

## **THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD**

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### Building a Learning Organization

“Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought with ardor and attended to with diligence.”

- Abigail Adams.

A quick review of the mission statements and goals of boards of education finds frequent references to the importance and primacy of student learning. This is not surprising, as the vast majority of boards of education understand their work as supporting student learning. A commitment to creating a learning environment for students is commendable. Unfortunately, few governance boards turn this same focus on learning on themselves.

Given the importance of an effective governing board to a school district particularly in creating and reinforcing a district’s culture, a board’s commitment to its own education and learning is an essential element of its ability to build an organization characterized by student and staff learning. Simply put, an organization’s commitment and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members; particularly those members who serve as the models of the organization’s values - the members of its governing board.

In recent decades considerable research and writing has taken place concerning the concept of a “learning organization.” In a time of unprecedented technological, structural and conceptual change, the idea of a learning organization has been advanced as a way for organizations to ensure that they can keep pace with, if not anticipate and influence, rapid changes in their environment.

One author on this topic, Mike Pedler, has written that “a learning organization is an organization that facilitates the learning of all of its members and continually transforms itself.” This description of a learning organization seems remarkably well-suited to describe an effective board of education and school district - committed to staff and student learning, preparing them to be able to adapt to an ever-changing world.

For members of a governing board to build and lead a learning organization, as its leaders it must champion learning throughout the district, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. This means that the board of education must serve as a model of the district’s commitment to learning.

Think of how much more powerful the board’s message of professional development and learning is when the board itself is invested in its own learning and development. To summarize Peter Senge, a leader in the field of learning

organizations, 'if the board signals the importance of spending time on problem identification and discussion, knowledge acquisition and transfer, and post-action reflection - these activities are likely to flourish throughout the organization.' In the simplest of terms - how a governing board conducts itself matters, and matters a lot.

How can a board build and lead a learning organization? The best way is to start with itself, taking steps to institutionalize board member learning and create a board culture committed to learning. Some possible actions are creating a board committee focused on board development and member learning; require individual member professional development plans at the start of each year; create a board professional development library of key books, articles, and webcasts; and create a professional development calendar for board members.

These are just some suggestions of steps that boards can take to encourage board member learning and development. The real challenge is create an environment and culture that encourages, values and expects a commitment to board member learning. Board meetings characterized by informed discussions on complex issues; board member learning as part of the board's self-evaluation process; board retreats that focus on board learning and reflection; and scheduled time for joint professional development opportunities.

A learning board can provide a foundation for the building of a school district committed to learning and continuous improvement. A governing board with a commitment to learning is a board that is continually expanding its capacity to create the future; which is the job description of any good school district. But to build a learning organization we start at the top; we start with the governing board; we start with ourselves.