

# Effective Policy Leadership

## 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 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 Policy Exists

Policy is the written form of the community's prioritized vision and values. Whether the school board intends it or not, whenever it writes something down and adopts it, it is saying, "this is the prioritized vision and/or values of our community." The prioritized aspect of school board policy means that if everything is important, nothing is important. So effective school boards are judicious in the quantity of policy they choose to adopt.

Once policy is written down, however, this does not ensure that it is being implemented. So to fulfill on the intention of policy, it also needs to be regularly monitored for implementation and reviewed for relevance. When these don't happen -- routine monitoring and reviewing -- then the policy is no longer representing the community. In these moments, the school board is pretending to lead through policy when in reality it is not.

When all of these elements are in place, the board is demonstrating effective policy leadership and fulfilling the purpose of policy. ***School board policy exists to represent the prioritized, codified version of the community's vision and values.***

## Avoiding Ineffective Policy Leadership

Policy can be about literally anything -- whatever the board writes down and adopts is policy. This means it is very easy for the board to unintentionally damage the intention of school board policy. There are common ways that the school board no longer does its job of representing the prioritized vision and values of the community and common ways that the board fails at effective policy leadership. The school board fails to lead effectively through policy when:

- It adopts so many policies that none are any longer prioritized
  - To avoid this pitfall, effective school boards determine which policies are highest priority -- and in particular, which policies would be inappropriate for anyone other than the school board to adopt.
  - There are four areas of policy that no one else can appropriate adopt other than the school board: policies about the community's vision, policies about the community's values, policies about the board's relationship with itself/its members/its community, and policies about the board's relationship with its direct reports. Any policies that are not these -- and that are not legally required of the board to adopt -- can be delegated to the superintendent.
- It fails to monitor policy implementation in a timely fashion
  - Related to the first pitfall, when school boards adopt so many policies that they cannot monitor each of them during the term of a school board member, the the school board is failing at policy

leadership. If a school board member's term is four years, then the board as a whole should monitor progress relative to every single board policy during that four year period. When policy implementation is not monitored, policy gets ignored and no longer represents the vision and values of the community.

- Policies related to the community's vision should be monitored at least 4x per year. Policies related to the community's values should be monitored at least 1x per year. Policies related to the board's relationships should be monitored at least 1x per year.
- It fails to review policy relevance in a timely fashion
  - Also related to the quantity of policies adopted, the school board fails to lead through policy when it does not regularly review each policy for relevance.
  - As with policy monitoring, effective school boards review policies at least once during a school board member's term.
- It allows the administration to set policy outside of their expertise
  - No one represents the vision and values of the community other than the school board. So it would be entirely inappropriate for a school board to allow the administration to set the vision and values of the community. That job belongs to the school board and the school board alone.
  - Unfortunately, this is one of the most common leadership failures of school boards nationwide.
- It allows itself to set policy outside of its expertise
  - In the same way that the board's expertise is in representing the vision and values of the community, so it should never let the administration override its expertise, the board should also be mindful to delegate policy creation/ownership to whomever has the most expertise in that area OR at minimum, solicit the insights of those with expertise prior to setting policy in that area. The board is not an education expert, or a finance expert, or a legal expert, or a SPED expert, or a facilities expert, or any thing else. The school board is *the* expert in only one area: representing the vision and values of the community.

### **Demonstrating Effective Policy Leadership**

Whenever the board stops writing and adopting policy, the superintendent is explicitly authorized to interpret -- and potentially write additional policy -- from there. This additional policy is administrative policy because it was adopted by the superintendent and their team.

Effective school board policy will clearly and succinctly answer four questions: what is the community's vision (as expressed in Goals), what are the community's values (as expressed in Guardrails), what is the relationship between the school board and the employee(s) who report directly to the school board (Delegation), and what is the relationship between the school board and the community, the school board members, and the full board (Governing). Any policy that doesn't answer one of these four questions -- and that's not required by law to be adopted explicitly by the school board -- can be delegated to the superintendent and becomes Administrative Policy.

This is important to remember: the school board and the school board alone determines when school board policy ends and administrative policy begins.

A unique characteristic of these four areas of policy is that they require the content expertise of community representatives. Staff were not hired to represent the vision of the community, so staff should not be writing the Goals. Staff were not hired to represent the values of the community, so staff should not be writing the Guardrails. And staff were not hired to serve as school board members, so staff should not be creating the board's relationship with staff (Delegation), community, and itself (Governing). These four areas of policy require the school board's unique perspective and expertise and, as such, should be written by the board. Policy should be written by individuals whose role in the organization requires the specific content expertise

being considered in the policy. This is why the board writes the four sections of board policy, and staff writes other policy — even if it's policy that the board is legally required to adopt. Content expertise by the current role-holder matters when drafting effective policy.

Accordingly, these become the four sections of a new school board policy manual:

- Goals (board's direction to the Superintendent on the community's vision)
- Guardrails (board's guidance to the Superintendent on the community's values)
- Delegation (board's relationship with staff who directly report to the board)
- Governing (board's relationship and processes with community members, board members, and the board as a whole)

In the next two sections we'll look at the first two which describe the Board's expectations of the superintendent (Goals and Guardrails) and the latter two which describe the Board's expectations of itself (Delegation and Governing).

### **About the Board's 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 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 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 the vision and values of the community and the operations of the school system. This is part of how the school board creates the conditions for improving student outcomes.

### **About the Board's Delegation and Governing**

Just like individual leaders must effectively attend to their relationships to be effective as leaders, school boards must effectively attend to their relationships to be effective as school boards. Creating clear boundaries and expectations regarding relationships is an important step in that direction.

