

## **THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD**

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### Why a Professional Governance Board?

I regularly utilize this space to write about the characteristics of a professional governance board and how a board of education can take steps to become such a board. But I have not yet addressed the fundamental question - why a board of education would invest the time and work necessary to become a professional governance board.

The decision to commit to being a professional governance board is not a simple or trivial one. It is not accomplished with one vote, or with one meeting, or by one member. It is a collective commitment, repeatedly made. Nor is it a decision without consequence, as the commitment required to function as a professional governance board is not insignificant, involving a collective focus, sustained effort and continual improvement.

Given the commitment and work required to create and sustain a professional governance board, it is understandable if board members ask whether functioning as a professional board is worth the effort. After all, board work and meetings already take up so much time and, realistically, how much can reasonably be asked of a volunteer board of education?

This question then becomes, as it always does, what is the purpose of a board of education? As board members, what is it that we wish to accomplish; and what realistically can we expect our influence on our school district and students to be? In short, why did we choose to serve as a member of a board of education?

I suspect that for many board of education members, the reason for their service is to improve the education received by the children in their community. Fortunately, research has demonstrated that the work of boards of education can have a positive impact on the performance of school districts and student achievement. For example, a recent study conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that school districts that are more successful academically have board members who assign a high priority to improving student learning.

Perhaps one way to illustrate the importance and value of a functioning as a professional governance board is through a story. One day a woman came upon a man who was working very hard to chop down a large tree. The work was going very slowly, as the axe that the man was using was dull and glancing off the tree's trunk. The woman asked the man, "Why don't you sharpen your axe? The work would go easier." The man replied, "No time to sharpen the axe, I'm busy trying to chop down this tree."

And so it is with the work of a board of education. Every month, every meeting, the demands faced by boards of education can seem overwhelming. After all, given that meetings may already go into the late night or early morning, how can board members be asked to commit to the work necessary to function as a professional governance board? The response is the same as might be offered to the man who doesn't have time to sharpen his axe – you can't afford not to.

One benefit of functioning as a professional governance board is the ability to focus on that work which is most important to the school district. Instead of spending time on work that does not improve or impact student learning, or can be better performed at a level other than the board level, a professional governance board leverages the time and talents of its members by focusing on the work necessary to lead the school district. A professional government board chooses what is vital over what is immediate, sees the future and not just the present, and represents the greater good over the individual interest.

Just as it is not a good idea to attempt to chop down a large tree with a dull axe, allowing the ongoing demands of leading a public school district to crowd out the necessary commitment and focus required to become and function as a professional governance board is to favor the urgent over the important, and often to address neither. Working to become a professionally functioning board of education does not mean ignoring or foregoing the work of the board, but instead, means approaching this work with an enhanced focus and a collective resolve - confident in the understanding that by focusing on how the board itself operates, the board will be better able to lead school and student improvement. Understanding that a board's work is best accomplished with a sharpened edge.