

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

January 2019 Vol. 32, No. 9

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Use an Aligned System to Increase Student Achievement at Scale Part 4

By Dr. Peter Gorman

In the final column in this series, I will share how the last three elements — budget, accountability, and evaluation systems — contribute to an overall district-aligned system.

Budget

While I have titled this element as budget because everyone is familiar with the concept of school district budgets and the budget creation and adoption process, “resources” is a more accurate word. In this example, resources include people, time, and money. They are listed in that order on purpose and are all part of an aligned system. The year we developed our strategic plan, the chief financial officer asked me if I’d thought about how we’d monitor the use of resources to achieve our strategic plan goals. We talked through different models and agreed it was important that during the budget-development process, requests were linked to the strategic plan. Any that were not linked to the plan or required by policy, law, or statute would be placed in the lowest tier of priorities.

Accountability

A mentor taught me a high-functioning system was self-diagnosing, auto-correcting, and self-renewing and focused on increasing learning.

Self-diagnosing meant there were systems and tools in place as part of day-to-day operations that let you know in a timely fashion who is and is not learning and in what specific areas students were having success or falling short. Auto-correcting is the concept that students who are not experiencing success or those who were achieving success rapidly and need

a greater challenge would receive targeted support or enrichment to meet their needs and allow them to excel and achieve to their full potential. The self-renewing part of this virtuous cycle involved consistent monitoring and feedback related to both the effectiveness and performance of the students and staff in the teaching and learning process as well as the systems, processes, and structures in place to support them. When modifications are needed for improvement, they are apparent to all and supported by evidence, making implementation easier.

Evaluation

The final step in an aligned system is evaluation. When I arrived in Charlotte, board members shared their areas of greatest concern with me. When I reviewed the evaluations of the senior leadership team, I was surprised at the lack of congruity. What the board identified as areas of great concern had not been mentioned in the evaluations either positively or negatively. This disconnect was disconcerting to me and definitely had contributed to a district-wide lack of progress and was something we addressed promptly.

As superintendent, my evaluation was based on achieving the goals of the strategic plan. All administrative staff members’ evaluations cascaded outward from my evaluation. Closing achievement gaps was part of my evaluation and part of the evaluation of our chief academic officer, area superintendents, director of STEM, elementary school principals, high school assistant principals, etc. If they were successful in an area, I was successful, and the opposite was true as well. ■

The chain of command is the tie that binds

At some time in your board term, an employee will likely come to you with a job-related complaint or concern. When this happens, you should remind the employee that all communication must go through the proper chain of command.

There is a good reason for this. Going around the chain of command undercuts the superintendent's effectiveness. Here's how:

When board members intervene in staff affairs, it sends a confusing message to employees about who is responsible for what and who is responsible to whom.

For example, if the board overturns a decision to discipline an employee, it undermines the superintendent's authority to handle personnel matters. The end result is that your administrator becomes an ineffective figurehead whose authority to manage employees has been stripped. ■

Invest in the board's relationship with the superintendent

A key board responsibility is to hire the district's superintendent. Once that is done, it makes good educational AND economic sense to maintain a strong relationship with your administrator. Far too many boards find themselves paying two superintendent salaries because the relationship with their superintendent soured.

When the board and superintendent relationship becomes acrimonious, the parting of ways can get expensive with big buyouts plus the costs of hiring a new administrator. That's why it makes sense to invest the time and care in maintaining a productive relationship with the superintendent you already employ. Keep these strategies in mind:

1. Provide an annual appraisal. When the board and superintendent openly and honestly discuss her performance each year, both parties develop trust in each other and can move to address any issues early on and effectively.
2. Invest in professional development. Both the board and the superintendent need to work at building their skills and knowledge. Provide a line item in the district's budget that allows the superintendent and the board to obtain education

during the year. Consider taking a joint trip to a school boards association meeting either at the state or national level.

3. Make time for discussion prior to acting. Rushed decisions often end up as poor decisions — and then someone gets blamed. When you separate discussion from action items at board meetings, the board can spend time discussing issues for as long as is necessary to make a good decision for the district. Then the item is ready to become an action item at the board meeting.

4. Understand the limits of a board member's personal power. Collaboration is important, and you are just one member of a team with ideas to share. As a board member, you have no more power than anyone else to see your personal will done.

5. Praise the superintendent. An often-overlooked board obligation is to support its superintendent. If the superintendent is doing good work, tell him. If a board member is pestering the superintendent about buying life insurance from him, tell the board member to back off. When board members jump to criticize without ever praising performance, they're not supporting their superintendent. ■

Serve ethically with these tips

In its Indicators of Effective Boards and Board Members, the Michigan Association of School Boards stresses the importance of serving ethically. According the MASB, board members should:

- "Ensure that familial or business relationships or special interest group affiliations don't contribute to a bias in decisions.
- "Ensure that solicited or received money, services, or other items of value from vendors or

special interest groups don't influence decisions or public perceptions.

- "Ensure that commitments and directives are in the best interest of the entire board and district and not the individual board member.

- "Create an environment that discourages micro-management or undermining of the superintendent."

For information, <http://www.masb.org/indicators-of-effective-boards-and-board-members.aspx#sthash.1HXlJoeZ.dpbs>. ■