The school board will want to be very intentional in its definition of its relationship with any staff who report to the school board -- its lines of delegation. In most cases, this is only the superintendent. But some states allow for or require other staff to report to the school board. In such cases, those relationships require intentional definition as well. Common issues addressed in this section of policy include delegation, duty expectations, communication, and evaluation.

In addition, the school board must attend to its relationship with the community it represents and internally with the board members who make up the school board -- its means of governing. Common issues addressed in this section of policy include the board's role, board member roles, officer roles, committee roles, self evaluation, board meeting processes, and community engagement processes.

### **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 policy diet: to create 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.*

### **How Much Policy Is Good Policy?**

The way the community knows what a board values is by watching where it invests its time. If a board cares about something, then it should have a policy about it. And the school board further demonstrates caring when they are willing to invest time in the policy. So said differently, if the board is willing to invest time monitoring the policy at least once per year, then it cares sufficiently that it probably makes sense as a policy. If the board isn't willing to monitor the policy at least once per year, then the board should avoid creating a policy about it and instead delegate responsibility for that area to whomever will implement it (and let *them* create a policy for it if they want).

Having hundreds of pages of policy language often doesn't clarify what the board prioritizes; it typically obscures it. And does so usually while invading the areas of delegation from the school board to the superintendent. One solution to this is to contemplate a policy diet wherein the school board delegates all operational policy to the superintendent (as admin policy or admin procedures; whatever makes the most sense) and the school board only retains as board policy the most succinct version.

The traditional 1000 page board policy framework has benefits. Focus on a narrowly defined understanding of the vision and values of the community such that they can actually be monitored is not one of them.

### **Board Policy vs. Administrative Policy**

It's worth noting that since policy can be about almost anything, the line between what is better suited as board policy vs administrative policy is easily blurred. For this reason, the school board needs a few tests for what makes sense for it to own in policy and what does not.

Governance vs Administrative Expertise Test

The first test of whether policy should be owned by the board or by the superintendent is whether or not it requires the unique expertise that only the governing body provides: the vision and values of the community. As previously stated, there are four domains where this is true:

- The policy is articulating the highest priority vision of the community (Goals)
- The policy is articulating the highest priority values of the community (Guardrails)
- The policy is articulating the relationship between the board and its direct report(s) (Delegation)
- The policy is articulating the relationship between the board, board members, and community (Governing)

If none of those are true, then it fails the governance expertise test and, instead, requires administrative expertise -- which means it should be administrative policy instead of board policy. In cases where state law requires the board to adopt a policy that doesn't meet this test, the superintendent should still develop and be delegated full responsibility for the policy even though the board is legally required to adopt it into board policy.

As an example:

- "The percentage of kindergarten students who enter school ready on a multidimensional assessment will increase from W percentage on X date to Y percentage by Z date" could be board policy (Goal).
  - The assessments calendar, data collection protocols, and improvement plan templates the superintendent uses to drive toward the Goal could be the corresponding administrative policy.
- "The Superintendent will not propose major decisions to the Board without first having engaged students, parents, community, and staff" could be board policy (Guardrail).
  - The stakeholder outreach/engagement procedures used by central office before major proposals could be the corresponding administrative policy.

### The Ends vs Means Test

Board policy is about the end result that the community wants or the means that are *not* acceptable to the community along the way. Administrative policy is about the means to accomplish the ends, so long as they remain within acceptable boundaries. Board policy describes the ends/the what to accomplish, administrative policy describes the means/the how to accomplish. As an example:

- "The percentage of students reading on grade level by the end of third grade will increase from W on X date to Y by Z date" could be board policy (Goal).
  - "All early elementary teachers will use Program X for Y minutes daily" could be the corresponding administrative policy.
- "The superintendent will not allow school system practices that harm the environment" could be board policy (Guardrail).
  - "The district will purchase zero emissions vehicles" could be the corresponding administrative policy.

### The Accountability vs Responsibility Test

While the school board remains accountable for *absolutely everything* in a school system, it is responsible for very little. Accountability for the school system comes from the community and is vested in the school board by the community, so once the school board is accountable for everything that happens in a school system, it can never not be accountable. But the school board does actually do the work to educate children; it delegates that work to the superintendent. The moment it delegates, it retains accountability for the results of its delegation, but it is no longer responsible for taking the delegated actions. This is the distinction between accountability and responsibility. Accountability is about the results where responsibility is about the actions taken to achieve the results.

Board policy should focus on the items for which the board is both accountable **and** responsible. Administrative policy should focus on the items for which the board has delegated responsibility (typically to the superintendent). As an example:

- “The Board evaluates the Superintendent annually against the adopted Goals and Guardrails and delegates day-to-day operations to the Superintendent” could be board policy (Delegation).
  - The superintendent’s internal performance management cycle for cabinet and principals (timelines, instruments, evidence) could be the corresponding administrative policy.
- “The Board will reserve at least 50% of board meeting meeting time for goal-setting and monitoring” could be the board policy (Governing).
  - The agenda-development timeline and report templates the superintendent uses internally to honor the board’s expectations and to supply monitoring data could be the corresponding administrative policy.

When the board governs the operations (sets what should be administrative policy) instead of governing from the community’s vision and values (sets what should be board policy), strategy collapses into tactics, the distinction between accountability and responsibility becomes incoherent, the superintendent becomes an executor without authority, board meetings drift from purpose to trivia, and student outcomes become secondary to adult preferences.

The board feels busy and is probably politically popular, but it is no longer effective. Effective policy leadership requires restraint. The board must repeatedly ask, “is this potential policy about representing the vision and values of the community or is it about operating the school system?”

If the answer is the former, the board should craft board policy and set a plan for regularly monitoring and reviewing the policy. If the answer is the latter, the board should delegate the creation and implementation of the policy. This is not abdication, this is effective school board governance.