

Remaking Governance



The creator of 'Policy Governance' challenges school boards to change

BY JOHN CARVER

The familiar—even cherished—practices of school boards are strangling public education. Most of what school boards currently do is a travesty of their important role. Much of what is published for boards—including advice appearing regularly in these pages—reinforces errors of the past or, at best, teaches trustees how to do the wrong things better. In my opinion, school boards don't need improvement so much as total redesign. And they are not alone in this predicament, for governance is the least-developed function in all enterprises.

Preparing people for contributing, satisfying adulthood is

worth the most effective governance a board can achieve. If school boards must completely reinvent themselves to be worthy of their mission—as I'm convinced they must—then so be it. If that means much of current board training must be discarded—as I'm convinced it must—then let it be done. No role deserves transformation more than that of the nation's school boards.

A new governance model

For two decades I have studied and taught governance—the process by which a small group, usually on behalf of others, exercises authority over an organization. I have found that

although boards work hard to solve practical problems as they arise, the crucial missing element is credible theory. The Policy Governance model of board leadership that emerged from my work is arguably the only existing complete theory of governance, whether of businesses, nonprofits, cities, or schools. Its philosophical foundations lie in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract, leadership philosopher Robert K. Greenleaf's servant-leadership, and modern management theory.

The model redesigns what it means to be a board, challenging other approaches as founded more on anecdotal wisdom than good theory. A tightly reasoned paradigm, the model must be used in total to achieve its promise of greater accountability. Partial implementation sacrifices the model's benefits, for it is a complete, logical system, not merely tips for improvement.

Using this new paradigm requires a school board to exercise uncharacteristic self-discipline, but it enables the board to govern the system, rather than run it; to define and demand educational results rather than poke and probe in educational and administrative processes; to redirect time from trivia and ritual actions to strategic leadership; to give a superintendent one boss rather than several; to grant administrators and educators great latitude within explicit boundaries; to be in charge of board agendas instead of dependent on staff; and to guarantee unbroken accountability from classroom to taxpayer.

Space here does not allow full explication of Policy Governance. I can, however, list seven characteristics that differentiate this model from governance as now widely practiced and taught.

1. Primacy of the owner-representative role. The board directly touches three elements of the "chain of command": the general public, the board itself, and the superintendent. Although the succession of authority within the system is best left to the superintendent, the board must maintain the integrity of the initial three elements. Let's consider the first link in that chain.

The board's primary relationship is with those to whom it is accountable—the general public, the "shareholders" of public education. The board is the public's purchasing agent for the educational product. The public-board relationship supersedes the board's relationship with everyone else.

The central task of a board is to assimilate the diverse values of those who own the system, to add any special knowledge (often obtained from experts, including staff), then to make decisions on behalf of the owners. The formal link from owners to trustees is the election process—a tight link with respect to a trustee holding office, but a very loose link with respect to knowing the public's mind. Typically, boards rely on open meetings, public hearings, and constituent phone calls for the bulk of public input. These methods not only fail to fulfill the board's obligation to connect with the owners, they are misleading in that the "public" is self-selected and typically expresses not its owner role, but its customer, vendor, or operator role. Boards rarely hear from a representative sampling of owners. Because the general public is so large, a continual sys-

tem of focus groups, surveys, and advisory mechanisms is required to achieve even a semblance of fulfilling the board's owner-representative role. The time is overdue for putting the public back into public education.

Cultivating a principal-agent relationship between the public and the board holds great promise for the position of education in society, but this relationship has been impaired by decades of conventional practice. For example, boards promote an inappropriate direct link from public to superintendent. This connection circumvents the board's role as sole owner-representative and lets the board off the hook for poor system performance. If the public can blame poor school performance on the superintendent, then the fact that it is the board that has let the public down might go unnoticed. Making the hiring of a superintendent into an affair of high-profile community involvement is part of this same aberration. Superintendents are instruments of the board, not of the public. The public's instrument is the board.

