

School Boards:

Community Representatives Working on Behalf of All Kids

School boards are the “buckle” between schools and community, as described by Donald McAdams, a longtime school board member and advocate for the reform of school systems. Locally elected or appointed school boards govern the nation’s 14,890 school systems, representing their communities in decisions about teaching and learning, staff and finances.

Today, school district leaders, especially board members, must be equipped to take on an array of roles and responsibilities. Several of those were identified by a national task force on school district leadership, coordinated by the Institute for Educational Leadership:

- Changing priorities of education reform
- Focusing simultaneously on many things, including academics along with services and supports to meet the social and behavioral needs of students
- Leading and managing diversity in a changing society
- Listening to the citizenry in the decisionmaking process
- Dealing with ambiguous roles and responsibilities

The job is multifaceted and the technical aspects are complex. The inner workings of school districts are complicated, as are local, state and federal laws. And the current context of the *No Child Left Behind Act* places increased pressure on school boards, just as it does on educators, to improve student achievement. In addition, board members must figure out how to adjust programs and procedures to manage the NCLB’s requirements and consequences. Marla Ucelli, director of district redesign at the Annenberg Institute on School Reform, says that, in the current climate school boards are “under more pressure than ever before.” But, she says, that has created a positive side effect: board members now have more expertise about teaching and learning, school funding and other key issues.

School Board Roles

It is the role of school boards to set policies and oversee the implementation of those policies without micromanaging. Board members see the big picture, set the vision for the district and, as representatives of the community, oversee whether the work of the district office and of schools is effective in carrying out that vision.

One of the most important jobs of school boards is to hire the superintendent, as the person who leads the implementation of district goals. Ucelli, who directs the Annenberg Institute’s School Communities That Work task force, emphasizes the importance of taking the time to define a community and board vision before encouraging or recruiting candidates. Boards, she says, need to hire superintendents who will “operationalize the local vision not paint a new one.”

The board/superintendent relationship can be complicated by the changing structures of boards and school governance. A small, but growing, percentage of urban boards are politically appointed by mayors, and, under state and national accountability systems, new rules are in place for states or other entities to run low-performing school districts.

In this era of standards and accountability, it is the role of school boards to adopt standards, set measures of progress and ensure accountability for making progress. Board decisions about educational programs, then, should align with these standards and accountability measures in ways that support the mission, vision and values of the district.

On the business side of the job, boards approve the annual school district budget and monitor spending throughout the year. Boards have responsibilities for negotiating contracts with teacher unions, other employee groups and contractors, such as food service providers.

They also approve plans for construction and renovation of schools and other buildings.

To describe the roles and responsibilities of a school board, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) has developed a framework called the “Key Work of School Boards.” According to Joseph Villani, NSBA deputy executive director, the framework “is designed to structure the way the school board members think about their job [in their] role to raise student achievement through community engagement.” The framework contains eight elements: Vision, Standards, Assessment, Accountability, Alignment, Climate, Collaborative Partnerships and Continuous Improvement.

With a steep learning curve, boards often seek out training from state school board associations or national organizations that specialize in school board leadership. Bobbie Regan, a new Portland, OR, school board member and longtime active member of *Community & Parents for Public Schools (CPPS)*, found that involvement in PPS was itself training for being a school board member: “It gives parents a solid foundation in the issues,” she says. Charles Olson, school board president in Waco, TX, and a founding member of PPS Waco, adds: “Involvement in PPS gives parents the tools to know how a productive relationship be-

tween parents and school boards should work.”

Regan anticipates that, because she was elected mostly by parents, many parents will come to her with their issues. She responds by putting constituents in touch with the people in the district who can help them, which is the same procedure used by many PPS chapters. When the dual roles of setting policy and serving constituents collide, school board members, like PPS chapters, ought not to take on every individual parent’s issue—like a single ineffective teacher—unless it is indicative of a larger systemic problem.

Regan explains: “I have to keep focused on our district’s core mission and the broader issues of the district, while still doing the constituent services. It won’t do any good if I get distracted by individual issues. People elected me to do what is right for the district.”

