching staff. That effectiveness will be measured by subjective and objective evaluations, and the percentage will be set after a district-wide accountability system required by CMS Board of Education Policy has been adopted." Our subsequent decision to use effectiveness-based layoffs was a strategy that aligned with our strategic plan, our policy and our theory of action — even though the financial crisis and layoffs were not foreseen at the time all three were created. Strong alignment and sound policy will pay dividends now and in an unknown future.

Those layoffs in Charlotte were the first ones since the 1930s, and they landed hard on the district and the community. The outrage and personal attacks that followed our decision to make effectiveness-based layoffs were painful and ugly. It certainly helped me understand how people can take the easier route for adults rather than do what they believe is right for children. ■

Email response resource helps board

The superintendent of Unity School District in Balsam Lake, Wis., created an email response resource to help his board members understand how to respond to emails they receive.

He did this because board members want to communicate positively, but doing so in email format can be especially difficult.

The resource, *School Board Member Advice — The Email Dilemma*, gives board members suggestions for scenarios they encounter when responding to an email:

Here's an excerpt focused on chain of command:

"Check to see who is included in the email. If an administrator is also included, they may have more information and may be able to respond in a satisfactory manner.

"If an administrator is not included in the email, it may be beneficial to inform the sender that you are forwarding the email to an administrator for follow-up."

Editor's Note: If you are interested in this resource, ask your superintendent for the copy I've provided in the administrator's section of *Board & Administrator*. ■

5 ways to concentrate on better board governance

Here are five areas where board members encounter role confusion and how to handle them:

1. Confusion about respective roles and responsibilities. Board members can't be the superintendent. You need to know the roles and responsibilities as a board member. It's also important to know the superintendent's roles and responsibilities and never cross the line and try to do the job of the superintendent. Remember that roles and responsibilities boiled down to the least common denominator are: the board makes policy on recommendation of the superintendent, hires and fires the superintendent, and approves the budget, and the superintendent implements policy and manages the day-to-day operation of the district.

2. Failure to remember that the board has one employee — the superintendent. The superintendent deals with the rest of the district's employees. Board

members have no business managing personnel issues involving certificated and noncertificated employees.

3. Lack of loyalty to the position of board members. Running for the board implies a strong desire to perform a service to the community, children and families in the district. Board members must always act on behalf of all the children — not just some.

4. Failure to realize the board functions as a whole. No individual board member can commit the board to any action not passed by the majority.

5. Failure to realize that the board members' power exists only during a duly called and constituted board meeting. Individual board members have no right to enter school campuses, give orders, make changes, and act as agents of the board, unless given that authority during a meeting for a specific item. ■

Keep this in mind about your board service

Some people run for election to the school board because they want to see something changed. These can be positive changes — like improvements to curriculum. Or they can be very negative — they want to put a coach, teacher, or principal out of work.

If you've been elected to a board, keep this principle in mind: All past board decisions and

policies are still valid, even when new members join the board. Board members come and go, but the decisions made by past boards remain in effect.

New board members should understand that board power is continuous until the full board meets in a legally constituted school board meeting and the majority changes board policy. ■