

Balanced Governance Information and Standards

Balanced Governance is defined as any school board governance approach that discourages both board disengagement (sometimes called “rubberstamping”) and over-reach (sometimes called “micromanagement”). Balanced Governance describes a constructive role for the school board in monitoring student outcomes through a process called *informed oversight*. A board engaging in Balanced Governance is one that strives to simultaneously set and monitor high end goals for student learning and is also knowledgeable about the means used to reach those ends. Balanced Governance equips boards to better advocate for and support community stakeholders, and craft targeted policy language that oversees formative progress on adopted policy while discouraging governors from directing operations and management.

Highly effective boards are characterized by their use of a Balanced Governance approach as highlighted in substantive research on school board effectiveness (Abjornsen, 2017; Alsbury, 2015; Alsbury & Gore, 2015; Blasko, 2016; Blissett & Alsbury, 2017; Delagardelle & Alsbury, 2015; Holman, 2016; Rocksund, 2017; Saatcioglu & Sargut, 2014; Walser, 2009). Constructs used as benchmarks in an observation and formative evaluation process are based on the collective of research-supported best practices and effective practices of highly effective boards linked to a balanced governance approach and improving student learning.

About the researcher:

Thomas L. Alsbury is founder and president of Balanced Governance Solutions and served for 23 years as a Professor of Educational Leadership at Iowa State, North Carolina State, Seattle Pacific, and Northwest Universities. He served 20 years as a former high school science teacher, principal, and district administrator and for 8 years as Director of the national UCEA Center for Research on the Superintendency and District Governance. He is currently adjunct professor and doctoral advisor/instructor of Organizational Leadership at Northwest University. Dr. Alsbury has been listed as the foremost expert on school governance by the Associated Press and consulted, trained, and evaluated boards on school governance issues in 12 countries and across the United States. He has over 50 publications on School Board and Director research. His book “The future of school board governance: Relevance and revelation” earned Dr. Alsbury the UCEA Culbertson Award. His 2015 book by Harvard Press entitled *Improving local school board governance: A Balanced Governance approach* introduces Dr. Alsbury’s Balanced Governance™ model. The Balanced Governance™ model is unique amongst school governance models, in that it is developed from 50 years of research on exemplary school Boards and the findings from the only national studies of school governors; both conducted by Dr. Alsbury. The Balanced Governance™ model has been adopted by both small and large school districts and used as a statewide model in several states.

Balanced Governance Standards

Standard 1: Vision-Directed Planning

The board engages communities and staff in the development of a shared vision focused on student learning. The Board ensures that the vision is the foundation of the mission and strategic goals that direct board policy-making, planning, resource allocation and activities.

- The board collaborates with the community to articulate core values and beliefs for the district
- Board members can clearly articulate the vision and strategic goals of the district
- The board collaborates with the superintendent to develop long-range strategic goals for improving student learning
- The board regularly monitors the progress of strategic goals focused on improving student learning
- The board adopts a budget that aligns resources to the district vision and strategic goals
- The board establishes and models a culture of high expectations for all students
- The board promotes a vision and expectation for excellence beyond the present performance

Standard 2: Community Engagement

The Board recognizes that all members of the community are stakeholders in the success of their schools. The Board engages the community using a reciprocal advocacy process that creates and sustains meaningful conversations, system connections, and feedback loops across the breadth of their community. The Board supports collaborative partnerships and new types and levels of community participation in the school.

- The board promotes practices that solicit input and involvement from all segments of the community
- The board ensures that vision and goals are collaboratively developed with input from staff, parents, students, and the broader community
- The board recognizes and celebrates the contributions of school and community members to school improvement efforts
- The board is responsive and respectful to community inquiry and feedback
- The board advocates for public policy that supports education through relationships with community leaders, city, and county government officials and state legislators

Standard 3: Effective Leadership

The Board practices and supports leadership that is proactive, integrated, and distributed. The Board establishes focus, direction, and expectations that foster student learning. Across the education system, the board ensures the development and implementation of collaborative leadership models and practices guided by student learning goals. Within district, the board ensures the alignment of authority and responsibility so that decisions can be made at levels closest to implementation.

- Board members are visible in the community

- Board members develop professional community relationships to improve student learning and opportunities for students
- Board activities, analysis, and decision-making are aligned to vision and strategic goals
- The board solicits input from multiple sources to assist in making informed decisions
- The board establishes and sustains relationships with community leaders, city, and county government officials, and state legislators
- Board members model an empowering leadership style
- The board enacts strategic goals and policies to define hiring practices that ensure employees fit into the culture and core values of the district
- Board members promote change through dialogue and collaboration
- Board members understand and are knowledgeable about school improvement initiatives and their role in supporting those initiatives

Standard 4: Accountability

The Board holds high expectations for the learning of each and every student and holds themselves and the organization accountable for reaching those results. The Board provides strategic direction in the development of the organization's mission, vision, and goals. The Board adopts policy and resources that align with strategic vision and goals. The Board monitors and holds accountable the superintendent to implement the strategic vision and goals.

- The board ensures funding to implement accountability measures
- The board regularly reflects on its performance and makes substantive change based on the results of self-evaluation
- The board models a culture of high expectations throughout the district
- The board's priorities and focus are on student learning and student success in alignment with the district's strategic goals
- The board ensures the budget aligns resources based on student learning priorities
- The board supports rewards, consequences, and recognition systems to encourage advancement of the district's strategic goals
- Disaggregated student results and growth are measures against expectations set by district strategic goals
- The board conducts an effective superintendent evaluation focused on monitoring progress on the district's strategic goals
- The board regularly establishes performance goals for itself
- The board ensures the superintendent and staff clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in creating and supporting a culture of high expectations throughout the system

Standard 5: Using Data for Continuous Improvement and Accountability

The Board uses meaningful quality data and information, from multiple sources and in various formats, to identify areas for improvement, set priorities, and monitor improvement efforts. At the same time, they support even better ways to do things the organization is already doing well.

