Building Trust Through Board Norms

Practical Strategies for Effective Board Governance



Effective governance depends on trust. Without it, even routine board work becomes more difficult. Boards that demonstrate high levels of trust are better able to engage in productive discussions and maintain a focus on improving student outcomes. Without trust, discussions can become personal, board meetings become less productive, and relationships with the superintendent, staff, and community can deteriorate.

While disagreement is a healthy part of governance, disrespect and inconsistency are not. Establishing and consistently reinforcing shared board norms helps create an environment where diverse viewpoints can be expressed constructively.

What are Board Norms?

Every board develops expectations about how members will work together. The most effective boards make those expectations explicit by adopting board norms. Strong board norms reflect the board's shared values and guide conduct both during meetings and in interactions outside the boardroom. Norms promote both professionalism and accountability. Because boards and their membership change over time, norms should be reviewed periodically and revised as needed. Norms are most meaningful when they are developed collaboratively and embraced as shared commitments rather than treated as rules.

Although every board should establish norms that reflect their unique values, many effective boards adopt common expectations for member behavior. These include treating one another with respect, focusing criticism on ideas rather than individuals, and avoiding personal attacks, sarcasm, or inflammatory language. Members commit to listening with the intent to understand, asking clarifying questions before drawing conclusions, and communicating respectfully in all interactions. They support board decisions once they have been made, raise concerns through established governance processes, come prepared for meetings, and remain focused on their governance responsibilities. *Throughout these discussions, the board's primary responsibility remains improving outcomes for every student.*

Embedding Board Norms into Governance

Simply approving board norms is rarely enough. Their value comes from using them consistently during the board's regular work. Effective boards should intentionally reinforce their shared commitments by briefly reviewing or displaying their norms at the beginning of meetings and using them as a framework for refining board practice. At the conclusion of meetings, boards may reflect on how well they upheld their norms and identify opportunities to strengthen future interactions. Board norms should also be incorporated into the orientation of new board members so expectations for professional conduct are established alongside the board's policies and governance processes. To further strengthen accountability, boards may include adherence to their norms as part of their regular board self-evaluation process. When

board norms become an integral part of the board's everyday work rather than simply a written document, they create consistency, strengthen relationships, and support more effective governance over time.

Responding When Norms Are Not Followed

Every board has moments when discussions become tense or members lose sight of agreed expectations. What matters most is how the board responds afterward. The goal isn't to assign blame. It's to address concerns early enough that they don't become larger problems for the board. Most problems are easier to address early. A quick conversation between colleagues is usually more effective than allowing frustration to build over several meetings. The most effective leaders can acknowledge their own mistakes while demonstrating their willingness to improve. Colleagues may respectfully remind one another of an agreed-upon norm by redirecting the conversation toward the board's shared commitments rather than focusing on individual behavior. When needed, the board chair plays an important role by guiding discussion back to the established norms and helping maintain a respectful and productive meeting environment. Following particularly challenging discussions, the board may also benefit from reflecting on what occurred and identifying strategies for strengthening future interactions. When everyone understands their expectations, conversations about behavior become easier because members are referring back to agreements they made together and not criticizing one another personally.

Board Reflection

Strong governance requires ongoing reflection. Periodically discussing how the board is functioning can help identify both strengths and opportunities for growth.

During a board retreat or self-evaluation, consider discussing questions such as:

- *What behaviors are strengthening trust among board members? What actions or patterns may be unintentionally eroding trust?*
- *Which board norms are most important to our current work, and how effectively are we living them?*
- *How will we respectfully remind one another when our shared expectations are not being met?*
- *Finally, how will we know whether our board culture is becoming stronger over time?*

Regular reflection encourages continuous improvement and reinforces the board's shared responsibility for maintaining a healthy governance culture.

Background Information related to CDE Board Supports:

CDE support, grounded in C.R.S. 22-11-208, is non-directive and non-partisan, focusing on best practices and resources. CDE does not prescribe governance approaches; these decisions remain with local boards. Boards should consult legal counsel for specific guidance. Related resources are available at: https://ed.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/board-of-education-supports

Disclaimer: Portions of this document were developed with the assistance of ChatGPT for light editing, language refinement, and content recommendations. All final content was reviewed and approved by the author(s).

Suggested "Next Steps" Table

If your board wants to improve trust…	Consider taking these actions
Establish shared expectations	Collaboratively develop or revisit board norms that define how members will work together and interact both during and outside meetings.
Model the desired culture	Board members consistently demonstrate respect, professionalism, preparation, and a focus on students in every interaction.
Reinforce norms regularly	Review board norms at the beginning of meetings and reference them during difficult discussions.
Normalize reflection	Reserve five minutes at the end of meetings to discuss what went well and what could be improved regarding board interactions.
Address concerns early	Encourage respectful peer-to-peer reminders when norms are not being followed rather than allowing frustration to build.
Support the board chair	Empower the board chair to redirect discussions and reinforce agreed-upon norms in a consistent and impartial manner.
Orient new members intentionally	Include board norms, governance expectations, and board culture as part of every new board member orientation.
Evaluate board effectiveness	Incorporate board norms into the board's annual self-evaluation and identify one or two improvement goals for the coming year.
Celebrate progress	Periodically recognize examples of positive board behaviors and improvements in collaboration and governance.
Revisit norms annually	Review, revise, and recommit to board norms each year to reflect the board's evolving needs and membership.

References & Board Resources

School Board Governance

Carver, J. (2006). *Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass. This book is considered the foundational text on Policy Governance, it presents a governance framework centered on defining purpose, clarifying the governance and management distinction, establishing accountability, and ensuring the board governs itself through explicit processes.

Eadie, D. C. (2005). *The Board-Savvy Superintendent.* Rowman & Littlefield. This book is a guide for strengthening the board-superintendent partnership. Eadie emphasizes governance as a leadership function, providing strategies for clarifying roles, improving communication, managing conflict constructively, and establishing effective governance practices.

Iowa Lighthouse Study (Iowa Association of School Boards). One of the most referenced studies of school board effectiveness, the Lighthouse study identified characteristics consistently demonstrated by high-performing school boards. Findings emphasize a strong focus on student achievement, collaborative relationships with the superintendent, use of data to guide decisions, clearly defined expectations, and a learning culture.

Organizational Trust & Team Effectiveness

Edmondson, A. C. (2019). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.* Wiley. Edmondson's research on psychological safety demonstrates how organizations improve decision-making and performance when individuals feel safe expressing differing viewpoints, asking questions, admitting mistakes, and engaging in respectful dialogue. These principles can strengthen board deliberations and improve governance.

Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.* Jossey-Bass. Lencioni describes trust as the foundation of effective teams. Although written for organizational leadership generally, the framework has broad application for governing boards by illustrating how trust influences productive conflict, commitment to decisions, accountability, and collective results.

Continuous Improvement & Board Reflection

National School Boards Association (NSBA), State Associations (including the Colorado Association of School Boards). Provide board self-assessment tools and guidance for evaluating board effectiveness. These resources encourage boards to regularly examine their governance practices and board culture,

Colorado Department of Education – Board of Education Supports. CDE provides non-directive, non-partisan resources designed to assist local boards in understanding their governance responsibilities, strengthening board-superintendent relationships, supporting accountability planning, and improving governance practices. Resources are intended to complement local board decision-making and do not prescribe a specific governance model.