



THE KEY WORK OF SCHOOL BOARDS

GUIDEBOOK

Fourth Edition

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Vision



Ensuring that public education will meet emerging challenges requires a clear vision for the work and operations of our public schools. Vision is not about what we are, but about what we want to be. For school boards, it is about where the district is going and what kind of school systems we are trying to create.

Objective: To understand how school boards can develop and implement an effective vision that focuses on student achievement, guides district strategies, and involves the community.

The board's primary work is about creating a powerful, shared vision—a mental image of success. The vision is future-focused and seeks to shape events rather than simply let them happen. Positive and inspiring visions require the widespread involvement of those whose lives will be shaped by the vision. Powerful visions are the product of hours of discussion and dialogue among key stakeholders.

Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student learning, quality instruction, and equity for all students that is rooted in strong shared beliefs and values about what's possible for students and their ability to learn and succeed; the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels; and a shared mission or purpose. Those beliefs and values ensure the board's vision is realized through the development of a strategic plan with specific goals, priorities, and objectives and through the establishment of policies for implementation and accountability.

The board's community leadership function involves developing a shared vision for student outcomes and equity that reflects those common values and core beliefs of a school community. This shared vision not only directs board and staff actions but also gains the commitment of the community to improving achievement for all students. Engaging the entire community in creating the vision generates support for getting the resources—both financial and human capital—necessary to make it a reality.

The more clearly people within the organization can see this vision and describe it to others, the more compelling the vision becomes. People in leadership positions cannot be everywhere in the organization. Leadership must rely on a shared vision to permeate the organization. An explicit vision, developed and embraced by everyone with a stake in the outcome,

guides and shapes an organization because of its power to motivate, unify, and direct individual purposes and behaviors to achieve common goals. The vision becomes the guiding principle that directs the actions of every person with a stake in achieving it. A powerful vision is an internal and intrinsic motivator that evokes leadership behavior throughout the organization.

Boards exercise leadership by holding themselves and staff accountable for monitoring student achievement, evaluating board and district programs in light of student learning and equity goals, providing appropriate training opportunities, and keeping the public informed about the status of education programs and student progress. Boards need to lead as united teams with their superintendents to ensure the vision is implemented.

Vision Questions School Boards Should Ask

1. How do we work with the superintendent to foster and guide community involvement in creating a vision?
2. What policies need to be in place to support our vision and strategic plan?
3. How do the superintendent and staff use the vision statement as a guide in planning and action?
4. Is there alignment between our vision, mission, core values, strategic plan, and resource allocation?

What Is Vision?

Effective leadership begins with a clear vision of what the organization wants to achieve. The organization's vision is what it hopes to become—the tomorrow it strives to create today. While current realities you face are important, vision means having a clear image of what “better” looks like—and taking the necessary governance steps to get there.

Your vision should inspire, look ahead, challenge, and lead. Defining your vision is taking charge of your destiny and giving it wings. For school districts, that destiny must be improving achievement for all students. A vision with anything less than equitable student success as the top priority cannot fulfill public education's core purpose.

Your vision is a powerful driver in the big picture of the district's work that also includes the district's mission, shared values and beliefs, and a strategic plan built on goals, priorities, and objectives.

Vision and Mission

Your vision is not the same as your mission statement. The mission is a statement of purpose—the reason a school district exists—and the business the school system is in. It states:

- What needs the district is attempting to fill (rather than the services currently offered).
- For whom the district is attempting to fill these needs.

- How those needs will be met.

It provides an anchor for the work of the district and a framework and foundation for achieving the vision.

A mission statement must be memorable and capture the purpose for which a district exists and its function. As a board develops its mission statement, it should consider the following criteria:

- Does the statement capture the essential nature of the district's reason for being?
- Is the statement student-oriented as opposed to being inwardly or organizationally bound?
- Does the statement represent a relatively stable anchor point for the district, one that will not require frequent change?
- Does the statement describe the desired result rather than focusing on activities?
- Does the statement reflect the district's values or philosophy relevant to today and the future?

Where the vision provides the “wings” for the work of the district, the mission provides its “roots,” grounding it in purpose and values.

Vision and Core Values

Building a shared vision requires that you be able to agree upon your core values and beliefs. In *The Fifth*

Sample Mission Statements

- The mission of our district is to ensure that every student can thrive as a responsible citizen in a changing world by providing a challenging curriculum in partnership with high-quality staff, caring families, and a supportive community.
- The mission of our district is to inspire and foster student growth by providing rigorous instruction and learning opportunities, sustaining a culture of excellence, and preparing our students for life in an ever-changing world in partnership with our community.

Sample Core Values Statements

The board of education establishes the following core values:

- The pursuit of excellence.
- Lifelong learning and success.
- A safe and orderly learning environment.
- Community participation.
- Fairness, honesty, and respect.
- Continuous improvement.
- A reflection of the priorities, beliefs, and mores of our community.

