

Effective Question Asking

It's often said that good questions make good school board meetings. We differ slightly: SMART questions asked for a defined reason increase the effectiveness of school board meetings -- decision-making or monitoring questions that are strategic, measure-focused, ask-oriented, results-focused, time-bound.

Question Reasons

There are three reasons that school board members ask questions. Effective school board members focus on decision-making and monitoring questions during school board meetings. To the extent that incidental / other questions are deemed necessary, the school board should create a system for those questions to be asked and answered as much as possible outside of school board meetings. A key to effective question asking is that random acts of inquiry don't change systemic adult behavior; effective and intentional decision-making and monitoring does.

- **Decision Making:** Questions that provide information educating the board regarding items to be voted on.
- **Monitoring:** Questions that provide information educating the board concerning school system performance on the goals and/or guardrails. This is where 50% of effective school board time lives: monitoring goals.
- **Incidental / Other:** Questions that provide information educating the board regarding anything else. Generally to be avoided during school board meetings so as to make space for the other two types of questions.

SMART Questions

The more of these five indicators that a school board member's question meets, the more effective of a question it will be. Board members wanting to grow in effectiveness will invite a Coach to evaluate each of their questions.

- **Strategic:** Is the question about strategic issues rather than technical or tactical issues? (*Also, see below Technical vs Tactical vs Strategic*)
- **Measure-Focused:** Does the question reference specific metrics/data that has been provided at the request of the school board?
- **Ask-Oriented:** Is the question open ended or is it a yes/no/multiple choice question? Also consider the tone of the question: if the question is asked in a confrontational or accusatory manner, it automatically fails to be ask-oriented since a respectful and professional approach is more likely to yield valuable information than a confrontational or accusatory approach.
- **Results-Focused:** Does the question focus on understanding data rather than sharing opinions? Also consider the tone and approach of the question: is the question being asked with the purpose of authentically learning about the data or is the question really just advice-giving or recommendation-making in disguise? Is the question directly related to understanding data about board work -- the goals, guardrails, and/or legally required items? If the question is not directly related to board work, it should likely be avoided.
- **Time-Bound:** Does the question focus on current performance (past/current actions) or future performance (future actions)? Additionally, consider the timing of the question: is the question being asked at an appropriate time in the decision-making process? If a question is being asked too late in the process, that's a governance failure not a management failure and shouldn't be allowed to harm the process; preparation is key.
- **Effective Example:** The 3rd grade literacy growth on page 4 appears flat for group A but not group B. Which, if any, of our budgeted strategies most accounted for that difference?
- **Ineffective Example:** Since X is an effective strategy for improving student outcomes, are you going to provide teachers with training on it next semester?

Technical vs Tactical vs Strategic

Effective school board conversations are strategy focused. Where technical and tactical questions are needed to contextualize a pending strategic conversation, the school board should have systems in place for school board members to ask those questions and get answers before the board meeting.

- **Technical:** Questions to understand how something is measured. Examples include:
 - What's the alignment of the portfolio assessment with the SAT or ACT? How do we know the validity of the portfolio assessment? What are the psychometric properties of the portfolio assessment? Why did we single out collaboration and problem solving skills from all the skills assessed?
- **Tactical:** Questions to understand how or by whom something is done. Examples include:
 - To whom is the assessment administered? Which staff have been trained to administer the assessment? What type of PD have staff received regarding the assessment? How do staff feel about the assessment?
- **Strategic:** Questions to understand how something aligns to the the goals and guardrails. Examples include:
 - Looking at the data in table 1, which strategy was most effective with our target student population? What is a strategy we deployed that didn't work, given the data in table 2, and what did we learn? Based on the data in graph 1, why are we seeing such significant growth among our non-target student

population but not our target student population? Why is the data in graph 2 showing that system performance on item a is so much higher than item b?

Current Performance vs Future Performance

Effective school board conversations are focused on current performance. Knowing how we got here should precede asking about where we're going next.

- **Current Performance:** Questions to understand the current state of performance by evaluating prior / current data. Questions about current performance should take $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of conversations. Examples include:
 - Who: What do we know about the students mentioned in the report? Who is struggling the most? Who is growing the most? Who is not moving? Which students are not included in this data?
 - What: What do we know about the data mentioned in the report? What is currently happening? What else do we need to know about this? How and what did we learn? What are the strengths? What are the limitations? Where do gaps exist between student groups? What's working? Not working? What do you see as accounting for <anomalous data in report>?
 - Why: What do we know about the root cause of the student data in the report? Why is it working in this area? Why is it not working in this area? How did we learn about this issue? Why such significant growth? Why was there no growth? What do we need to know about? Why do gaps between student groups exist? Why is <data point a> so much <higher or lower> than <data point b>?
- **Future Performance:** Questions to understand what we think future performance and future actions will be. School board members tend to jump straight to these questions. This reveals a lack of training about effective leadership, a lack of discipline, or both. Examples include:
 - How: What adult behaviors need to change in response to the student data? How can we replicate what is happening in ____? Given what we know about ____, what are you going to do to speed up the progress? What evidence suggests that your new strategy is going to work? How are we going to address ____ (issue not resolved)? How might changes show up in the future (budget, etc.)? How can the board help?

Examples of Ineffective Questions

- Any statements or questions that are really just board member opinions or recommendations about what the superintendent should do.
- Most statements or questions that don't reference the data requested by the school board.
- Any statements or questions that aren't actually questions but that are just statements or opinions.
- Any statements or questions about what will happen next that aren't grounded in previously asked questions about current performance.

Question Discipline: Creating Organizational Alignment

A key observation about the questions board members ask, is that school board member inquiries have an impact on administrative behavior. If school board members ask a lot of questions about why there are potholes in the junior high parking lot, then that will have the effect of administrative behavior being more likely to attend to potholes in the junior high parking lot. The challenge is that the amount of administrative energy and time are finite, so the time spent on potholes is time that is not spent on something more strongly correlated with accomplishment of the goals or honoring of the guardrails. If every school board members asks every one of their pet questions, alignment diminishes rapidly.

Every single question asked -- whether in a board meeting or outside of board meetings, via text or via email or face-to-face -- nudges the behavior of administration in a direction. Effective school board members will conduct a 2-step cost/benefit analysis before asking any question of their administration (and only proceed if both are "yes"):

- Step 1: Does this question nudge in the direction of organizational alignment with the goals and guardrails?
 - The answer to that question for 95%+ of possible questions is likely, "no." Every now and then the answer will be yes, but far, far more often, the answer will be no. Pretending the answer is "yes" is a common failing of school board members; the intellectually dishonest person will invent a way to pretend that a strong connection exists. I commonly hear things like, "well if the potholes aren't fixed then our teachers might quit out of frustration and some of our parents might be less likely to visit the school because they might not be able to afford new tires so yes, this issue is directly related to the accomplishment of our goals and guardrails". If this example seems reasonable rather than tenuous to you, please consider resigning if you currently serve on a school board.
- Step 2: Do the benefits of asking this question outweigh the costs to organizational alignment?
 - This is a less clear judgment call. The answer is likely, "no", but sometimes unique things happen.