

Understanding the Instructional Core:

A Guide for Board of Education Members

Part 1

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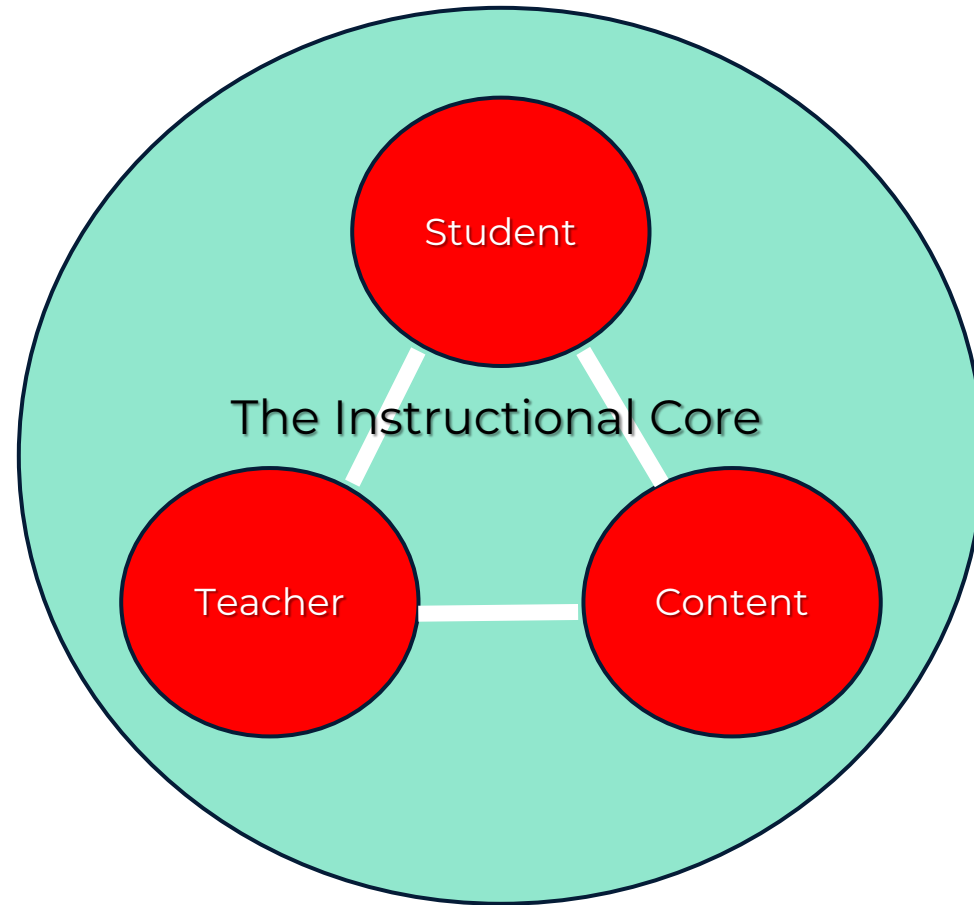
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Agenda

- How we got here
- Overview of The Framework
- Context
- The Model
- Take-aways

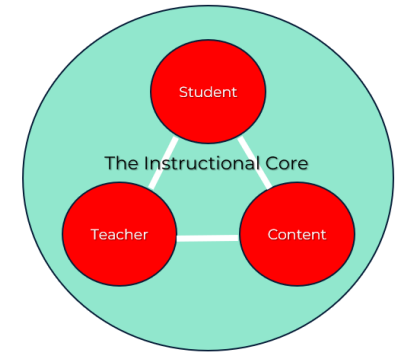
Our work is to provide a quality curriculum through quality instruction to every child.

Katie Haycock, Education Trust



What is the Instructional Core?

The Foundation of Student Learning

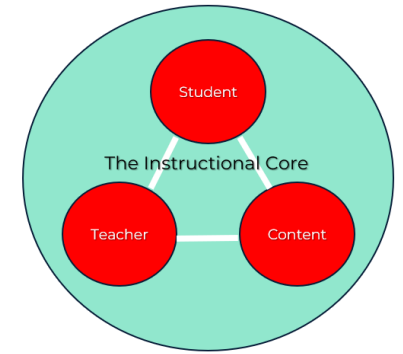


- A powerful framework for understanding effective teaching and learning.

Why is it important for Board Members and Superintendents?

- Guides strategic decision-making.
- Ensures policies directly impact classroom practice and student outcomes.
- Provides a way of thinking about the board's work to help define, support, and protect high-quality instruction

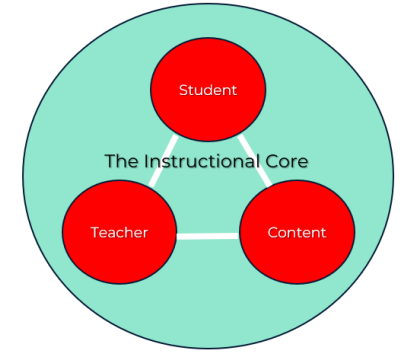
What is the Instructional Core?



