TASB eXceptional Governance Board Development

The board of trustees of an independent school district … shall provide oversight regarding student academic achievement and strategic leadership for maximizing student performance.
*—SB 1566, 85th Texas Legislature, 2017*

Overview

Although the Texas Education Code already enumerated duties of Texas school boards, the 85th Texas Legislature in 2017 elevated one responsibility in a new way. Senate Bill 1566 highlighted the specific responsibility of school boards to **provide oversight and strategic leadership regarding student academic achievement**. For some boards in Texas, this represents a notable shift in focus from overseeing traditional issues like budgets, buildings, and buses to evaluating student learning outcomes. For some trustees, this shift could seem like a daunting change.

Fortunately, a growing body of research on effective school district governance supports this shift in focus. More than a decade of research, in fact, identifies key practices of school boards leading the most effective school districts across the country. Sometimes, the difference between boards in high-performing districts and others is reflected in the actions they take. Other times, the difference is a high-performing district's underlying perspectives or beliefs. In either case, **focus** and intentionality are often distinctive among trustees in high-performing districts.

TASB eXceptional Governance (XG) Board Development incorporates this research into a five-session, whole-board learning experience that strengthens essential perspectives, builds governance capacity, and equips boards to act confidently with a focus on improving student outcomes.
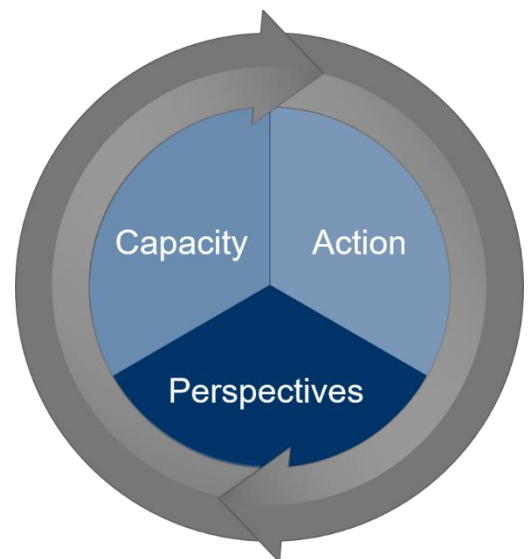
Outcomes

XG Board Development supports the school board's primary responsibility of overseeing the improvement of student learning in the district. XG focuses the board's attention on the overarching question: **"How are the students doing in our district?"** The program equips trustees to answer this question, to make connections between student learning and district initiatives for improvement, to set goals for improving outcomes for students, and to stay

engaged in monitoring progress toward these goals. Student achievement, in turn, becomes the essential lens for decisions that come before the board.

Accomplishing this goal requires individual trustees and the board as a whole to develop particular perspectives, capacity, and actions.

Perspectives refer to beliefs, dispositions, and values that trustees bring to their board work. Research on effective governance reveals that certain beliefs are characteristic of boards in high-performing districts. Discussion and application of these perspectives is fundamental to XG Board Development.

Capacity refers to the knowledge and skills that trustees must develop in order to set and monitor meaningful student performance goals. XG Board Development facilitates continuous learning as a whole-board team. Leaders who prioritize their own learning can more effectively lead organizations that prioritize learning.

Ultimately, school boards lead their districts by taking action. XG Board Development helps trustees learn about and prioritize the *actions* most closely related to improving student achievement. Historically, board development programs have focused on building the capacity of governance teams to work well together to accomplish the district's goals. XG Board Development extends this outcome with a strong focus on the work of the team. It focuses on research-informed actions of boards in high-performing districts. This empowers trustees to govern as a focused visionary team with the superintendent and senior administrators.