Another mistake is behaving as if parents are the system's owners and that the board is their representative. Boards historically have shortcut the owner-board-organization-customer circuit, partly because parents are the most vocal subgroup of owners, and partly because they are fewer and easier to identify than the true ownership. Consequently, both politics and logistics induce boards to act as if parents own the system. Parents might resist losing any part of this role, but public policy (and, in the long run, parents and students) will benefit by facing the fact that parents, *as parents*, do not own the public schools. Parents are owners by virtue of being part of the public, but they constitute only a percentage, not the whole. The same is true of teachers, administrators, and the media.

This is not to denigrate the importance of parents. Parents and their children are customers/consumers of the system and, as such, are no less important and no less to be courted and pleased than customers of any other enterprise. Nor does this formulation minimize the central role of parents in their children's education. In fact, failing to give parents an integral role in the educational process would be unconscionable.

2. One voice from plural trustees. Trustees have authority only as a full board—but few boards behave accordingly. Staff members take instructions from and answer to individual trustees and board committees. Individual trustees judge staff performance on criteria the board as a body has never stated. Superintendents seek to keep individual trustees happy quite apart from fulfilling board requirements. Trustees enjoy getting things "fixed" for constituents. There is often unspoken agreement that "you can meddle in your district if you'll let me meddle in mine." It is not enough to dismiss these phenomena as simply politics and personalities. Whether the board intends it or not, the realpolitik of school systems demonstrates regularly that staff members do, in fact, take direction from individual trustees.

If a board seriously intends to speak with only one voice, it must declare that the staff can safely ignore advice and instructions from individual trustees, that only the explicit instructions

of the board must be heeded. Excellence in governance will not occur until superintendents are certain that trustees *as a group* will protect them from trustees *as individuals*.

Commitment to the authoritative unity of the board in no way compromises board members' right to speak their minds. Vigorous disagreement among trustees does not damage governance, but allowing intraboard skirmishes to affect the staff is irresponsible. In short, trustees who disagree with the vote may continue to say so, but may not influence organizational direction. It is in boards' interest that superintendents treat a 5-4 vote as a 9-0 vote.

3. The superintendent as a real chief executive officer. Boards frequently give direction to subordinates of the superintendent, degrading the chief executive role and the board's own ability to hold the superintendent accountable. Only if the board expresses its aims for the system as a whole—rather than part by part—can the powerful utility of the chief executive role be harnessed, simultaneously simplifying accountability and saving board time.

In other words, the superintendent is the only person the board instructs and the only person the board evaluates. The superintendent should be authorized to use any reasonable interpretation of instructions the board gives. This requires the board to take full responsibility for its words and enables the superintendent to take the board at its word.

4. Authoritative prescription of "ends." The board's greatest and most difficult responsibility is to clarify and reclarify why the system exists. This requires the board to be both proactive and authoritative—to define expected results for students and to demand system performance. The public is buying specifiable results for specifiable groupings of students at specifiable costs or priorities.

Informed obsession with the system's "ends"—that is, results, recipients, and cost of results—should be the dominant work of the board. Involvement in curriculum, special reading initiatives, or testing programs will not suffice. To the contrary, holding a system accountable is impeded by board involvement in these and other internal processes. Instead of demanding ends performance, boards routinely fail to describe the ends and then intervene in what they've hired professionals to do. No amount of telling people how to run the system can substitute for simply demanding designated results and getting out of their way.

5. Bounded freedom for "means." Boards struggle with the dilemma of being accountable for others' work. Con-

trol is necessary, but so is empowerment. Authority not given away does little good, but too much given away constitutes rubber stamping or dereliction. How can the board have its arms around the system without its fingers in it?

If ends expectations are met (right results, right recipients, right costs or priorities), the "means"—that is, other decisions, such as methods, practices, and conduct—must have worked. So the board does not have to control means prescriptively. In fact, to tell staff how to accomplish ends impedes creativity and innovation. Why does the board need to control means at all? Because not all means are justified by the ends—some means would be unacceptable even if they work. The achievement of

ends demonstrates that means are effective, but it doesn't prove that means are acceptable.

