

# School Board Governance Basics

## Types of Governing Bodies

Most organization's governing bodies have one dominant focus, one overriding emphasis that defines the body's "why" for existing. That "why" drives many other elements of how the governing body functions, from the way members are selected to daily decision making. It is important to distinguish between the different types of governing bodies because it is common for school board members to have experience serving on other types of boards and mistakenly believe that their school board service will work the same way. The common belief is that having served on non-profit boards or run small businesses or served as a city/county elected official provides analogous experiences from which school board members can draw and be highly effective. This commonly held belief is wildly inaccurate.

### Founder-focused Governing Bodies

In these organizations, a dominant and/or charismatic organization founder is still leading the organization either from a managerial role or a governance role.

- **Member Selection:** The founder drives the selection of governing body members.
- **Governance Work:** Participation on the board is calibrated toward supporting the success of the founder with minimal distinction between managerial and governance duties.
- **Decision Making:** Organizational decision making authority disproportionately resides with the founder.
- **Common Organizational Examples:** new single site charter schools, bootstrapped or angel-funded tech startups, mega churches, nonprofits that are the passion project of the founder
- **Common Behavioral Evidence:** The governing body members refer to themselves as a, "working board". There is not a SMART goals-based annual evaluation of the founder's performance.
- **Disqualifying Characteristics:** If the organization's founder is no longer involved with the organization in any way, the governing body is almost certainly not Founder-focused.

### Contribution-focused Governing Bodies

In these organizations, major funders are leading the organization either from a managerial role or a governance role.

- **Member Selection:** Lead funders drive the selection of governing body members.
- **Governance Work:** Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward providing financial and operational support for the organization with some distinction between managerial and governance duties.
- **Decision Making:** Organizational decision making authority disproportionately rests in the hands of the lead funders.
- **Common Organizational Examples:** culture-focused non-profits like symphonies and art museums, vc-funded tech startups
- **Common Behavioral Evidence:** The governing body has a minimum, "give or get" policy for members. Being a governing body member confers significant social status.
- **Disqualifying Characteristics:** If membership on the governing body doesn't require a large financial donation, the governing body is almost certainly not Contribution-focused.

### Patronage-focused Governing Bodies

In these organizations, individuals and/or organizations seeking to extract value from the organization exert influence over the managerial and governance processes.

- **Member Selection:** Beneficiary entities aggressively influence the selection of governing body members to ensure the selection of members who will honor patronage expectations.
- **Governance Work:** Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward supporting the needs of the beneficiary entities.

- Decision Making: Organizational decision making authority varies based on which vector can most reliably deliver benefits to the beneficiary entities.
- Common Organizational Examples: state legislatures; city councils; corporation boards that have been the subject of hostile takeover
- Common Behavioral Evidence: There is an entire industry of lobbyists being compensated to entice governing body members with the support of their patrons. The governing body has never adopted goals.
- Disqualifying Characteristics: If the organization is too small to employ a significant number of people, if the budget is too small to allow for significant redirection of funds, or if no external entities participate in the recruitment or selection of governing body members, the governing body is almost certainly not Patronage-focused.

### Outcomes-focused Governing Bodies

In these organizations, a narrowly and explicitly defined set of outcomes-oriented SMART goals are adopted by governance and guide execution by management.

- Member Selection: Member selection can take many forms but to remain an Outcomes-focused governing body for long, extensive training and coaching is required -- particularly, prior to selection.
- Governance Work: Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward setting outcomes-oriented SMART goals and monitoring progress toward the adopted goals.
- Decision Making: Organizational decision making is bifurcated with selection of SMART goals belonging to governance, and daily execution toward the SMART goals belonging to management.
- Common Organizational Examples: profit-focused corporate boards, patient health-focused hospitals, student learning-focused school boards, community well-being-focused (when narrowly defined and measurable) social service boards, resident well-being-focus (again, when narrowly defined and measurable) neighborhood boards.
- Common Behavioral Evidence: The governing body has adopted SMART goals that are focused on high priority organizational outcomes. The governing body has a calendar for when it monitors progress toward its goals and adheres to the calendar.
- Disqualifying Characteristics: If the organization has not adopted outcomes-oriented SMART goals and then invested at least 50% of the governing body's time each month into progress monitoring, the governing body is almost certainly not Outcomes-focused.

Sometimes a governing body may not demonstrate any of the aforementioned characteristics sufficiently enough to characterize it as any of these four types. In the cases where this is true, it generally suggests that the organization is entirely unmoored and that it has become a special case of patronage board where the beneficiaries are the employees and governing body members: the organization may exist only to provide employment for the staff and a sense of authority for the governing body members.