Perspectives	*Capacity*	*Actions*
• Belief in possibilities • Continuous improvement • Responsibility • Commitment • Curiosity • Focus • Trust • Respect • Engagement • Alignment • Systemic thinking	***Knowledge*** • Research-supported practices of effective governance • Foundational school improvement strategies • Summative assessments • Formative assessments • Nature of effective student learning goals • State assessment and accountability systems ***Skills*** • Asking open-ended questions • Making connections between student learning and district initiatives • Monitoring formative and summative data results tied with goals	• Establish a student-centered vision for the district • Establish student outcome goals • Monitor progress toward student outcome goals • Interrogate data • Maintain focus on student learning amid routine governance decisions • Conduct regular board self-assessment • Communicate needs, progress, and priorities with the community

Program

XG Board Self-Assessment

The XG Board Self-Assessment is a research-based survey that gauges trustees' perceptions of their current practices relative to practices of boards in high-performing districts. The self-assessment is completed before the first session so results can be incorporated into discussions and used to tailor learning to the district. The self-assessment results can be used to set improvement goals for the board and to monitor continuous improvement of the board.

Session 1: What's at stake: Setting a vision for opportunity and achievement

This session lays the foundation for the series by identifying what is at stake for students, the district, the board, and public education. Participants commit to a shared vision and high expectations for students, staff, and the board.

> *Session 1 takeaway:*
> *When the board develops a conviction that higher achievement is possible for all students, it can focus on continuous improvement to ensure equitable outcomes for students.*

Learning Objectives

- Investigate key perspectives of student learning and the board's role in improvement.
- Discuss what is possible for student achievement.
- Develop a shared sense of urgency for improvement.
- Develop a board-wide commitment to student learning as the primary work of the board.
- Develop (or affirm) a vision statement.
- Establish personal commitments to improvement in the district.

Outcomes

- Shared sense of urgency for improving student learning
- Enthusiasm for the board's work and accomplishing goals
- Awareness of whether the current vision statement sufficiently reflects the board's beliefs about student learning in the district. (Note: Depending on the age and content of the vision statement, this session might prompt a process to update the vision.)
- Individual commitments to continuous improvement in the district

Prerequisites

This session is most effective when all board members attend, so a commitment from all trustees is important.

Although not a disqualifying prerequisite, having a current vision statement and district goals will assist the process. Additional work sessions may be required if a vision statement does not exist or does not reflect the current board.

Session 2: Essential levers: Key elements of improved learning and teaching

The second session builds on the vision and shares research-supported levers for improved teaching and learning in the district. Trustees can explore these concepts without having to become educational experts. Participants focus on the board's governance role in supporting improvements made throughout the district.

Session 2 takeaway:
The board can better focus when it operates with a clear understanding of key levers for improved student learning.

This session is a collaborative experience with trustees and senior administrators. Mixed groups participate in a gallery discussion of select strategies for improvement, discussing the value of each strategy and how it currently occurs in the district. The exercise builds understanding of key district initiatives among the board.

Learning Objectives
- Investigate the Seven Conditions for Success and the board's governance role in each condition.
- Identify key perspectives, capacity, and actions related to select Conditions for Success.
- Describe how selected Conditions are currently implemented.

Outcomes
- Common understanding of key initiatives
- Strengthened collaborative relationships among trustees, the superintendent, and senior staff
- Mutual support for district improvement efforts

Prerequisites
This session is most effective with participation of senior administrators in addition to trustees and the superintendent.

Sessions 1 and 2 provide a shared foundation for all school boards completing XG Board Development. Although the target outcomes remain the same, Sessions 3–5 are tailored to the readiness, goals, and needs of each board and district, which may require additional facilitated work sessions.

Session 3: Taking stock: Where are we now, and where are we going?

Session 3 equips trustees to understand the current state of student achievement in the district and set specific learning outcome targets. The board focuses on understanding and applying data to monitor and make decisions at the governance level.

This work may require an additional session led by district administrators, depending on the familiarity trustees have with reviewing student performance data.

Session 3 takeaway:
The board can develop meaningful student learning targets when it has a clear understanding of the current state of student performance in the district.