- The board uses, and expects the superintendent to use, a variety of types of relevant data in decision-making

- Programs approved by the board have effective data collection requirements and measurable results
- The board uses data to identify discrepancies between current and desired outcomes
- The identifies and addresses priority needs based on data analysis
- The board communicates to the public how policy decisions are linked to student learning data
- The board creates a culture that encourages the use of data to identify learning needs throughout the system
- The board ensures data used in decision-making is disaggregated, culturally representative, and provides the ability to monitor the district's strategic goals

Standard 6: Cultural Responsiveness

The Board recognizes cultural diversity in its many facets including social, economic, political, religious, geographical, generational, linguistic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, gender identification, and students with special needs. The Board develops an understanding of this diversity and applies perspectives responsive to the cultures in their community in policy and program approvals. The Board supports effective community engagement and expectancy strategies to build on the strengths of a community's cultural diversity.

- Board outreach and community engagement activities accommodate cultural differences in values and communication
- The board actively encourages and expects the superintendent to facilitate the participation of culturally diverse groups
- The board has a process to review policies for cultural responsiveness and bias
- Board members approach decision-making considering the many facets of cultural diversity including those indicated in the cultural responsiveness standard
- The board ensures district employees are representative of the values and culture of the community
- A climate of caring, respect, and the valuing of students' cultures is established through board policies and goals
- The board ensures the superintendent holds all employees accountable for high standards and expectations for each and every student

Standard 7: Culture and Climate

The Board creates a climate of expectations that all students can learn at their highest level. The Board supports policy and procedures that foster a positive and safe learning environment. The Board models professional relationships and a culture of mutual respect with staff and community. The Board models and establishes an organizational culture of service.

- The board models relationships built on trust and respect
- The board takes time to reflect and improve internal and external relationships
- The board regularly assesses, holds the district accountable, and provides support for the improvement of the district's culture and climate
- The board creates a system in which high levels of student learning are expected.
- The board establishes policies and ensures practices to foster a safe, positive learning climate for students
- The board models and holds the district responsible for improving a culture of service

Standard 8: Learning Organization

The Board ensures the district functions as a self-renewing professional community that supports reflection, discovery, learning, improvement, and success by staff at all levels. The Board encourages professional development that empowers staff and nurtures leadership capabilities across the organization.

- Board policies nurture leadership capabilities across the organization
- The board creates and pursues opportunities to learn about research-based strategies that ensure continuous improvement for the next generation of learners
- Board members promote positive change through dialogue and collaboration
- The board encourages professional development that increases learning and empowerment
- The board fosters an environment of mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth throughout the organization

Standard 9: Systems Thinking

The Board practices and supports systems thinking in its deliberation and approval of policy, programs, and procedures. The Board practices an integrated view of education within and across systems and levels (e.g. K-12, ESD, community college, and university). The Board seeks out collaborative local, state, and national partnerships, coordinated programs, and shared resource models to improve student learning.

- The board works to avoid policy decisions that shift problems from one part of the system to another
- The board encourages an organizational structure that enables creative processes
- The board engages in process thinking, seeing beyond the immediate situation and easy solutions
- The board analyzes issues for their impact on other parts of the system
- The board team is solution-oriented
- The board works collaboratively with other agencies to encourage dialogue that fosters continual growth

Standard 10: Innovation and Creativity

The Board encourages innovation and creativity as assets to the process of development and change, leading to new types of thinking and better ways of meeting student needs. The Board supports innovation and creativity that support district vision, values, and goals throughout the organization; engages collaborative partnerships; and encourages dialogue, new ideas, and differing perspectives.

- Board members create time and opportunities for their own creative thinking
- Board members partner with community and educational organizations to remove real and perceived barriers to creativity and innovation
- The board sets meeting agendas that allow it to proactively identify and explore strategic issues
- The board incorporates flexibility into its future plans to enable the district to look and move in unforeseen directions in response to unexpected events
- The board recognizes the risk inherent in creativity and innovation and promotes employee knowledge, awareness, creativity, self-initiated action, and experimentation

Standard 11: Board Member Conduct, Ethics, and Relationship with the Superintendent

The Board recognizes that it is essential to have a clear, mutual understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of the Board and the superintendent. The Board supports and practices team building as an essential part of this relationship.

- Each member of the board understands and respects the distinction between the board's responsibilities and the superintendent's duties
- The board and superintendent trust and respect one another
- Board members represent the interests of the entire district
- Board members preserve the confidentiality of items discussed in executive session
- Board members do not use their office for personal gain or advancement
- Board members do not attempt to individually speak on behalf of the entire board or commit the board
- Board members direct complaints and requests to the superintendent rather than attempting to solve them directly
- The board and superintendent agree on the information needed by the board, and when and how the board receives that information
- The board and superintendent participate in learning opportunities as a team
- Board members come to the meeting familiar with the agenda and prepared to discuss, ask questions, and take action on agenda items

Standard 12: Budgeting and Financial Accountability

The Board ensures that strategic educational goals of schools are translated into reality through effective alignment with the budget and make sure the district is fiscally sound. The Board utilizes fiscal resources based on student needs, district policy, and strategic goals.

- Board members are knowledgeable of the district budgeting process
- Budgeting decisions are based on student needs, adopted district policy and goals, and the district's financial ability to meet those needs
- Board members have a basic understanding of district revenues and expenses
- The board reviews monthly financial statements provided by the superintendent and understands their role in the oversight of the budget