## The “Why” Of School Systems & School Boards

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. That is the only reason for which school systems exist. School systems do not exist to serve founders, provide status, or benefit patrons. Other types of boards do and that's perfectly fine, but school boards do not. School systems do not exist to have great buildings, have happy parents, have balanced budgets, have satisfied teachers, provide student lunches, provide employment in the county/city, or anything else. Those are all means -- and incredibly important and valuable means at that -- but none of them are the ends; none of those are why we have school systems. They are all inputs, not outcomes. None of those are measures of what students know or are able to do. **School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes.**

An immediate challenge is that throughout the community there are many ideas about which student outcomes -- which measures of what students know and are able to do -- should be focused on (I refer to this as the community's “vision”) and which means to accomplish the vision should/shouldn't be used (I refer to this as the

community's "values"). A school system can't be effective if it's trying to pursue a myriad of incoherent visions while implementing a cacophony of conflicting values. So the decision was made to select a group of individuals who would collectively represent the community's vision and values. We refer to this group as a school board. ***The school board exists to represent the vision and values of the community.***

## Why The "Why" Isn't Enough Without An Effective "How"

Even though school boards have an inherent desire to see improvements in student outcomes, comprehensive analysis of hundreds of hours of school board meetings from across the nation reveals that few school boards invest a meaningful percentage of their time in behaviors that most correlate with improvements in student outcomes. Simply put, the design of most school board meetings and processes is focused on managing the adult inputs, not governing for student outcomes. In the absence of a coherent framework for what it means to "govern", school board members often view the school board as being one layer *above* management. But that is a flawed understanding of governance; in reality the proper alignment of the school board is one layer *below* community. This sounds like mere semantics, but the difference in mindset manifests in wildly divergent adult behaviors in the boardroom -- the board positioning itself as inward focused super manager of adult inputs rather than a community vision- and values-focused protector of student outcomes.

This clarifies why 100 years of school board orthodoxy have often failed to protect children from unintentional, but very real, educational malpractice. When school boards approach "governing" the way it's always been done they -- again, typically without intending to -- create school systems where improvements in student outcomes occur either in spite of the school board, or not at all. This norm is deeply ingrained in school board culture nationwide and requires dramatic transformation in adult behavior. But change is often difficult -- particularly for public officials who are often punished for any significant change in direction from the status quo.

## The "How" Of Effective School Board Governance

This leads to a simple axiom: ***student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change.*** Or said differently when placed in the context of governing, patterns of behavior that are exhibited in the boardroom can reasonably be expected to be found paralleled in the classroom. This concept, which offers a summation of the current literature and research on school board behaviors and their relationship to improving student outcomes, is as elegant as it can be confounding. But it points to four recurring themes in the research literature -- about effective governing bodies in general, and effective school boards specifically -- regarding which adult behavior changes in the boardroom are most correlated with improvements in student outcomes in the classroom:

- Clarify Priorities
  - What should the school board direct the school system to focus on? How does the school board effectively communicate its priorities?
- Monitor Progress
  - How will the school board know if the school system is improving over time relative to the priorities? How will the school board know if a significant strategic pivot is required?
- Align Resources
  - How will the school board ensure that the priorities are the primary focus of resource allocation? How will the school board change its behaviors to center the priorities in its own work?
- Communicate Results

- How will the school board update the community regarding the priorities?

### Clarifying Priorities

Because the function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community, any effective system of governance must support the board at adhering closely to the community's vision and values. But even though the school board has far fewer members than the community as a whole -- typically around 5 to 9 members -- the school board members may still disagree on what the community's vision and values truly are. If school boards aren't intentional, they can start focusing on the wants and wishes of individual community members rather than the vision and value of the community as a whole. To resolve this and to create a way of holding the school system accountable, the school board as a whole adopts two special types of policy. It adopts **Goals** that reflect the community's vision. And it adopts **Guardrails** that describe the community values that must be protected while in pursuit of the Goals.

Because the intention of Goals is to reveal the community's vision for its students' outcomes, Goals are only about student outcomes -- what the community wants its students to know and be able to do. Ideal Goals will be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound), will describe what the community wants its students to know and/or be able to do, and will number between one and five (we generally recommend three). Goals describe what the school system is trying to accomplish. Examples of Goals include:

- The percentage of students from our Pre-K program who enter kindergarten school-ready on a multidimensional assessment will increase from 21% on August 1, 2019 to 65% by August 1, 2024
- The percentage of graduates who are successfully persisting in the second year of their post-secondary program will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of free and reduced lunch-eligible students in kindergarten through 2nd grade who are reading/writing on or above grade level on the district's summative assessment will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of students at underperforming schools who demonstrate proficiency in collaboration, communication, and problem solving will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of males of color who graduate with an associate's degree will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z

The community will also have other things it values beyond the vision. These other items relate to what the adults are doing to cause the Goals to happen -- they are the inputs, not the outcomes. They are about the means, not the ends. We refer to the written version of these values as Guardrails. Ideally a school board will adopt one to five such overarching statements (we generally recommend three). Guardrails describe how the school system will behave as it seeks to accomplish the Goals. Examples of Guardrails include:

- The Superintendent will not allow an inequitable distribution of educator talent
- The Superintendent will not propose major decisions to the Board without first having engaged students, parents, community, and staff
- The Superintendent will not allow underperforming campuses to have principals or teachers who rank in the bottom two quartiles of principal or teacher district-wide performance
- The Superintendent will not allow the inequitable treatment of students
- The Superintendent will not make instructional materials selections without input from parents and educators

The more clearly and finitely defined the school board's adopted Goals and Guardrails are, the easier it is for the school board to ensure alignment between not only the school board's sayings and doings, but also the superintendent's sayings and doings. This is what we mean by creating the conditions for improving student outcomes.