Three Interdependent Elements

- The Instructional Core is defined by the dynamic relationship between:
- **1. The Teacher:**
 - Their knowledge, skills, and pedagogical practices.
 - How they design and deliver instruction.
- **2. The Student:**
 - Their engagement, prior knowledge, and active role in the learning process.
 - How they interact with the content.
- **3. The Content:**
 - The curriculum, subject matter, and the intellectual demands placed on students.
 - The rigor and relevance of what is being taught.

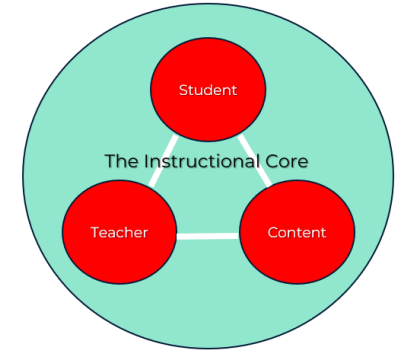
Why This Matters



Strategic Decision-Making

- Instructional core provides a critical lens for evaluating all district initiatives and policies.
- Ensures the Board is asking the right questions:
 - "How will this directly impact the interaction between teachers, students, and content in our classrooms?"
 - "What changes will we see in the instructional tasks students are asked to perform?"
 - Shift focus from simply providing resources (e.g., new technology, smaller class sizes) to ensuring these resources translate into tangible improvements within the instructional core.

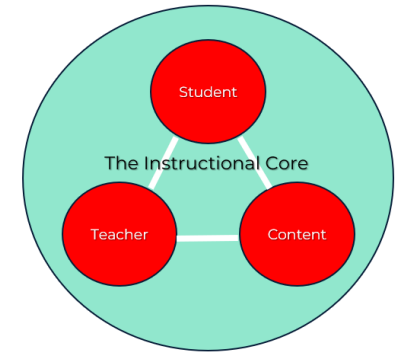
Why This Matters



Shifts the Board's focus to supporting:

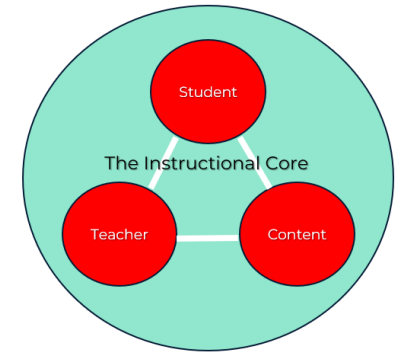
- High-Quality Instruction
- Professional Development (PD)
- Curriculum Design
- Evaluation
- Alignment of Resources

The Interconnected Elements Coherence)



- Dynamic Relationship: It's the *relationship* among these three elements, not their individual qualities, that determines the nature and effectiveness of instruction.
- "If you change one, you have to change them all": A core principle is that altering one element necessitates adjustments in the others for true improvement.
 - *Example:* Introducing a new, rigorous curriculum (content) requires teachers to develop new skills to teach it (teacher), and students to adopt new ways of engaging with it (student).

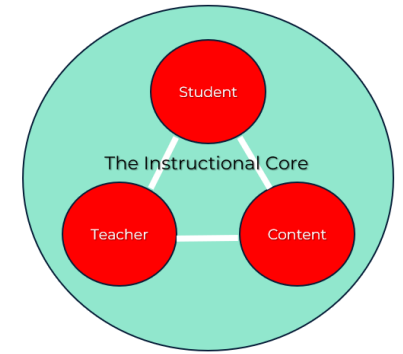
The Instructional Task



What Students *Actually* Do

- The "instructional task" is at the heart of the core. This refers to the *actual work students are asked to do* in the classroom.
 - The observable actions and cognitive demands placed on students.

How Does Learning Improve?



Building Capacity

- Increase the knowledge and skill that the *teacher* brings to the instructional process.
 - *Focus: Effective professional development, coaching, and ongoing learning for educators.*
- Increase the level and complexity of the *content* that students are asked to learn.
 - *Focus: Rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum, and challenging intellectual tasks.*
- Change the role of the *student* in the instructional process.
 - *Focus: Fostering active engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and student ownership of learning.*

Superintendents

The Traditional Manager (1950s-1980s)

- Duties primarily centered on operational management, district finance, building facilities, and contract negotiations.
- Classroom teaching, curriculum choices, and learning outcomes were left in the hands of building principals and teachers.
- Success was defined by running school operations smoothly, maintaining stable labor relations, and remaining within budget.

