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## "Why" Isn't Enough; Boards Also Need "How"

School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes. And the function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community. But the "Why" isn't enough to improve student outcomes without an effective "How".

Even though school boards have an inherent desire to see improvements in student outcomes, comprehensive analysis of hundreds of hours of school board meetings from across the nation reveals that few school boards invest a meaningful percentage of their time in behaviors that most correlate with improvements in student outcomes. Simply put, the design of most school board meetings and processes is focused on managing the adult inputs, not governing for student outcomes. In the absence of a coherent framework for what it means to "govern", school board members often view the school board as being one layer above management. But that is a flawed understanding of governance; in reality the proper alignment of the school board is one layer below community. This sounds like mere semantics, but the difference in mindset manifests in wildly divergent adult behaviors in the boardroom -- the board positioning itself as inward focused super manager of adult inputs rather than a community vision- and values-focused protector of student outcomes.

This clarifies why 100 years of school board orthodoxy is no longer adequate to protect the educational well-being of our students. When school boards approach "governing" the way it's always been done, they unintentionally create school systems where improvements in student outcomes occur either in spite of the school board, or not at all. This norm is deeply ingrained in school board culture nationwide and requires dramatic transformation in adult behavior. But change is often difficult -- particularly for public officials who are often punished for any significant change in direction from the status quo.

### How, Part I: Decision Making

As previously described, the board's first step is to get clear about the goals and guardrails that represent the community's vision and values respectively. Once a school board has adopted goals and guardrails, the school board now has a tool for evaluating any recommendations brought before the school board.

- Should we adopt the budget proposed by the superintendent? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent has demonstrated that it prioritizes accomplishment of the goals and adherence to the guardrails.
- Should we proceed with placing an item on the ballot for consideration? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent's implementation plan clearly shows how use of those funds will help accomplish the goals while honoring the guardrails.

- How will we evaluate the superintendent's performance? That's determined by the extent to which she made sufficient progress toward the goals while operating within the guardrails.

Once goals and guardrails are in place, every decision the school board confronts gets measured against the community's vision and values. It's a rarity that governance-level decisions won't connect back to either one of the goals or one of the guardrails (and such situations will more often than not relate to something the school board is required to do because of state legislation). In general, if it is operational in nature, isn't legislatively required, and isn't directly related to one of the goals or guardrails, the school board is well-served to delegate the matter to the superintendent so that the board is freed up to focus on monitoring student progress.

### How, Part II: Monitoring

While the function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community, ***the function of the superintendent is to implement the vision and values of the community*** as described to them by the school board via the goals and guardrails. The school board should not blindly trust that the superintendent's implementation of the goals is actually driving student performance improvements; it should trust, but verify.

Once goals and guardrails are established, the work of the school board shifts to monitoring progress to ensure that reality increasingly matches the goals and guardrails. School boards that truly desire to create the conditions for improvements in student outcomes invest at least 50% of their time each month into monitoring progress toward their goals for student outcomes.

This is not easy; changing adult behaviors requires effort to overcome institutional inertia. But with a framework, training, and coaching, school boards can change their adult behaviors in ways that most correlate with improvements in student outcomes. This is what it means to be intensely focused on improving student outcomes. This is what it means to engage in student outcomes focused governance.

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- Everything Has Changed... Except This
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