

Completing A Board Agenda Evaluation

SECTION 1: WHAT'S THE BENEFIT OF CONDUCTING A BOARD AGENDA EVALUATION?

Why School Systems & School Boards Exist

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. That is the only reason for which school systems exist. 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 (we refer to this as the community's "vision") and which means should/shouldn't be used to accomplish this (we 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 function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community.*

Listening, Identifying, & Implementing the Vision & Values [What We Say]

The school board's work can largely be broken into three buckets:

1. Listening for the vision and values of the community whom they represent.
2. Identifying specific policies that reflect the community's vision (we refer to this as adopting "goals") and specific policies that reflect the community's values (we refer to this as adopting "guardrails").
3. Implementing the community's vision and values by delegating operational responsibility to the superintendent and then monitoring and communicating progress toward the vision (goals) while honoring the values (guardrails).

These three behaviors -- listening, identifying, and implementing -- are at the core of exceptional board leadership and, when done well, clearly distinguish the work of governing (which belongs to the school board) from the work of managing (which the board delegates to the superintendent).

The goals and guardrails that emerge from effective school board work serve as the north star against which all decisions and all monitoring are evaluated. Should we adopt the superintendent's budget recommendation? Only if the superintendent has convinced the school board that the budget prioritizes accomplishment of the goals while honoring the guardrails. How should we evaluate the superintendent? On the basis of whether or not they made sufficient progress toward the goals while operating within the guardrails. Should we put a tax increase or bond approval on the ballot? Only if you can prove to voters that the proceeds will support accomplishment of the goals and honoring of the guardrails. Should we vote to approve this expenditure item on the board meeting agenda? Only if the superintendent has convinced the school board that approval will support accomplishment of the goals while operating within the guardrails. And so on, and so on.

As an aside, technically some consider "legal compliance" to be a fourth bucket because state legislatures often task school boards with doing things that no school board should ever do. For example, one state's laws

obligate school board members to install the accounting software. Can you imagine your brand new school board member heading down to the central office with a copy of Quicken? Scary, right?!

The Currency of Life [What We Do]

When we see what someone spends their currency on, that provides us with insight into what they most value. Ultimately, there is really only one currency: time. Money is simply stored time; you exchanged some of your time and got money in its place. You bought an apple, but really what you were doing was trading a unit of your time (money) for a unit of someone else's time (the time they spent picking the apple and bringing it to market). So if we want to know what people most value, one means of doing so is to track their use of time. This is as true of school boards as it is of people.

Alignment Between Saying & Doing

Boards that want to have the strongest impact on improving student outcomes will demonstrate a very strong alignment between the vision and values they speak and the goals and guardrails they act on. The more alignment there is between saying and doing, the more likely it is that the school board's actions will create the context for improvements in student outcomes. The less alignment there is, the more likely it is that the school board's behavior is unintentionally harming the school system's chances of improving student outcomes.

Alignment between saying and doing can be measured by comparing how the school board chooses to use the precious time it has each month -- the time during public meetings of the school board -- with the board's written vision and values (the goals and guardrails they've adopted). *This is the benefit of a board agenda evaluation: to reveal the extent to which there is alignment between what the school board says and what the school board does as a means of helping school boards see a path toward improving student outcomes.*

About Goals & Guardrails

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 kindergarten students who will 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 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 meet or exceed the state standard 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 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 propose major decisions to the Board without first having engaged students, parents, community, and staff
- The Superintendent will not allow the number or percentage of students at underperforming campuses to remain the same or increase
- The Superintendent will not allow the inequitable treatment of students

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.

SECTION 2: HOW TO CONDUCT A BOARD AGENDA EVALUATION

Once the next school board meeting agenda is drafted but before it is made public or even sent to board members, gather the board leadership, the Superintendent, and anyone else who touches the agenda prior to board meetings (usually a Superintendent's chief or staff and/or a board's administrator). Then do the following:

1. Starting with the very first line of the agenda (no matter what it says) and read it aloud.
2. Ask the participants: "is this item student outcomes focused or not?"
 - a. As clarity, the only way to answer "yes" to this question is if the entire purpose of the agenda item is to monitor progress relative to the board's adopted goals using a monitoring report on the timeline defined by the board's monitoring calendar. If as a result of the board item, board members walk away with data that shows current student progress toward the board's goals for student outcomes, the item is probably student outcomes focused. Otherwise it's almost certain that the answer is "no".
3. If the answer is "yes", continue to the next item. If the answer is "no", ask the next question: "do you want to keep it, delete it, or modify it?"
 - a. If the answer is "keep it", then ask: "why is this important to you?"
 - b. If the answer is "delete it", then ask: "is there another way the board can receive the value of this item that doesn't involve it happening during a board meeting?"
 - c. If the answer is "modify it", then ask: "which modifications would either cause this to be student outcomes focused or, if not, cause it to be more efficiently handled so that time can be freed up for items that are student outcomes focused?"

Then go to the next item. That's the approach. The first time you do this, it will take a long time to go item by item. It's very common to discover that there are zero items that are student outcomes focused. That's not a problem. Future agenda evaluations like this will take less time and get easier. Unfortunately, figuring out how to economize doesn't get easier. For this, you will need to get incredibly aggressive about giving up "the way it has always been done". This evaluation will need to be repeated frequently for the first quarter; it generally takes at least that long before changes to the agenda become the new normal.