Parent Roles

The importance of identifying and working to elect qualified candidates for school board—including public school parents—should not be underestimated. While PPS chapters never endorse specific candidates, they do take steps to ensure that voters know how candidates stand. Several PPS chapters are involved in organizing candidate forums and conducting candidate interviews, often in collaboration

with groups like the League of Women Voters, to give the public opportunities to hear candidates’ positions first-hand.

As with any other public official, voters need to stay vigilant in holding school board members accountable for responsible leadership. A sure way to do this is to help educate the community about expectations for board leadership and engage the public in discussion about current and anticipated decisions using the following strategies:

- Organizing “accountability sessions” in which school board members are invited to a meeting of 50 or so parents to discuss current issues and ‘account for’ what they as school board members are doing to address those issues
- Organizing public forums through cable call-in shows and summarizing the results in flyers or newsletters
- Meeting with editorial boards of local newspapers
- Tracking votes of each board member over time and publicizing the trends of who supports what
- Making public evidence of individual board member’s actions to support student, parent, and/or public functions about public education (See Toolkit on back page for more ideas.)

Organizing parents and other community members to pursue accountability strategies is im-

(continued on page 2)

See back page for special offer from PPS

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Letter from the Executive Director

Fall 2003

By Ken Rolling

The topic of school board governance is one that is relevant and timely to the direction of PPS as an organization—and to the health of our democracy. The themes in this issue underlie what PPS is all about: parents in decisionmaking roles. PPS is about parent engagement that improves public education, builds community and strengthens democracy. Accountable, responsive and inclusive school boards and the participation of parents in school governance are basic building blocks of democracy and fundamental to PPS work.

Parent involvement—whether by attending school board meetings, serving on committees or working to hold candidates and office holders accountable for their decisions—is a true expression of PPS’s conviction that it is as important for parents to be at the policy table as it is for them to be at the homework table.

But parent involvement in school board governance is not just about getting one’s own student a good school or a good teacher. It is about supporting the health of the public schools in a community. It is about supporting the health of the community—and of our country. PPS encourages parents to see the larger view, that of what’s best for all children. Engage in regular conversations with your board members. Let them know what you’re concerned about and offer to help craft solutions.

We also encourage parents to run for school board—as many PPS parents have done. At last count, PPS has 32 chapter members serving on 15 different local school boards, in places like San Francisco, CA, Park County, MT, Cincinnati, OH, Memphis, TN, Starkville, MS, and Pitt County, NC.

We encourage elected and appointed school officials to stay focused on the kids. PPS pledges to work with you to solve problems and support you in hard decisions, but we will also hold you accountable for doing business out in the open, operating in a mode of consensus, involving parents and staying focused on what’s best for all kids.

And we urge you, our readers, to share copies of this issue with members of your local school board, with civic and business leaders, and to start conversations in your community about high expectations for the school board.

PPS encourages communities across the country to make a commitment to public schools and to democracy by working to support and improve local school boards.

(School Boards from page 1)

important for school success. Anne Henderson, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant on family-school relations, affiliated with the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University, explains that research on community organizing shows that “when parents are organized in ways that hold policymakers and school systems accountable, it leads to positive development in schools.”

Critical to holding school board members accountable for their actions is making sure boards conduct their business out in the open. Several PPS chapters have been successful in demanding changes of their boards’ meeting policies. (See stories on next page.)

Though it is important to monitor individual school board members’ actions, it is also important to respect the right of a board to act collectively on wide-reaching decisions. “The school board is the public body we elect to listen to citizens and make decisions on behalf of the community,” says Charles Olson, who wears both PPS and school board hats.

In NSBA’s Key Work framework, school boards are charged with helping to build community consensus for a vision for the local school district. Parent advocates, along with other community groups, are important players in the process to define and carry out a vision. Portland, OR, school board member Bobbie Regan encourages parents to get involved from the start, when newly elected boards are setting goals and agendas. Often boards have several sub-committees that are ideal for parent involvement. “If parents show up at a committee meeting, the chances are good that they’ll be participating in the discussion,” Regan says. She advises the kind of involvement that PPS parents are known for: “Parents need to proactively put themselves in position to be heard. Don’t wait to be asked.”