The Shift to Accountability

- A national and local movement initiated in the late 1980s transformed school oversight, redefining the role of district administration.
- Public policy shifted the measures of school quality from “inputs” (budgets, buildings) to clear educational “outcomes.”
- Structured state-wide assessments made achievement gaps visible, necessitating systemic intervention directly from the central executive.

Leading Instructional Improvement

- Today's superintendent must serve as the lead instructional designer, systemically aligning resources around the **core interactions** in every classroom.
- Rather than observing from a distance, contemporary leadership **builds instructional capacity and coherence** across all schools through structured observations and collaborative professional learning. (Instructional Rounds)

Teachers

The Deliverer of Content (1950s-1980s)

- Rote memorization: Students were viewed as empty vessels to be filled with “accepted” factual inputs.
- Passive Environment: Classrooms were teacher-centric. Students sat in rows, worked quietly on the same worksheets/assignments, and were rewarded for behavioral compliance.
- One-Size-Fits-All: Delivery was uniform. If a student fell behind or lacked access, the system viewed it as an individual learning limitation rather than a systemic gap.

The Focus on Data and Accountability (1990s-2010s)

Summative data – little influence on classroom instruction

- Students viewed as Data Points - objective testing, benchmarks, and data outputs.
- Focus shifted to mastering test-taking strategies, standardized diagnostic rubrics, and proving performance on state-wide and other “corporate” assessments.
- Environment and a narrower scope defined by high-stakes assessments.

The Teacher as the Instructional Manager/Coach

Technology Supports Greater Individualization - Focus Shifts to High-Quality Instruction, Capacity Building, and Coherence:

- The teacher's role has shifted towards managing a variety of learning environments and resources, facilitating an array of learning opportunities, and using assessment tools to inform instruction for individual student needs and interests.
- Modern classrooms aspire to prioritize critical thinking, student agency, peer-to-peer collaborative problem solving, and personalized learning pathways, designed to produce authentic student growth – Portrait of a Learner

Students

The Compliant Listener (1950s-1980s)

- Rote memorization: Students were viewed as empty vessels to be filled with standardized, factual inputs.
- Passive Environment: Classrooms were teacher-centric. Students sat in rows, worked quietly on worksheets, and focused on behavioral compliance.
- One-Size-Fits-All: Delivery was uniform. Students were exposed to large group instruction. If a student fell behind or lacked access, the system viewed it as an individual learning limitation rather than a systemic gap.

Assessed and Measured (1990s-2010s)

- Students as Data Points: The student experience transformed to revolve around objective testing, benchmarks, and data outputs.
- Procedural Rigor: Focus shifted to mastering test-taking strategies, standardized diagnostic rubrics, and proving performance on state-wide exams.
- High Stakes, Narrow Scope: While this era made strides in identifying achievement gaps, students frequently experienced a narrowed curriculum centered on tested subjects.

The Active, Co-Creating Learner

- Today's student school experiences aim to keep them highly engaged, increase their agency, and have them become creators of their own learning journey.
- Modern classrooms prioritize critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and personalized learning pathways, designed to foster and produce authentic student growth.

Boards of Education

The Community Bridge (1950s-1980s)

Ombudsman

- Duties primarily centered on operational management, district finance, building facilities, and contract negotiations.
- Classroom teaching, curriculum choices, and learning outcomes were left to building principals and teachers.
- Success was defined by running school operations smoothly, maintaining stable labor relations, and remaining within budget.

The Shift to Governance

Focus on Governance

- The national and local Standards-Based Reform movement shifted the measures of school quality from “inputs” (budgets, buildings) to clear educational “outcomes.”
- Data-Driven Practices: Structured state-wide assessments made achievement gaps visible, necessitating systemic intervention directly from the central executive.
- Test scores focused on measurement rather than improving instruction.

