

Board Minute – Testing Assumptions: Asking the Right Questions

As school board members and leaders, you frequently find yourselves in conversations where decisions must be justified, positions defended, and initiatives explained. The ability to recognize flaws in assumptions or questionable reasoning—whether in your own thinking or in the arguments presented to you—can be critical to sound governance. In the first two articles of this series, we examined informal fallacies that arise from irrelevant or flawed content.

Formal fallacies – like assuming a cause simply because an effect occurred – can lead to shaky conclusions. For example, “If we launch a tech initiative, student enthusiasm will increase,” may seem reasonable. But if enthusiasm does increase, was the initiative the true cause? Maybe – but maybe not. Other factors could be at play. While such logical errors are important, everyday board conversations rarely require this level of technical analysis.

While it’s helpful to be aware of formal fallacies – errors in how an argument is structured – our focus here is on something more practical: testing assumptions. Rather than analyzing argument structure like a logician, board members and school leaders may benefit more from simple strategies that help clarify reasoning in real time.

Here are five simple strategies to help board members and school leaders quickly test assumptions and assess reasoning in real time:

1. If-Then Statements:

Ask yourself: *If “x” is true, must “y” also be true?* If the answer is no, the logic may be flawed.

Example: A claim like “If we launch a technology initiative, student enthusiasm will increase” assumes a direct cause-effect relationship. But if student enthusiasm does rise, it doesn’t necessarily mean the tech initiative caused it. Something else—like a change in teaching style or school culture—might be responsible. The argument does not prove that one outcome necessarily follows from the other.

2. Work the Argument in Reverse:

Flip the logic: *If the outcome is true, did the supposed cause have to happen?* If not, the conclusion may be invalid.

Example: Consider the statement, “If the school increases the art budget, then participation in art activities will increase.” Now reverse it: if participation has increased, does that mean the budget was raised? Not necessarily—other factors could explain the rise, such as a new art teacher or a popular new course offering.

3. Look for Alternative Explanations:

Ask: *Are there other possible causes for this outcome?* Arguments that ignore alternative explanations often oversimplify complex situations.

Example: Revisit the increased art participation scenario. Could it also be the result of student-led clubs, better scheduling, or greater community involvement? When multiple explanations exist, pinning the outcome on one cause alone is risky and logically unsound.

4. Check for Supporting Premises:

If the conclusion is true, *what else should also be true?* Supporting data points can help validate or challenge the logic.

Example: Someone says, “The after-school tutoring program is working; student grades are improving.” If this conclusion is valid, you might also expect to see fewer students on the ineligibility list or higher scores on state assessments. If those signs aren’t present, the conclusion may rest on incomplete evidence.

5. Identify Missing Information:

Ask: *Is this argument built on a full picture, or are key details missing?* Gaps in information often lead to faulty conclusions.

Example: Consider the claim, “Student test scores are low; therefore, the district is failing students.” Without understanding the student demographics, community challenges, or support systems in place, that conclusion is oversimplified. A district may be doing excellent work with a high-need population—something not reflected in raw scores alone.

By using these techniques to test assumptions, you’ll respond more thoughtfully to both community concerns and internal board discussions. For example, if a patron says, “Our property taxes are too high because the school district keeps spending more,” it’s worth asking questions before jumping to defend or deflect. Their frustration may be tied to rising valuations or actions taken by another governmental body. A few thoughtful questions can clear up misunderstandings and even highlight areas where the district’s messaging could improve.

Ultimately, sound reasoning helps maintain community trust and ensures decisions are genuinely in the best interest of students. By asking thoughtful questions and encouraging clear reasoning, we strengthen our collective ability to lead effectively – especially in complex or emotionally charged situations.