To address the acceptability of means, the board need only define the boundaries of acceptability. The board limits the superintendent's latitude regarding certain situations, activities, or risk. In effect, the board does not tell the system how to operate, but how *not* to—an approach that is simpler and safer for the board and freeing for the staff. The message from board to superintendent, then, is, "Achieve these ends within these restrictions on means." This instruction

embraces the whole of board-staff delegation, which is to say, the superintendent's job description.

6. Board decisions crafted by descending size. There is no way the board can determine every result for every child and the cost appropriate for that result. Similarly, it is impossible to state every unacceptable action or situation. So what prevents the seemingly simple protocol of prescribing ends and proscribing means from deteriorating into maddening detail?

Boards must manage the sequence of different sizes of decisions. First, the board defines ends and unacceptable means in as broad a way as possible. For example, the broadest version of ends might be, "Students acquire skills and understandings for successful life at a tax rate comparable to that of similar districts." The broadest version of means limitation might be, "Don't allow anything imprudent or unethical." This is broad indeed—which is to say it is open to a wide range of interpretation. If the board were willing to allow the superintendent to use any reasonable interpretation of these words, the board could stop with these two short instructions.

But no board would allow that. Instead, the board must define a bit more, perhaps adding, "Don't allow assets to be unnecessarily risked or inadequately maintained," along with similarly narrowed prohibitions about personnel treatment,

In effect,

the board does not

tell the system

how to operate,

but how not to.

compensation systems, parental involvement, and so forth. As to ends, the board might augment its initial, broad statement with, "Students will be literate above age-level expectations." This is also too broad for most boards, so the next step is to define still further. The process continues step-by-step into more detail until the majority of trustees are willing to accept any reasonable interpretation of the words used to that point. At this level the board stops and superintendent authority begins.

7. System-focused superintendent evaluation. The only reason to have a chief executive officer is to ensure system performance. Consequently, board expectations of the system (ends and limits on means) are the *only* criteria on which a superintendent should be assessed. The board actually evaluates the entire system (not the superintendent personally) and "pins it" on the superintendent. Most discussions of superintendent evaluation—including articles in recent issues of *ASBJ*—miss the power of this simplicity, falling back on such nonperformance, personalized irrelevancies as "leads by example" and "proficient in educational thinking." It is archaic and spurious to evaluate a superintendent on anything other than whether the system produces and operates as it should. It is *system performance* for which the board is accountable to the public.

Annual board approval of the superintendent's objectives is another testimony to poor governance. If the superintendent accomplishes the board's expectations, it is immaterial whether he or she achieves his or her own as well. Typically, boards have not expressed system expectations sufficiently to enable recognition of success and failure on their own. In the Policy Governance model, ends to be achieved and means disallowed embrace all the board's expectations. Moreover, they are targeted at system accountability, unaffected by how a given superintendent retains or delegates the various elements of management.

Monitoring data are reviewed throughout the year, as frequently as the board chooses. Because these data directly address performance on ends and means limitations, they constitute a continual evaluation of the superintendent. Although there might also be a summative annual evaluation, the criterion-focused monitoring system is the most direct measure of superintendent performance—a seamless process through time rather than a sporadic event.

This comparison of reality to expectations must be fair as well as uncompromising. Trustees should not judge the superintendent's performance on criteria the board has never stated. Expectations not incorporated into the board's ends or means limitations cannot be admitted into evaluative monitoring. Further, "any reasonable interpretation" of the board's expectations must mean just that—not the interpretation of the most influential trustee or what the board had in mind but didn't say.

