

THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD

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The Seven Characteristics of Professional Governance Boards

Board governance – how a board of education chooses to operate and govern itself and its school district – matters. It matters a lot. Simply put, the failure of a board of education to clearly and consciously determine issues of board governance will prevent it from leading its school district on issues of student achievement and staff performance.

Given the importance of professional school board governance, what does a professional governance board look like? Like successful schools and educators, successful professional boards of education appear in a variety of guises – large and small, partisan and non-partisan, experienced and new to the work. But among them they share certain essential beliefs and operating principles. These are the core elements upon which their work of governing their school district and themselves is based. What follows is a listing of the seven essential characteristics of a professional governance board.

Model desired behavior

The first job of every leadership position, individual or board, is to exemplify the qualities and behaviors that you expect of your organization and members. A professional governance board should use each meeting, each action, each opportunity, to communicate through its actions how a professional learning community should operate. Board of education meetings should be nothing less than the exemplar of professionalism for the entire school district.

Understand your leadership role and responsibilities

A professional governance boards has a clear understanding of that which it can and must do. This includes understanding not just what the board must do, but equally important, understanding that which the board should not do. Professional boards understand and embrace that their function is to lead the school district, not to manage or administrate it. Boards of education have an extremely limited capacity to manage a school district, and attempts to do so, however well meaning, always result in a poorly run school district. Worse, when boards seek to manage a school district, they abdicate their responsibility to lead the district, forfeiting the unique leadership role that only the board of education can assume. Professional governance boards learn to say “no” to the less important, so that they can say “yes” to the essential.

Focus and insist on real accountability

One of the most important functions of a board of education is to build into its work a rigorous and sustainable accountability system. This means an accountability system that informs all actors of what is important and ensures that the essential work of the school district is being performed well, as opposed to the more common “gotcha” system that many board members employ at meetings. Be clear about objectives, timelines and metrics, and then devote valuable board time to their review. A professional governance board understands that delegation is not abdication.

Board and its members are always prepared

Being a professional governance board is more than just showing up for meetings. It means real preparation on the part of members and the board itself. Members should be prepared for meetings, prepared to intelligently discuss issues, prepared to make decisions, and prepared to hold one another, and themselves, accountable. A professional governance board prepares by ensuring that it has in place clearly defined and understood processes and procedures, and established goals for its performance. Being a professional board of education involves homework, and membership entails more than just showing up.

Govern as one board

Deliberate in many voices, govern in one. This does not mean that a professional governance board is characterized by identical members, but by different individuals committed to the same values, working toward the same goals. Membership involves the willingness on the part of individuals to sacrifice and compromise to achieve its collective goals. A governance board cannot sustain itself and its organization if individual members seek to undermine decisions made by the whole.

Board and its members are characterized by high expectations

Successful boards of education have high expectations for its students, for the schools, but most of all, high expectations for itself. A professional governance board maintains the core belief that there is a possibility of real excellence for itself and its organization, and acts based on that belief. It refuses to accept the comfort of a status quo of “above average” in its drive to succeed.

Individual members assumes personal responsibility for success of board

Almost invariably, unsuccessful boards of education are characterized by individual members who are at odds with their board. Successful boards are made up of members who embrace the board’s common values and vision, and act to achieve them. Members of a professional governance board, universally, believe

that success for individual members can only exist in the context of the success of the board and the organization. Professional governance boards possess clarity of vision, and its members share clarity of purpose.

As a member of a board of education, the temptation is to race to deal with the latest issue confronting the school district. It is easy for a board to fill its calendar and agendas with the urgent and, in the process, ignore the essential. Take the time to build a professional governance board and both your board and school district will reap the benefits.