Our core values articulate our key beliefs about students, academic achievement, and the elements necessary to achieve excellence in education and learning.

- Students are our priority, and all students can achieve at high academic levels.
- Families, students, and educators share the responsibility for student success.
- High expectations inspire high performance.
- All staff share the responsibility for a safe and supportive school environment contributing to excellence in education.
- The support of everyone in our community is essential to the success of our schools and students, and this success enriches our community.
- Continuous improvement in teaching, leadership, and accountability is the key to our destiny.

Discipline Fieldbook, Peter Senge writes, "Values describe how we intend to operate, on a day-to-day basis, as we pursue our vision." Knowing what you really value, individually and collectively, guides your aspirations and your mission as a district. It also guides your behavior.

Developing a shared vision that reflects your community's core values and beliefs is the starting

point for a school board and its focus on student learning. Core values drive the vision. They underlie the work to be done, define how individuals interact with each other, and help determine the strategies necessary to fulfill the mission. Core values are the belief systems that motivate a person or group to choose one alternative over another. They are guiding principles that remain constant even when the mission and vision may change.

This small set of principles should not be confused with specific cultural or operating practices, nor are they short-term goals. In visionary school districts, core values don't need external justification. They don't sway with trends or fads, and they don't shift with different priorities in education. These five to six guiding tenets are the foundation for the way the district acts, how it treats people, and what it will do to achieve the vision and mission.

Creating a Vision

Vision becomes reality through the daily actions of everyone in the organization. In a school district, "everyone" includes employees, parents, community advocates, businesses, government agencies, and higher education. Engaging the community to create the vision makes it more likely to be accepted and encourages the behaviors necessary to achieve it. As a board of education, it is your responsibility to work with the community to develop a vision that places student achievement as the top priority.

Accomplishing such total commitment requires multiple steps. First, gather input to identify the community's core beliefs and common values. Once those are defined, develop a process for drafting a vision statement. After the draft statement is written, test it by seeking feedback to ensure it reflects the community's core beliefs and inspires a commitment to improving student achievement. When the vision statement is complete, the dissemination process begins.

The overarching question the governance team will want to answer with its vision statement is: "What kind of school district do we hope to be?" Most school districts have an existing vision statement that your board can use as a starting point for meaningful conversations with the community, staff, and even students. Build on that core question by considering things such as:

- What do we want our students to have, do, and be as a result of our work and efforts?

- How do we ensure it happens?
- What roles do our educators, parents, and community play in getting us there?
- How can we all work together to achieve this?

Communicating the vision to the entire community is essential. As board members, you must articulate the vision's main points at every opportunity, when you are together and when you are out in the community. By repeating, reinforcing, and embracing these main components, you will develop the constancy of purpose necessary to sustain your vision.

Constancy of purpose will guide your leadership team. Achieving the vision takes time and persistence. Knowing that your board is committed to investing the time necessary to achieve the vision will motivate staff to work as hard and as long as necessary to be successful. Your constancy of purpose and commitment to your district's vision gives staff the encouragement to try new ideas that may need time to become successful. Long-term results require long-range thinking and commitment.

Defining your vision means taking charge of your destiny. For school districts, that destiny must be improving student achievement for each and every student. Anything less cannot fulfill the core mission of public education. After all, our obligation to our students and our communities is to prepare students for the world they will inherit.

Implementing Your Vision

Saying it and writing it down are only the beginning. School leaders who complete the writing process and believe they have a vision are mistaken. What they have is a written vision statement. Moving the vision from paper into practice is the real challenge and opportunity.

A powerful vision should guide the strategic planning process for the school district. After your board and superintendent have widely disseminated the vision

Sample Vision Statements

Listed below are several vision statements from school districts across the country. These examples may help clarify your thinking about the statement you want to make about the vision for student achievement in your district:

- A high-quality education is the fundamental right of every child. All children will receive the respect, encouragement, and opportunities they need to build knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be successful, contributing members of a global society.
- Families and community are partners for student success. The policies, personnel, and resources of our district are used to ensure that all students are provided engaging, meaningful schoolwork that results in challenging them to think and reason, develop ownership for their own lifelong learning, respect diversity, and be contributing members of society.
- We will inspire all students to discover their strengths, embrace learning, achieve personal excellence, and demonstrate care. Students thrive with a rich, rigorous, and innovative curriculum delivered by highly qualified teachers. Each student learns and grows in a safe, nurturing environment. In collaboration with students, parents, teachers, and the community, our district provides opportunities for each learner to investigate, be successful, be resilient, and become inspired and empowered as they contribute to our global society.

statement, the next step is to develop a strategic plan. A beautiful vision without a plan is like a great movie title with no script.