## Monitoring Progress

Once the school board has clarified what the priorities are -- Goals and Guardrails -- the superintendent determines how best to implement them. From that point on, the work of the school board shifts to monitoring progress to ensure that reality increasingly matches the Goals and Guardrails.

Goals and Guardrails, however, often reference performance data that only gets updated once per year. So to monitor progress, more frequently available data is needed. For this, the board tasks the superintendent with developing a set of progress measures for each goal and guardrail. These Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails are based on formative data that is regularly updated and that allow the board to know whether or not the district is getting closer to being able to accomplish the Goals and Guardrails throughout the year — rather than having to wait until the end of the school year and to find out if things are on track.

To be useful as progress measures, Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails must be SMART, must update multiple times during the school year, must be predictive of their respective Goals/Guardrails, and must be things that the administration can influence. The superintendent will select between one and three of these progress measures per Goal/Guardrail.

Having clarity about the community's vision and values (Goals & Guardrails) and progress measures for tracking performance (Interim Goals & Interim Guardrails), the Board can now create a monitoring calendar and then begin receiving monitoring reports each month.

The school board behavior most strongly correlated with improvements in student outcomes is working collaboratively with the community and the superintendent to identify the vision and values and then adopting them into a set of Goals and Guardrails.

Once Goals, Guardrails, Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails have been adopted, the next behavior of school boards that most correlates with improvements in student outcomes is monitoring progress toward the board's adopted Goals and Guardrails. School boards that truly desire to create the conditions for improvements in student outcomes invest at least 50% of their time each month into monitoring progress toward their Goals for student outcomes.

## Aligning Resources

Once a school board has adopted Goals and Guardrails and has created a system for monitoring progress, the school board now has the tools for aligning any recommendations brought before the school board.

- Should we adopt the budget proposed by the superintendent? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent has demonstrated that it prioritizes accomplishment of the Goals and adherence to the Guardrails.
- Should we proceed with placing an item on the ballot for consideration? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent's implementation plan clearly shows how use of those funds will help accomplish the Goals while honoring the Guardrails.
- How will we evaluate the superintendent's performance? That's determined by the extent to which she made sufficient progress toward the Goals while operating within the Guardrails.
- How should we invest our time during school board meetings? Focus at least 50% of school board time each month on monitoring progress toward the goals, and the rest of the time either monitoring guardrails or attending to statutorily required duties.

While the school board exists to *represent* the vision and values of the community, the ***job of the superintendent is to implement the vision and values of the community*** as described to them by the school board via the Goals and Guardrails. This arrangement creates clarity for the board regarding how to monitor progress and it creates freedom for the superintendent to innovate and take risks knowing that the board has pre-agreed to support whichever path she leads the school system so long as she can demonstrate that it prioritizes making progress toward the Goals/vision while honoring the Guardrails/values.

## Communicate Results

Because the school board represents the vision and values of the community, it's responsible for reporting back to the community on a regular basis. The community should not be expected to know everything about effective governance. Instead, the board should plan to convey to the community at least twice per year the basics of goals and guardrails, the why behind them, and progress regarding these priorities.

## Continuous Improvement

Effective governance is not easy; changing adult behaviors requires effort to overcome institutional inertia. But with a framework, training, and coaching, school boards can change their adult behaviors in ways that most correlate with improvements in student outcomes.

To best serve its students, effective school boards routinely engage in governance best practices such as board self evaluations, time use evaluations, agenda evaluations, ongoing training for board members, and providing training for members of the community. This is what it means to be intensely focused on improving student outcomes. This is what it means to engage in student outcomes focused governance.

## Resources

- About Effective Governance
  - [Student Outcomes Focused Governance Manual](#)
  - [Additional Reading About Governance](#)
    - [Analyzing Research](#)
  - [School Board Leadership To Improve Student Outcomes](#)
  - [School Board Basics](#) (this document)
  
- About Clarifying Priorities
  - [Deep Dive Into Priority Setting](#)
  - [Assessment Related Topics](#)
  - [Why Guardrails?](#)
  
- About Monitoring Progress
  - [Progress Monitoring Guide](#)
  - [Correlational Analysis Example](#)
  - [Deep Dive Into Priority Setting](#)
  
- About Aligning Resources
  - [Board Time Use Evaluation](#)
  - [Agenda Evaluation](#)
  - [Committee Evaluation](#)
  - [Board Self Evaluation Process](#)
  - [Superintendent Evaluation Process](#)
  - [Budget Workshops](#)
  - [Policy Evaluation](#)
  - [Cascading Priorities To Staff](#)