In Cincinnati, parents found that just by asking, they got a place at the table. There are parent representatives on most of the school board and school district committees, dealing with issues from textbooks and the school calendar, to training for school-based decisionmaking councils and oversight for school reform and budget decisions. When parents asked to be part of these committees, says Ann Lugbill, board member of the Cincinnati PPS chapter, the board and administration were receptive. “No one had ever asked before,” she says.

This kind of proactive, constructive communication with district leaders is exactly the kind of culture change that Charles Olson believes is necessary. He believes that not only must school boards “aggressively and proactively seek opportunities to hear from parents...and lower the barriers to allow parents to be part of the process,” but parents must also understand that “they work best as part of a decisionmaking process primarily when they are constructive.”

In the spirit of constructive participation, parents can work with the school board to adopt a thoughtful parent involvement policy, with specific actions expected of schools and of parents. According to Anne Henderson, educational researcher and writer, “this kind of policy provides a framework for parents who want to be involved.” Without the support of a formal and specific school board policy, parents have less leverage to say how they want to be more meaningfully involved, what they need from schools in order to be involved or to seek recourse if that is not provided.

True to the PPS mission of ensuring all schools effectively serve all children, Regan says, “Parents are most helpful to school boards when they are looking at what makes sense for a broader group of children, at what makes sense districtwide, or at the elementary, middle school or high school level—when parents can take a broader perspective than just what is good for my child.”

By taking this broader perspective, parents and school board members are able to bring the voices of disenfranchised families, voices that are not typically heard, to decisions about how the school system is governed.

Joseph Villani of NSBA says that parents not only need to participate in setting the vision, but also to help the school district implement the priorities, which is what happened in Portland early in 2003. When it became clear that neither the state legislature nor the governor would adequately fund local school districts, a small group of advocates, including Regan (before she was elected), worked with the president of the school board and others to get a local tax measure to support public schools and other public services on the ballot. After a successful and broad-based grassroots campaign, in which CPPS participated, the tax increase passed with 57% of the vote.

Not only is it a community’s responsibility to help ensure schools have adequate re-

sources, it is also a primary responsibility of parents and other residents to ask good questions—in the public arena—about how their tax dollars are being spent in schools.

The Annenberg Institute’s School Communities that Work task force advocates student-based budgeting as a way to move toward more equitable, transparent funding formulas. Student-based budgeting is the process of allocating resources directly to schools based on student enrollment and factors that indicate specific educational needs, such as high-poverty, disabilities and giftedness.

The complex nature of school funding hides inequities, as Cincinnati PPS found when they helped scrutinize how much money each school was really receiving during the district’s move toward student-based budgeting. “The first step toward equity is understanding where the money goes,” says Marla Ucelli, director of the Annenberg Institute’s task force. “The most powerful thing parents can do is pay attention and be willing to belabor the obvious.”

From her experience in Cincinnati, Lugbill agrees: “We [as parents] can ask for help understanding why things happen. That makes the process more open and can uncover pots of money that aren’t being used. It’s often very helpful to come in with the pure moral viewpoint of whether or not it helps kids.”

Another key role for parents is to invite school board members into schools for substantive discussions about achievement, challenges and successes. As a longtime parent advocate and member of PPS, Lugbill advises parents to “keep the lines of communications open” with board members. Most board members are not paid or paid very little. They are doing this as a community service. It is important for parents to encourage and support them in this very tough job.” Olson adds: “Parents need to say, ‘What can we do to help you, the district, to resolve this issue?’, not ‘What are you going to do to help us?’”

Donald McAdams of Houston says “it takes a city” to reform a school district, implying that the community is the only constant as school board members and superintendents come and go. Parents and other civic leaders can provide the consistent voices for high expectations for all students and responsible governance of schools to reach those expectations.



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MISSION STATEMENT: Parents for Public Schools is a national organization of community-based chapters working to strengthen public schools through broad-based enrollment. Invigorated by a diverse membership, our proactive involvement helps public schools attract all families in a community by making sure all schools effectively serve all children. We believe that quality public education is vital to our democracy and to America’s future.