Protect and Support the Instructional Core

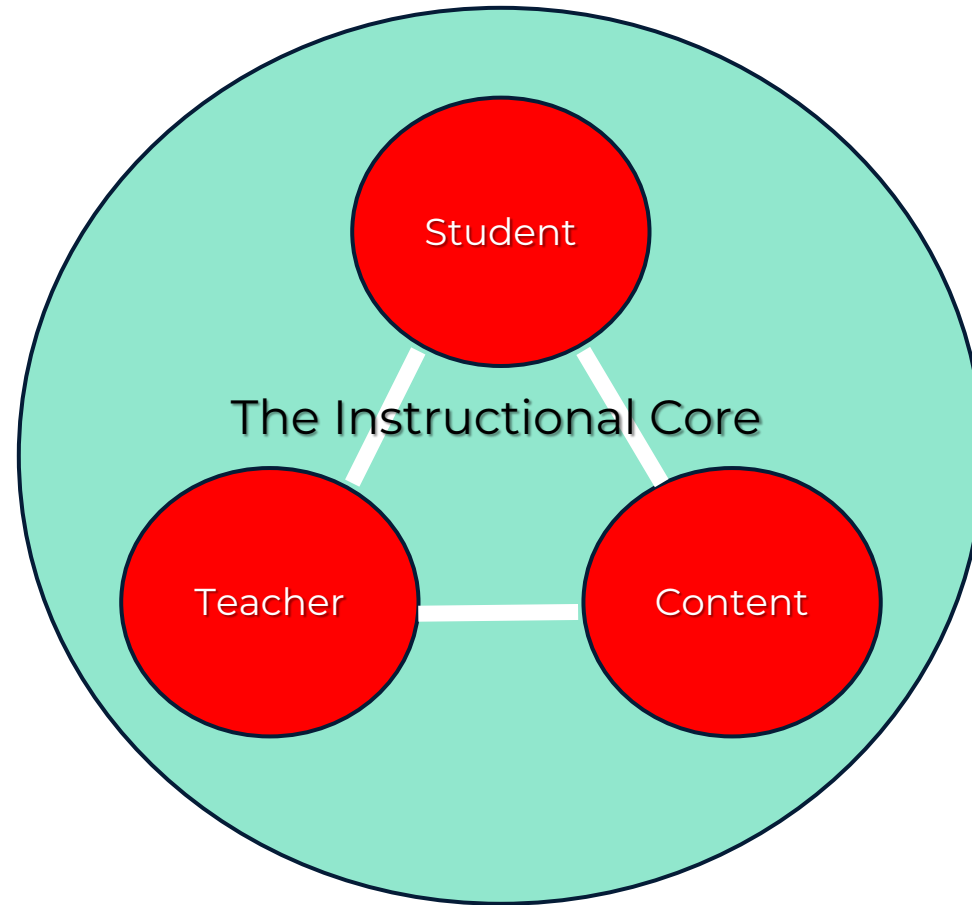
- Focus attention on the work that supports teaching and learning
- Support the systems that support instruction
- Board decisions are directly related to strengthening the Instructional Core – building organizational capacity and coherence.