Learning Objectives
- Explain the performance domains in the state accountability system.
- Examine student performance data for the district and identify key areas for improvement.
- Develop common messages about student learning in the district.
- Develop up to three student learning targets.
- Develop consensus on expectations and definitions of success.

Outcomes
- Understanding of the state accountability system
- Common messages about the state of student achievement in the district connected to the district's vision and initiatives
- Up to three student learning targets (Note: Depending on the age and content of the current district goals, this session might prompt a process to create goals around student learning. Additional time may be needed for the development of those goals.)

Prerequisites
This session is most effective if the board has current comprehensive district goals (and ideally established learning targets or "indicators of success") that can be used as a starting point for discussion. The superintendent may choose to identify initial student learning targets for discussion with the board. These targets should be linked with formative assessment measures that can be used to monitor progress.

Session 4: Structuring for success: How will we know when we get there?

Session 4 helps trustees build a sustainable goal-monitoring structure that ensures a sharp focus on student learning and accountability for results. Participants will use data to ask informed questions and assess improvement. In addition, trustees will discuss the results of their XG Board Self-Assessment, particularly the standards related to high expectations for student achievement and accountability.

Session 4 takeaway:
The board must embrace its oversight role and incorporate progress monitoring into its regular work.

Learning Objectives
- Review current practices based on XG Board Self-Assessment report.
- Discuss formative assessment data related to student learning goals.
- Commit to a calendar for monitoring student learning.

Outcomes
- Goal-monitoring calendar
- Consideration of additional changes in board operations

Prerequisites
This session will be an academic exercise if the board has not adopted clear goals related to student learning with formative assessments identified to monitor progress. This session requires completion of the XG Board Self-Assessment.

Session 5: Oversight for excellence: The ongoing role and work of the board

The final session ensures that trustees have essential skills and practices to sustain the work of the board, focused on their vision for improving learning and teaching. This includes the ability to apply the progress monitoring system, share an understanding of and commitment to ongoing improvement, and develop common messages that support a relentless focus on student learning outcomes.

Session 5 takeaway:
Routine governance decisions take on new meaning when the board has a relentless focus on student learning in the district.

Learning Objectives
- Review current practices based on XG Board Self-Assessment report.
- Create board improvement goals based on the XG Board Self-Assessment.
- Discuss practices that can derail eXceptional Governance.
- Describe the concept of reciprocity of accountability.
- Identify commitments individually and as a board.
- Develop a plan for sustaining the board's focus on student achievement.

Outcomes
- Board improvement goals
- Common commitment to maintaining focus

- Follow-up/sustainability plan

Prerequisites
This session requires completion of the XG Board Self-Assessment and the previous sessions.

Sustainability and Follow-up

Boards that complete XG Board Development will be well-positioned to address the Legislature's charge to "provide oversight regarding student academic achievement and strategic leadership for maximizing student performance." The five-session series equips boards to enter a process for continuous improvement. Follow-up sessions, either quarterly or semiannually, may be required for ongoing refinement. The XG Board Self-Assessment could be repeated semiannually or annually to monitor the board's continuous improvement.

As superintendents leave or new trustees join the board, sustaining focus on student achievement will require targeted effort. TASB ISD, a training program for newly elected trustees, has been redesigned around the same foundational research in XG Board Development so that new board members understand their role in student achievement early in their service.

Certainly, a school board that has adopted XG principles as its core perspectives and priorities will want to incorporate an introduction to XG in new board member orientations. TASB's Online Learning Center will include introductory modules by the summer of 2018 to assist participating boards with this orientation.

TASB will continue to feature specific sessions at conferences and events to deepen trustees' understanding of eXceptional Governance perspectives, capacity, and actions. The biennial XG Summit provides another opportunity for XG boards to gather for focused learning on the latest governance research and to share their own XG journeys with peers.

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