In creating a strategic plan, the board-staff leadership team must develop a process to identify goals that mark progress toward the vision. This process identifies standards to be maintained, specifies where change is to occur, and defines the boundaries of that change. Goals are the specific results identified as necessary to live the district's mission and achieve the district's vision. They are supported by priorities and strategies that identify the most important goals that will determine how district resources are allocated. At this point, staff generally develops specific objectives or targets for each goal and action plan for achieving those objectives.

Finally, the board and staff need to come to agreement about processes for regular reporting on the progress,

needs, and necessary adjustments to ensure that the plan becomes reality. When the visioning and planning process has been broad-based and inclusive, accountability for results can be shared across the school system, as explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

Your vision also should influence the policies the board adopts and procedures the superintendent develops to implement the policies. School boards should consider a periodic, systematic review of policies to assure consistency with your adopted vision. That kind of check-in is worthwhile because it keeps you on track and signals to staff, students, and the community that the board is committed to its vision. Chapter 3 addresses the key role policy plays in achieving the district's vision.

Finally, leadership behaviors and the demeanor of the governance team speak volumes as you carry out your

responsibilities. Ultimately, the way board members work with each other and treat staff sets a leadership tone that affects the behaviors and attitudes of staff and students. Getting that wrong can potentially undermine the positive efforts that go into embracing a vision.

Ensuring that public education will meet emerging challenges requires every school board to provide strong leadership in crafting an aspirational vision for its district focused on high expectations for student learning and equity for all students. The board should make that vision the laser focus of the district's work and the ultimate measure of its success.

Your state school boards association is an excellent source of expertise in assessing your mission and vision statement and assisting with strategic planning. Because this is a complex process, it is helpful to have an informed, objective voice to lend a different perspective.

Next Steps

- Schedule a work session to review your district's vision, mission, core values, and strategic goals to make sure they accurately reflect the board's view of the future for the school district and that you have a process in place to ensure multiple voices have informed the board's thinking.
- Develop a process for using data to periodically review and adjust your strategic plan to ensure that goals and resources are aligned with your vision.
- Try the self-assessment for vision (page 16) to help determine whether your board already has the processes in place to work through the components of creating a vision.
- Review and discuss the chart (pages 17-18) of differentiated responsibilities of the board and superintendent in the vision planning process.

SAMPLE GOALS AND STRATEGIES

GOAL

We will offer high-quality student programming so that graduates are prepared to compete in a global society.

1. Provide personalized learning for all students.
2. Provide equitable learning opportunities based on individual student needs.
3. Support progression based on mastery of individual student goals.
4. Embrace a collaborative culture by leveraging and maximizing parent and community partnerships to support accelerated student success.
5. Require students to play a key role in setting their goals along with their teachers, advisors, counselors, and parents.
6. Provide students and families with choices and meaningful opportunities to improve their school experiences.
7. Ensure all classrooms are connected, global environments that encourage interactivity and learning by doing.
8. Provide a curriculum that balances individualization and vetted best practices.
9. Design classroom instruction to be a hybrid of face-to-face and online methods, using digital textbooks.
10. Ensure that technology proficiency and digital citizenship literacy are part of the learning experience for each student.
11. Maximize all data sources to improve instruction for students.

GOAL

We will provide high-quality and effective teachers and administrators.

1. Require teachers to frequently assess student academic growth to constantly inform their instruction.
2. Provide teachers with opportunities to network and collaborate with external organizations to enhance student learning experiences.
3. Provide teachers with research-based ideas for the most effective instructional practices.
4. Recruit, retain, and empower excellent teachers who are adept at personalizing learning experiences for students.

5. Provide principals with the autonomy to innovate and demand excellence from their faculty and staff.
6. Hold principals accountable for meaningful school improvement and rapid turnaround for chronically underperforming schools.
7. Ensure that every principal demonstrates how they provide opportunities for students and parents.
8. Develop professional learning communities in all schools.
9. Support leadership development for aspiring, new, and veteran school leaders.
10. Partner with higher education institutions to ensure that teacher candidates are of the highest quality and aligned with district needs.

GOAL

We will seek, encourage, and nurture the involvement and participation of the entire community in the learning process.

1. Make all schools centers of community learning.
2. Leverage community assets and resources to build community schools that provide full-service supports for students and families.
3. Provide schools as a place for community convening and for citizens to acquire new knowledge and skills.

GOAL

The board will be committed to excellence in education and aware of its responsibilities.

1. Require every board member to participate in annual professional development.
2. Maintain ongoing review and development of pertinent policies.
3. Conduct at least one school board and superintendent work session focused on improved teaching and learning each year.
4. Involve community and business leaders in the development of the board's vision and strategic plan.
5. Develop and monitor standards for student and system performance and accountability.