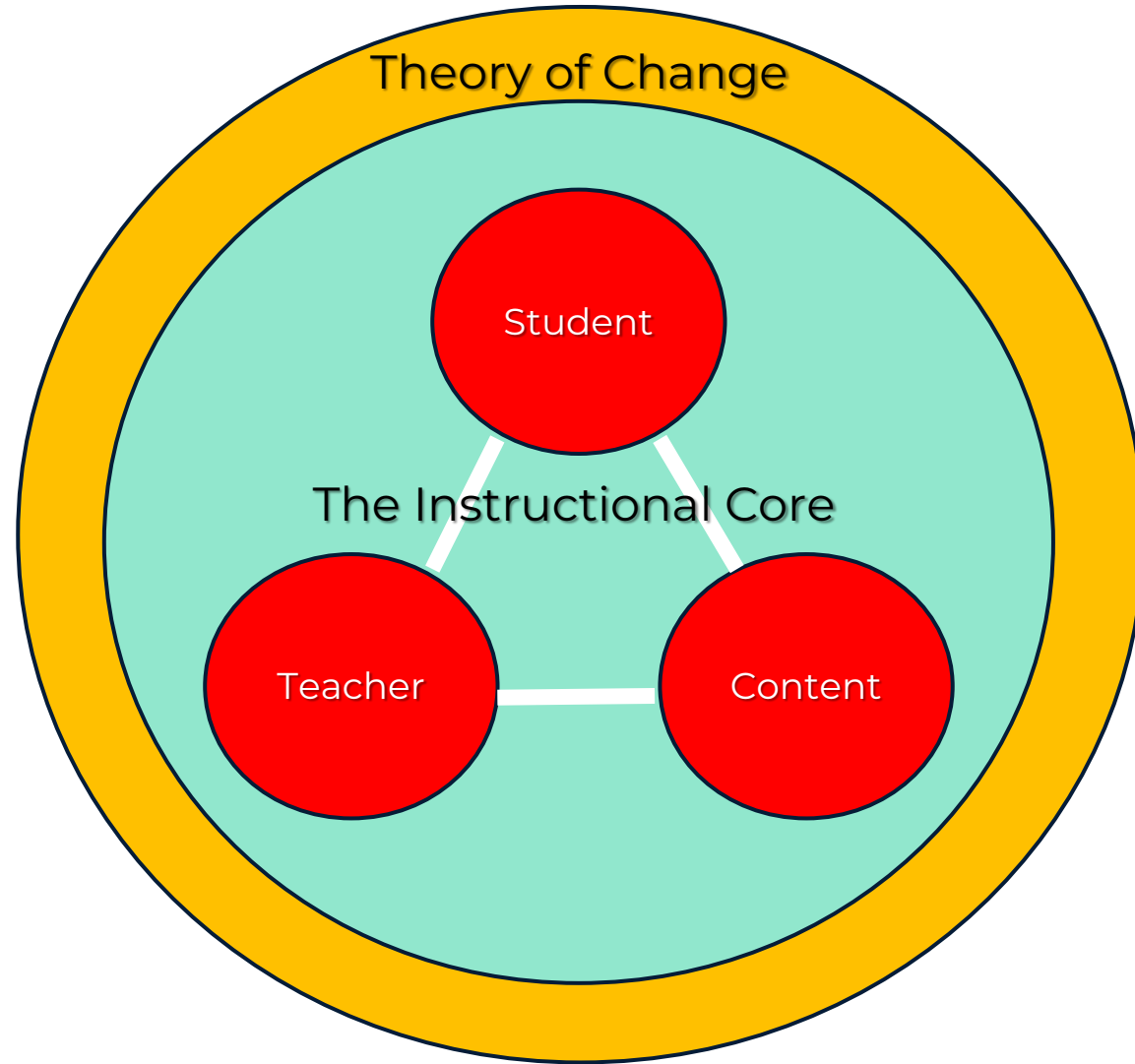
How Boards Interact with the Core

- Establish vision of expectations
- Align governance practices with vision;
 - Policy Alignment: Establishing governance policies that prioritize teacher development, continuous curriculum renewal, and high-quality instruction across all levels.
 - Resource Allocation: Directing public resources and budgets to evidence-based materials, structured educator training, and critical student interventions.
 - Accountability: Steering monthly board conversations away from administrative minutiae and towards metrics, evaluating district success by student growth.