PPS Chapters Change the Faces and Styles of Local School Boards

Defining Community Expectations

From 1996-2000, parents who started **PPS of Hudson Valley, NY** watched their school board meetings become seemingly more efficient but less productive. Meetings often lasted under one hour with little or no discussion. Student achievement issues were rarely considered. Lengthy executive sessions excluded the public. Students and teachers seemed forgotten. Parents observed the growing number of exclusionary tactics with increased concern and combined their efforts to address the problems.

These parents recognized that the problem lay, in part, with board members who had no experience or exposure to the business of operating a school district. Board members seldom attended training, most served only one term and mid-term resignations were common.

PPS used materials from the National School Board Association to learn more about what effective school boards should do—and assess what their local board was not doing.

In 2001 PPS and the League of Women Voters of Hudson Valley developed a short list of expectations for school board members and began educating the public about it. The list reads as follows:

Candidates should

- **pledge to attend state school board trainings for new board members;**
- **support prioritizing school board actions by their impact on student achievement;**
- **listen to the community before making board decisions;**
- **support a more public budget development process.**

These expectations led to significant changes in the local school board. When the board fired a new superintendent seven months into his contract in 2001, in spite of his popularity with parents, five board members were replaced in the 2002 election—two are PPS members—and the superintendent was rehired.

Now board members attend training and report on what they learned. The board now addresses all academic issues first on the agenda. And citizens have two different opportunities to speak to agenda topics during board meetings.

Creating an Inclusive Process for Decisionmaking

According to Chris Spinner, president of **PPS Springfield, IL** and longtime school board observer, the local school board voted unanimously and with little or no discussion on almost every issue for years. Board members said they reached decisions after talking with the superintendent and sometimes with each other prior to meetings. Missing from this style of governance is an inclusive process that is open to the public, especially to parents.

PPS channeled their concern into action. They partnered with Unity for our Community to host a school board candidates' forum in early 2003 when all seven board positions were up for re-election. Several candidates who pledged inclusiveness were elected.

Now, board meetings are on the district's cable channel. The public can finally comment on agenda items without being required to give a week's notice, even before the agenda was posted. And the chapter encourages the superintendent to include public engagement in her strategic planning process. More work needs to be done but progress has been made in Springfield thanks to PPS.

PPS continues to remind the new superintendent and school board members: **The process for conducting school business is as important as the decisions that are made.**

Educating Voters

The situation looked dire with the **Syracuse, NY**, school board argumentative and dysfunctional at the time it needed to hire a new superintendent. When parents asked the board for an open search process and were ignored, **PPS of Syracuse** decided to get involved in the superintendent search by hosting their own public forums. The chapter also decided to get involved in the upcoming school board election and help the public do the same.

PPS created a Voter Action Packet that contained a brief biography on each school board candidate, a summary of their responses to questions related to education and parent involvement and a list of questions that public school parents could ask the candidates.

The chapter then blanketed the city with this packet, and the local newspaper used portions of the packet in a series it ran prior to the election. Voters began paying more attention to an election that was usually ignored.

Collaborating with the League of Women Voters and the Southwest Community Center, PPS also co-hosted a candidates' forum. (This collaboration has led to some powerful PPS partnerships around other public school issues.)

Now four of the seven Syracuse school board members are PPS parents. The bickering and infighting have ended. The board president meets with PPS to explore common ground. And the mayor, superintendent and school board members are saying that parents need to be partners in the process of public education. Faced with whopping budget issues, this fresh approach couldn't be more needed in Syracuse.

Did you know?

Findings from a survey of board members in 2,000 school districts provide a glimpse into the world of school boards:

Service: Respondents spent about 25 hours per month on board business. Several board members, especially those in large districts, spend 20 or more hours a week on board affairs.

Compensation: Two-thirds of respondents report receiving no salary for their board service and less than four percent report earning \$10,000 a year or more (mostly in large districts where board members devote considerable time to board affairs).

Composition: Most school boards are composed of between five and eight members.

Term: Typically, a school board term is four years. The mean length of board service among respondents is 6.7 years.