What it looks like

What does the public see the board doing differently under Policy Governance? The board gets out of the superintendent's job

and takes responsibility for its own job. Because agendas are no longer staff-driven, board meetings are the *board's* meetings—not the staff's meetings for the board. The steady stream of documents for approval disappears from the regular agenda due to more sophisticated delegation. (Criteria that would have led to disapprovals are known and monitored, so the "approval syndrome" becomes inconsistent with proper delegation. The consent agenda is reserved for decisions the board would delegate, but on which law requires board action.) Freed from endless crowding of its agenda by managerial material, the board does its own work instead of pretending that looking over the superintendent's shoulder is its work.

Board meetings are not characterized by shoot-from-the-hip instructions to the superintendent, much less to the staff. Board meetings are not to help manage the system, nor to go over operational details. The board no longer struggles through extensive reports unrelated to preestablished criteria. It has learned that what it previously thought was monitoring was merely wandering around in the presence of data.

Board meetings are not parent and vendor complaint meetings. Any system in which customer complaints must go to the board for resolution is poorly designed. (Envision having to take your cold hamburger to the fast food chain's board.) On the contrary, the board expects the superintendent to have parents taken care of as courteously and effectively as possible. If a parent problem gets to the board, it is considered symptomatic of a system flaw rather than an opportunity for trustee involvement. Parents get their say in the way the system affects their children, but not by supplanting the owners' meetings.

Most board committees disappear. If a board has committees, it does so only for help with *its* job—never to help, advise, or instruct staff, lest it destroy the clarity of delegation. The board does not believe that the kind of internal involvement described in an article about board committees in a recent issue of *ASBJ* is related to governing the system. For a board committee to focus on staff activities is probably the most intrusive of board practices and the most wasteful of staff and trustee time.

Liberated from hours of preoccupation with system operations, trustees have more time to meet with community groups, other public boards, and pertinent authorities. Raising its visibility as a governmental leader, the board demonstrates its focus on ends and its long-term perspective by the language it uses, questions it asks, and topics it schedules. Joint meetings with city councils, hospital boards, social service boards, and other organs of the public become commonplace.

Board meetings are spent learning diverse points of view on what is most important for schools to produce, differing projections of future needs of students, and any other wisdom that helps in making wise long-term decisions about ends. The public is integral to these meetings, but carefully organized so the board gets representative input.

Many board meetings are not meetings in the usual sense at all, but take place in community settings where certain segments of the public can be heard. Wherever the meeting, the atmosphere is tailored for listening and entering into dialogue.

Board meetings are places of thoughtful dialogue and debate rather than the trivia that commonly besets conventional agendas.

Through focus groups, the board assesses public values about priorities and costs of educational products. This is not a sporadic or single-purpose effort, but an unending process. These carefully planned interactions are not for public relations, but for the dual purpose of enhancing board understanding and reinforcing the public's sense of ownership of its schools. Trustees are perceived as the public's servant-leaders in the great challenge of preparing citizens for a democracy.

What schools are for

The critical role of education in a democracy demands exceptional governance integrity. Commitment and intelligence cannot overcome our institutionalized hodgepodge of traditional practices. Conscientious, detailed preoccupation with what schools *do* can never compensate for failing to define clearly what schools are *for*, then demanding system performance from a chief executive officer. Visionary leadership is not

forged in a flurry of trivia, micromanagement, and administrative detail. If school boards are not the place for serious, perpetual community debate of how much this generation is willing to pay for which skills and understandings of the next generation, what other place does the public have?

Earlier, in illustrating flaws of conventional wisdom, I cited two articles from previous issues of *ASBJ*. I'll close by quoting a refreshing article ("Changing the Entitlement Culture," Paul McGowen and John Miller) in the August 1999 issue. "The challenge is for leaders to change the culture. ... It is time for public school leaders to seize the initiative." If there is to be a renaissance of public education, it will begin when boards discard the conceptually incoherent practices of today for a public leadership founded on sound governance theory.

John Carver (polgov@aol.com; <http://www.carvergovernance.com>), a governance theorist and author of numerous books and articles on boards, is an Atlanta-based consultant. For a more complete description of Policy Governance, see *Boards that Make a Difference* (Jossey-Bass, 2nd ed., 1997).