The Instructional Core





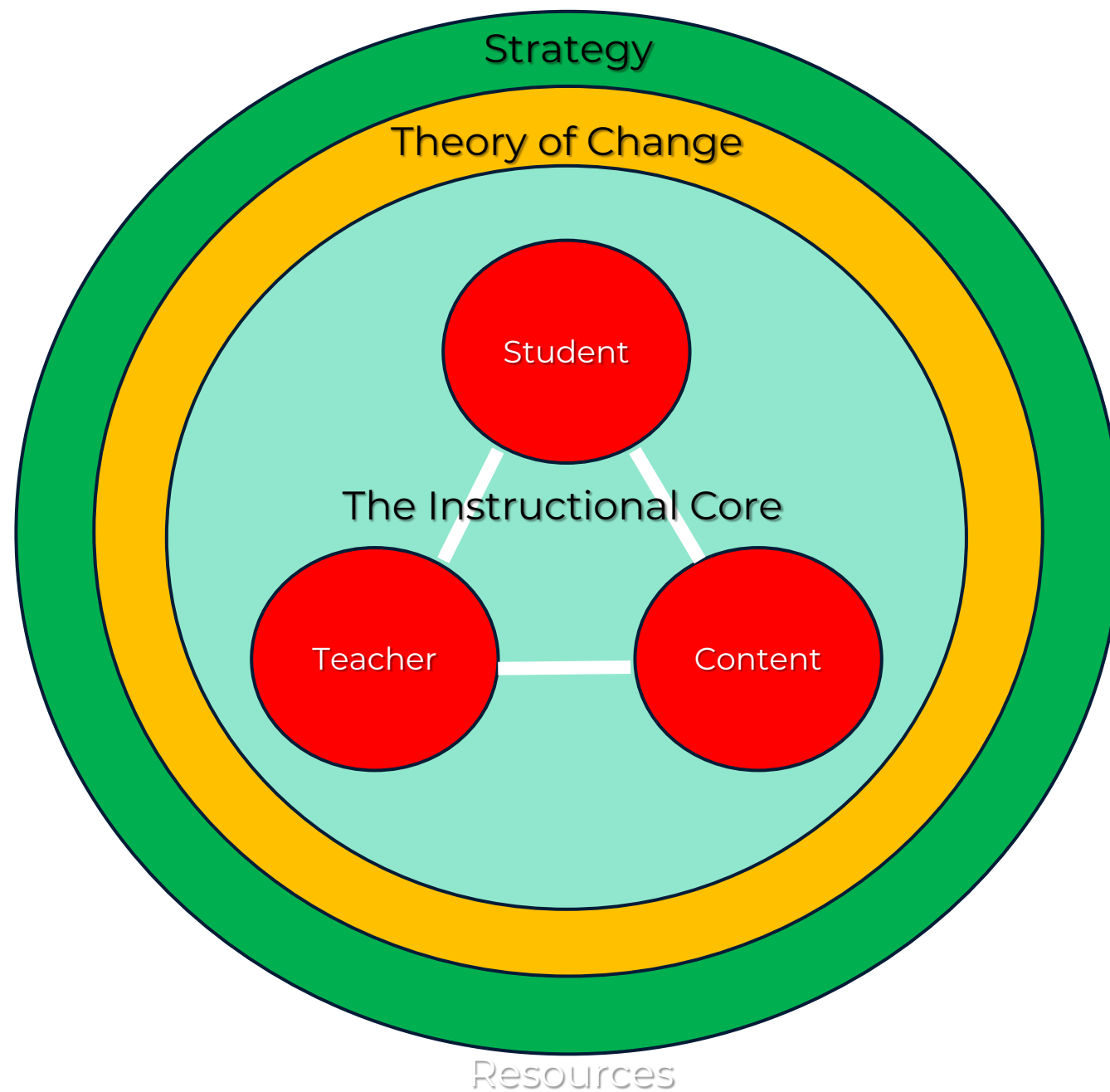


Theory of Change

The District's collective, explicit belief about the causal relationship between specific leadership actions and student outcomes.

Almost always written as an "If... then..." Statement:

If the District provides job-embedded professional development on data-driven reading interventions, then teachers will target specific literacy gaps, and student reading achievement will increase.



Strategy

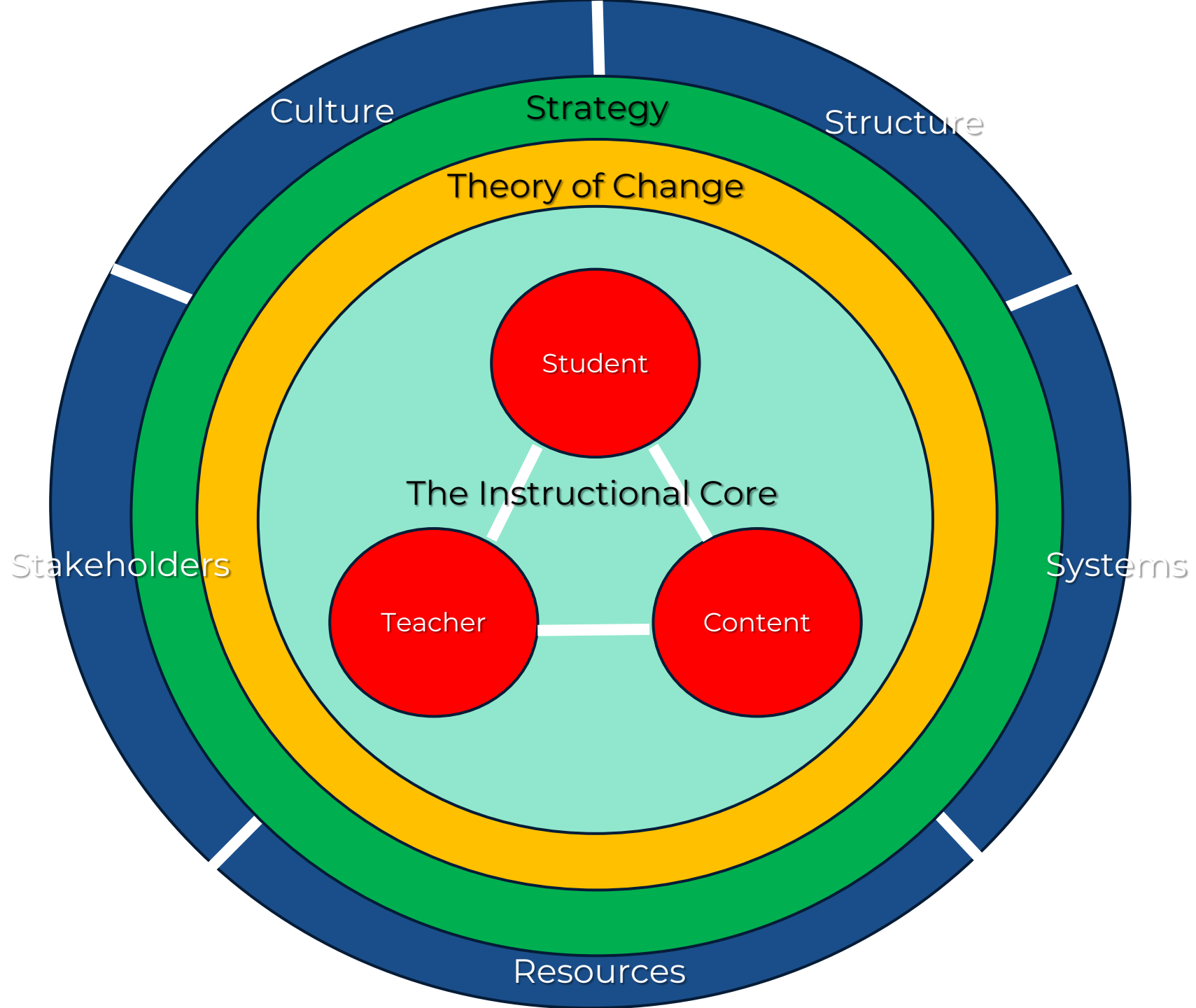
Strategy is the specific, focused plan of action a district uses to execute its Theory of Change and improve student learning across all classrooms.