Selection: Respondents indicate 96.2 percent of their board membership is elected with the remaining 4 percent being appointed.

Politics: Respondents reported that of elected local school board members, more than 89% report elections are nonpartisan. They also describe themselves as moderate (44%) and another 3.9% reject any ideological label.

For more information on the survey findings, see the report, *School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st Century* on NSBA's Web site (available in the "Information & Research" section under "Surveys, Studies and Evaluations" at www.nsba.org).



When board committee meetings were held without public notice and major school business was tackled without public input, **PPS of Waco, TX** insisted that these practices end. The local press soon joined growing opposition to this exclusionary way of doing business. Under threat of legal action, the board president relented and agreed to open school board committee meetings to the public. In applauding this parent-initiated victory, the local newspaper declared, "Well, they're **PUBLIC** schools!" (Since 1993, PPS Waco has had eleven members elected to the school board.) Reprinted with permission from the Waco Tribune-Herald.

Patricia Ceaser, 4, and her brother Lewis Ceaser, 6, watch the action at the "Rally for M.O.R.E.," which stands for Momentum, Opportunities, Resources and Excellence. **Parents for Public Schools of Syracuse** organized the rally. Kim Rohadfox-Ceaser, mother of Patricia and Lewis, is a chapter member and national PPS board member. Photo by David Lassman. Reprinted with permission from the Syracuse Post-Standard.



TOOLKIT

Attributes of an Effective School Board Member

Developed by Parents for Public Schools of Waco, TX

1. Demonstrates ability to **build consensus** and achieve collaborative outcomes
2. Demonstrates an understanding of the importance of **parental involvement** and support in public education
3. Demonstrates a commitment to high standards of **achievement** for all students
4. **Visionary, risk taker and goal oriented**
5. Values **diversity** and includes it in decisionmaking
6. Willing to set the **example** and establish **accountability** at all levels for achievement of all students
7. Focused on the role of **policymaker** rather than administrator
8. Committed to quality through **innovation, technology and professional development**
9. Demonstrates effective **listening and speaking skills**
10. Demonstrates an understanding of the need to seek **parental and community commitment** in the decisionmaking process
11. Exhibits appropriate **organizational, fiscal and leadership skills**
12. Strong **advocate** for public education
13. Exhibits **personal qualities** which serve as a positive role model for children and the community
14. Demonstrates an understanding of the need to **involve the entire community** in the education of our children

This list of 14 attributes was developed by PPS Waco, based on the work of the A+ Coalition in Austin, TX. For several years, PPS Waco has used this list to set the tone of school board elections. The chapter distributes the list to community sites and through parent networks, and uses it to guide candidate forums. Ultimately, this list has helped create a new tone for the Waco school board—that of *consensus*.

Parents—and voters—can use these Attributes to evaluate school board members and candidates.

To Inform the Public:

- Share Attributes with business leaders. Ask that they underwrite printing and distribution of Attributes throughout the community. Offer to include business name and logo on the document.
- Meet with the editorial board of the local newspaper and other media executives to discuss the value of publicizing Attributes. Explore how their reporters can use Attributes in interviews with board members and candidates.
- Meet with parent groups like PTA's. Discuss using these characteristics to evaluate board members and candidates.
- Present Attributes to local groups like Rotary and Chamber of Commerce.

To Enhance the Quality of Sitting School Board Members:

- Ask a diverse group of people to evaluate board members using Attributes and compile a consensus evaluation.
- Share Attributes with board members along with a self-evaluation form.
- Meet individually with board members and discuss Attributes, their self-evaluation and the consensus evaluation. Explore opportunities for training in areas that need improvement.

At Election Time:

- Collaborate with organizations like the League of Women Voters to raise voter awareness of the responsibilities of school board members.
- Hold a voter registration drive and distribute this list to everyone.
- Provide opportunities for candidates to speak publicly such as
 - candidates' forums
 - interviews with candidates

To Hold Public Officials Accountable:

These attributes are applicable for school board candidates, sitting board members and also for elected or appointed public officials with authority and/or responsibility for schools, such as city councils, county commissioners and mayors. Use the following list of questions as a starting place for how to hold these officials accountable for meeting these expectations:

- Explain your vision for our public schools.
- How would you improve parent and community involvement in our schools?
- What has been your experience with our public schools?
- Explain your understanding of the roles and relationships between the school board, administration, unions and other education stakeholders.
- What do you see as the strengths/challenges of our public schools?
- Share an example of how you built consensus within a diverse group.
- What are your goals for improved teaching and learning? How would you achieve them?
- How do you hold yourself and others accountable for achieving these goals?
- How would you address our district's financial challenges?

