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Why School Systems & School Boards Exist

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. That is the only reason for which school systems exist. School systems do not exist to have great buildings, have happy parents, have balanced budgets, have satisfied teachers, provide student lunches, provide employment in the county/city, or anything else. Those are all means -- and incredibly important and valuable means at that -- but none of them are the ends; none of those are why we have school systems. They are all inputs, not outcomes. None of those are measures of what students know or are able to do. *School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes.*

An immediate challenge is that throughout the community there are many ideas about which student outcomes -- which measures of what students know and are able to do -- should be focused on (I refer to this as the community's "vision") and which means should/shouldn't be used to accomplish this (I refer to this as the community's "values"). A school system can't be effective if it's trying to pursue a myriad of incoherent visions while implementing a cacophony of conflicting values. So the decision was made to select a group of individuals who would collectively represent the community's vision and values. We refer to this group as a school board. *The function of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community.*

Goals & Guardrails
Even though the school board has far fewer members than the community as a whole -- typically around 5 to 9 members -- the school board members may still disagree on what the community's vision and values truly are. If school boards aren't intentional, they can start focusing on the wants and wishes of individual community members rather than the vision and value of the community as a whole. To resolve this and to create a way of holding the school system accountable, the school board as a whole adopts two special types of policy. It adopts policies that reflect the community's vision (I refer to these as *Goals*). And it adopts policies that describe the community values that must be protected while in pursuit of the goals (I refer to these as *Guardrails*).

Because the intention of Goals is to reveal the community's vision for its students' outcomes, Goals are only about student outcomes -- what the community wants its students to know and be able to do. Ideal goals will be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound), will describe what the community wants its students to know and/or be able to do, and will number between one and five (I generally recommend three). Goals describe what the

school system is trying to accomplish over the next three to five years. Examples of Goals include:

- The percentage of kindergarten students who enter kindergarten school-ready on a multidimensional assessment will increase from 21% on August 1, 2019 to 65% by August 1, 2024
- The percentage of graduates who are persisting in the second year of their post-secondary program will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of free and reduced lunch-eligible students in kindergarten through 2nd grade who are reading/writing on or above grade level on the district's summative assessment will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of students at underperforming schools who meet or exceed the state standard will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of males of color who graduate with an associate's degree will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z

The community will also have other things it values beyond the vision. These other items relate to what the adults are doing to cause the Goals to happen -- they are the inputs, not the outcomes. They are about the means, not the ends. I refer to the written version of these values as Guardrails. Ideally a school board will adopt one to five such overarching statements (I generally recommend three). Guardrails describe how the school system will avoid behaving -- what it won't do -- as it seeks to accomplish the goals. Examples of Guardrails include:

- The Superintendent will not allow underperforming campuses to have principals or teachers who rank in the bottom two quartiles of principal or teacher district-wide performance
- The Superintendent will not propose major decisions to the Board without first having engaged students, parents, community, and staff
- The Superintendent will not allow the number or percentage of students at underperforming campuses to remain the same or increase
- The Superintendent will not allow the inequitable treatment of students

The more clearly defined the school board's adopted Goals and Guardrails are, the easier it is for the school board to ensure alignment not only of the school board's work, but also of the superintendent's work (the function of the Superintendent is to *implement* the vision and values of the community once they have been defined by the school board). These are the first and most vital steps the school board can take to create the conditions for improving student outcomes.

Blog Posts:

- What Effect Are Our School Systems Having?
- Beware Junk Equity Audits/Plans
- Three Steps To Effective Action
- "Why" Isn't Enough; Boards Also Need "How"

- Why School Systems & School Boards Exist
- Everything Has Changed... Except This
- Not a time to fear; a time to adapt
- Ideas for Online Instruction
- Science of Early Learning
- School Boards Can Make A Difference!
- TEI + ACE Showing Improved Student Outcomes
- Outcome Goals, Education Policy, & Public Incentives
- I Love A Good Debate
- Childhood Experiences and Student Outcomes
- Students Deserve Better
- Privilege, Not A Right
- Science of Learning
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