It is the district's intentional choices about what to prioritize—and just as importantly, what *not* to prioritize—with its limited time, money, and energy.

Strategy

The unwritten rules, shared values, deeply embedded norms, and daily behaviors that dictate how people *actually* interact and work within the district. It is "how we do things around here."

The Board's Lens: Culture dictates whether a strategic plan succeeds or fails. A board can pass a policy requiring data-driven instruction, but if the district's *culture* treats data as a tool for punishment rather than a tool for learning, teachers will hide their struggles. True alignment means fostering a "culture of instructional practice"—where collaboration, vulnerability, and a shared responsibility for all students are the norm.



Structure

The formal, physical, and legal organization of the district. This includes the organizational chart, job descriptions, lines of authority, physical placement of programs, and governance policies.

The Board's Lens: Structure dictates accountability and communication pathways. For example, if your district's strategy focuses heavily on aligning curriculum from kindergarten through 12th grade, but your *structure* separates elementary and secondary directors into completely isolated departments, your structure is actively sabotaging your strategy.

Systems

The repeatable, formalized processes, protocols, and channels used to manage the district's continuous, day-to-day work.

The Board's Lens: If structures are the *bones* of the district, systems are the *nervous system*. Examples include the teacher evaluation system, the budget development cycle, student data tracking, and curriculum renewal cycles. The board must ensure these systems are streamlined to feed resources and data directly back to the classroom core, rather than trapping educators in compliance loops or redundant paperwork.

Resources

The tangible assets available to execute the strategy, which must be viewed as a triad: **People** (skills, knowledge, and talent), **Time** (schedules, professional development days, and collaboration hours), and **Money/Technology** (funding, facilities, and physical tools).

The Board's Lens: Boards frequently make the mistake of viewing resources strictly as dollar amounts. Under the PELP framework, money is simply a mechanism to buy *Time* and *People*. If a board approves a budget to buy a new software system (Money), but fails to provide the schedule adjustments (Time) for teachers to learn it (People), the resource has been fragmented and wasted.