RESOURCES

School Board Leadership

Leadership for Student Learning: Restructuring School District Leadership, a report from the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), recommends that district leaders focus on the goal of improving student learning and offers questions to use in initiating community discussion and action.

www.iel.org/pubs.html#21st; (202) 822-8405

"Strengthening Urban Boards," by Donald McAdams, president of the Houston-based Center for the Reform of School Systems, examines the principles of good governance, high expectations and effective school board leadership.

www.crss.org/DRMASBArticle.pdf

The Key Work of School Boards is an eight-part framework for school board leadership that focuses on student achievement and community engagement. A comprehensive Web site and a guidebook explain the eight elements and provide examples, questions to ask and resources.

www.nsba.org/keywork2

"Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding the Right Fit," from the Education Writers Association, contains perspectives from leading thinkers on board leadership and a helpful comparison of functional and dysfunctional school boards.

www.ewa.org/offers/publications/leadership.pdf

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) provides a range of reports and research on school boards and governance and a database of what states are doing. (Choose "school boards" from the drop-down menu on the "K-12 issues" page of the ECS Web site.)

www.ecs.org

Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements, a seminal book on the role of local school boards in delivering a quality education for every child. By Jacqueline Danzberger, et. al. Published by IEL (1992). \$15.

www.iel.org/pubs.html; (202) 822-8405

Effective School Boards, by Eugene R. Smoley, Jr., outlines research on school board effectiveness in the state of Delaware and includes a useful self-assessment quiz for board members. The quiz is also available on the book's Web site.

www.nsba.org/smoley

Roles and Responsibilities of Boards

"The Roles and Responsibilities of School Boards and Superintendents: A State Policy Framework" is available from the Education Commission of the States.

www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/41/26/4126.pdf; (303) 299-3600

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) "fosters excellence and equity in public education through school board leadership." NSBA's Web site contains a wealth of information on school governance, school board policies and school law. A directory of state school board associations is available in the "Federation" section the site.

www.nsba.org; (703) 838-6722

American School Board Journal, a monthly magazine published by NSBA, offers practical advice on a broad range of school governance topics. Back issues are available on the Web.

www.asbj.com

"School Board Roles and Responsibilities" from the Vermont School Boards Association defines the major roles of school personnel in several categories, including policy, budget and community and parent relations.

www.vtvsba.org/download/boards.htm

The *Improving School Board Decision-Making: The Data Connection* Web site offers primers, tools and training materials are all in free, downloadable PDF files.

www.schoolboarddata.org

For Parents and Communities

Fifteen questions to ask school board members from The Center for Education Reform (though prepared for reporters) are a good starting point for parents seeking information from board members.

<http://edreform.com/press/2001/15questions.htm>

"School Board Candidate, Who? Me?" contains 13 criteria for effective school board members prepared by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Education Foundation and the Nashville League of Women Voters.

www.nashvillepef.org/grants/SchoolBoard.pdf

Budgeting

"First Steps to a Level Playing Field: An Introduction to Student-Based Budgeting" explores the resource allocation strategy and offers practical tips for implementing it. Available as downloadable section #7 in *School Communities that Work for Results and Equity: A Portfolio for District Redesign* from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/sctw_portfolio.html

The "School-Based Budgeting and Site-Based Management" Web page from the Cross City Campaign includes a Bill of Rights and lessons learned.

www.crosscity.org/programs/budgeting/index.htm

"Community Guide to Understanding the Greenville County (SC) Public School Budget" is a 12-page, fact-based booklet that examines the school budget from a layperson's perspective.

www.allianceforqualityed.org/downloads.html; (864) 233-4133

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