Board Involvement in Improvement Planning: Focus Group Summary Report

Background & Summary



Date: June 20, 2025
Facilitators: Erin Loften & Dan Jorgensen
Participants: CASB Board Members
Groups: Two Focus Groups (17 participants total, mostly rural, mix of district sizes and experience levels)

The two focus groups conducted with CASB board members highlighted that while school boards recognize the importance of Unified Improvement Plans (UIPs) as tools for driving student achievement and ensuring accountability, their direct involvement in the development, approval, and monitoring of these plans is often limited and inconsistent across districts. Many boards see their role primarily as one of approval or acknowledgment, relying heavily on superintendents and district leadership to oversee the planning and implementation. There was an expressed need for more accessible data presentations/resources, consistent processes, and better alignment with strategic plans to support board-level monitoring (see pages 3-5 for participant responses by question).

Board members also expressed a strong desire for additional training and clearer guidance on their statutory responsibilities related to UIPs, particularly in understanding the approval and monitoring processes. Additionally, challenges exist in recruiting members to serve on the District Accountability Committees (DACs). Also, varied district practices with the use of DACs present challenges to meaningful community engagement. Participants emphasized the need for practical, board-specific tools/training that can be delivered in-person, regionally, and through flexible, on-demand virtual formats.

Possible Next Steps:

- Develop targeted, foundational training for board members and DACs focused on statutory requirements, roles, and best practices.
- Create simple, replicable models for effective board engagement in the UIP process.
- Provide regionally tailored, in-person training and increase the availability of virtual resources (e.g., webinars, on-demand modules).
- Continue to strengthen partnerships between CDE and CASB to co-develop training and resources, ideally with board member input.
- Promote opportunities for boards to share best practices and engage in peer learning at CASB conferences and other collaborative events.

Requested Supports & Resources Identified from Feedback:

The focus groups helped identify resources that would help support board governance roles regarding improvement planning. Similarly, the feedback identified areas of future support. The table below provides a list of these supports/resources and recommended approaches to delivery to facilitate conversations between CASB, CDE, and School Boards regarding roles and optimal approaches to delivery.

Table 1. Focus Group Requested Supports/Resources

Topic	Support/Resource
UIP Board Role (Legal)	Foundational training for board members and DACs on statutory requirements, roles and practices related to UIPs
UIP Board Role (Legal)	Clear written guidance on board responsibilities in the UIP approval and monitoring process.
UIP Board Role (Governance)	Replicable 'model' resources for effective board engagement w/UIPs
UIP Board Literacy	Tools for aligning UIPs with strategic plans
DAC/BOE	Model Resources for establishing a strong BOE/DAC relationship
DAC/BOE	Guidance on board liaison roles with DACs
DAC/BOE	Recruitment/engagement strategies for DAC participation
Data	Templates or samples of effective data/goal monitoring tools for Boards
Data	Accessible presentations that illustrate complex data utilization for board use
Identified Delivery Preferences/Options	
Delivery	Co-developed training and resources with CASB input
Delivery	On-demand virtual resources (e.g., webinars, recorded modules)
Delivery	In-person, regionally tailored training opportunities
Delivery	Opportunities for peer learning and sharing of best practices (request for CASB events)
Delivery	Presentations from CDE at local board meetings/retreats

Summary of Responses by Question

Question 2: Purpose of Improvement Plans

Key Themes:

- Improvement plans are primarily about using data to drive continuous student achievement.
- They serve as a tool for accountability and continuous growth for schools and districts.

Notable Comments:

- Plans are intended to support continual improvement, guide decision-making, and hold schools and leadership accountable.

Question 3: Board's Role in Improvement Plans

Key Themes:

- Boards typically review, approve, or acknowledge improvement plans but are not deeply involved in the planning process.
- Boards are responsible for creating an environment for success and holding the superintendent accountable.
- Some Boards have formal approval processes; others simply acknowledge the plans.

Notable Comments:

- "Do board members even know what an improvement plan is? This doesn't really come to the board for conversation."

Question 4: Board Involvement in Approval Process

Key Themes:

- Board involvement varies widely:
    - Some boards conduct formal reviews and approvals.
    - Others only acknowledge the improvement plans without formal votes.
    - Boards tend to focus more on schools in Priority Improvement or Turnaround status.
    - Some boards use study sessions or liaisons to dive deeper into plans.

Notable Comments:

- "The cycle can get overwhelming; plans often fall between the cracks."
- "We trust and hope that the plans are being implemented."
- "Boards need clarity on what is required."

Question 5: Monitoring Improvement Efforts

Key Themes:

- Effective monitoring hinges on data literacy and regular updates.
- Boards rely heavily on the superintendent and leadership teams for data interpretation.
- Mobility of students can complicate data tracking.
- Frequent concern: Board members need simple, accessible presentations of complex data.

Notable Comments:

- "Data. That's it. And understanding the data."
- "Break the data down to a 5th-grade level for better community transparency."
- "Boards should monitor progress through the strategic plan and set expectations for the superintendent."

Question 6: Role of District Accountability Committees (DACs) and Stakeholders

Key Themes:

- DAC engagement and functionality vary significantly across districts.
- Common issues:
    - Low participation
    - Difficulty recruiting members
    - Limited understanding of DAC roles
- Stronger districts:
    - Use board liaisons to connect with DACs.
    - Provide DACs with focused tasks and structured onboarding.

Notable Comments:

- "We have had a hard time with engagement, especially in small communities."
- "Some DACs want to do board work without having to run for election."
- "At a systems level, our board doesn't get into the weeds; that's for the superintendent's accountability department."

Strengths/What's Going Well:

- Some districts have board liaisons effectively attending DAC/SAC meetings.
- Some boards have strategic plans that align improvement efforts.
- Study sessions allow deeper exploration outside of public board meetings.
- Boards that emphasize data presentation in accessible formats are seeing improved communication.

Challenges/Barriers:

- Inconsistent board involvement in approval and monitoring.
- Lack of clarity and training on board roles and statutory requirements.
- Low DAC and SAC participation and recruitment struggles.
- Time constraints: Improvement plans often fall off the radar due to competing priorities.
- Student mobility and small district staffing challenges complicate monitoring.

Question 7: Support Needed from CDE & CASB

Key Themes:

- Clear guidelines and training for boards and DACs on statutory responsibilities.
- Development of onboarding and 101-level training focused on roles, responsibilities, and required processes.
- Strong preference for:
    - In-person training
    - Regional or district presentations
    - Webinars and on-demand virtual resources
- Interest in sharing best practices from other districts.
- Presentations at the CASB Annual or Winter Conference.
- Increased collaboration opportunities with CDE.

Notable Comments:

- “Partner with CASB to create by-board-members-for-board-members training.”
- “Advertise that CDE is available to visit boards or attend retreats.”
- “It would be helpful to have CDE webinars that are accessible statewide.”

Exit Question: Final Reflections

Key Themes:

- Boards need clarity on their roles.
- Importance of accessible training and networking opportunities.
- Boards want to collaborate more intentionally with CDE and other districts.
- Strong desire for practical tools and models that can be tailored to their local contexts.