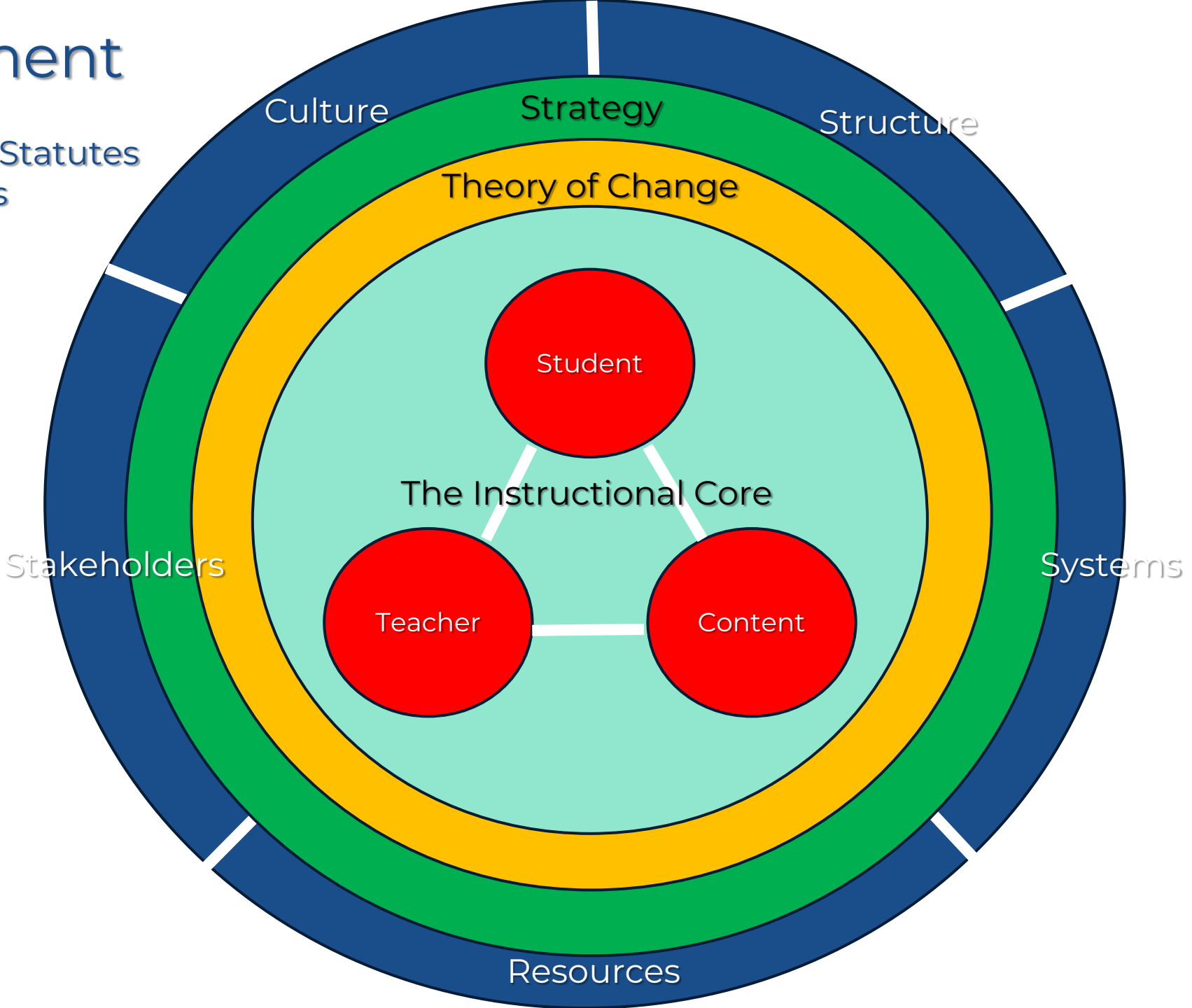
Stakeholders

Internal and external individuals or groups with a vested interest in the district's schools and the power to influence their direction.

The Board's Lens: This includes collective bargaining units (unions), parent groups, community advocates, local businesses, the state Department of Education, and municipal appropriating bodies such as Town Councils or Boards of Finance. The board's role is to manage these external and internal pressures so that competing political demands do not divert the district's focus from its central strategy and instructional core.

Environment

Regulations and Statutes
Contracts
Funding
Politics



Environment

- Regulations and Statutes
- Contracts
- Funding
- Politics

Regulations and Statutes

What it is: The rigid legal boundaries set by state and federal governments that dictate what a school district *must* or *cannot* do.

The BOE Context: In Connecticut, this includes mandates passed during recent legislative sessions—such as strict definitions for child abuse reporting, kindergarten age waivers, online curriculum transparency requirements (like Senate Bill 308), or limits on AI note-taking tools.

The Lesson: The board cannot view mandates as isolated checkboxes for compliance. You have to ask: "*How do we adapt our internal **Systems** and **Structures** to meet this new state law without disrupting our classroom strategy?*"

Contracts

What it is: The legally binding labor agreements with teachers, administrators, custodians, and support staff unions.

The BOE Context: Contracts dictate the physical boundaries of the school day—maximum class sizes, exact working hours, the number of mandatory professional development days, and teacher evaluation protocols.

The Lesson: Contracts heavily restrict your **Resources** (specifically *Time* and *People*). When a board negotiates a union contract, it isn't just a financial negotiation; it is an instructional one. If your strategy requires collaborative teacher planning time, but the contract structure doesn't allow for it, the contract becomes an environmental barrier to the core.

Funding

What it is: The financial ecosystem that determines your district's revenue, including state ECS (Education Cost Sharing) grants, federal grants, and local property tax allocations.

The BOE Context: This is where Connecticut's unique "dependent school district" model comes into play. Because local BOEs do not have taxing authority, you are entirely dependent on the municipal appropriating body (Board of Finance or Town Council) to fund your budget, often clashing with local budget caps or Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) laws.

The Lesson: External funding volatility forces the board to be master prioritizers. When funding shifts, a coherent board protects the spending that directly impacts the *Teacher-Student-Content* triangle, cutting "peripheral" items first.

Politics

What it is: The shifting landscape of public opinion, community expectations, special interest groups, and local municipal relationships.

The BOE Context: This includes everything from highly charged public comment sessions at board meetings regarding book selections or social media guidelines, to the political relationship between the BOE Chair and the Town Mayor or First Selectman.

The Lesson: Political noise is the number one cause of "strategic drift." When a community controversy erupts, boards are tempted to create reactionary new policies or committees. The PELP framework acts as a shield, helping the board filter political noise and stay focused on student achievement.

Key Takeaways for Board Members (Coherence)

- The instructional core (teacher, student, and the content/instructional task) is the *engine* of student learning.
- All decisions should be evaluated through the lens of how they impact this core.
- Real improvement happens when all three elements of the core are addressed in concert.
- Focus on what students are *actually* doing.
- *Your role is to create the conditions and policies that enable a strong and continuously improving instructional core in every classroom.*



Questions/Comments

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