**The Pros and Cons of Standing Board Committees**

**By Donald R. McAdams**

Standing committees. Legislative bodies have them, so do university boards of regents, nonprofit boards, religious boards and even corporate boards. Why shouldn’t school boards have them?

Indeed many school board authorities believe they should, and most school boards do. Yet standing committees can be problematic, and for one big reason: They tend to pull boards into management.

Consider the case for standing committees. Board committees can specialize in complex issues, review pending board decisions and think long term about the district’s direction. Surely this division of labor enables the board to more thoroughly understand, set direction and provide oversight. Is this not why other governing bodies have standing committees? Should not school boards use these best practices?

Maybe, maybe not. For one thing, school boards are unlike almost all other governing boards. Unlike legislative bodies, school boards are small. Large bodies need standing committees to effectively process their work. Nonprofit boards, which are frequently quite large because they are primarily fundraising boards, are often, in effect, management boards. The administrative staff is small, and board committees raise money, plan and implement events and sometimes even keep the books. Different organizations have different needs.

**A Specific Lens**

School boards are unique. They are small. How can three or four standing committees each represent the whole? And if they don’t, is this not a recipe for bottlenecks? School boards meet frequently, sometimes twice a month, and in addition board members are expected to be out and about at public events. Will quality candidates seek election if board service is even more time-consuming? School boards operate at center stage in the political arena. Should not all board members have access to the same information at the same time?

Indeed some standing committees add value, but not all standing committees are the same. And this is the crux of the case. Most university boards of regents have standing committees, but they focus on matters such as long-range planning, fundraising and governmental affairs. They seldom oversee major business systems. The same is true of corporate standing committees. They focus on matters such as executive compensation or audit.

School board standing committees that focus on the entire district but see it through a specific lens can be useful and in some cases indispensable. Committees such as audit, policy or long-range planning set up the board for whole-systems analysis. But standing committees for the purpose of oversight of major operational areas, such as finance, personnel, curriculum, construction management, facilities maintenance or technology encourage micromanagement.

A standing personnel committee that meets monthly or even quarterly is almost inevitably drawn into management. Board members become friends of senior administrators, deeply knowledgeable on a wide array of personnel management issues and close observers of numerous management decisions. Most board members in this position will sooner or later begin to offer management advice.

Given the temptation of board members to insert themselves into the details of finance, personnel, procurement and construction management, why set up structures that encourage this behavior?

Management oversight is indeed a board responsibility. But this is best done by means of annual (or less frequent) board workshops that focus on systems integrity and performance metrics with follow-up annual superintendent reports on performance. Management oversight is not making management decisions. It is not even reviewing management decisions. It is guaranteeing systems integrity and reviewing the results of management decisions.

**Problematic Oversight**

Boards need to meet from time to time as a committee of the whole to establish procedures and protocols or to resolve conflicts. Ad hoc committees are powerful tools for looking into hot topics or preparing policy recommendations — always of course with the full participation of the superintendent or assigned staff. And standing committees that look at the entire district through a specific lens, either for planning or systemwide integrity purposes, make sense.

But standing committees for purposes of management oversight are usually problematic. Where there are no factions, where board members work together in trust and harmony, where all board members are invited to all committees, where micromanagement is well understood and avoided like the plague — in these circumstances standing board committees for management oversight might work, for a season.

However, issues come and go, politics rears its ugly head, and board elections can turn a board upside down. Why create a structure so likely to cause problems?

Why not instead give all board members access to all information at the same time, use workshops for deep learning and management oversight, enlist a committee of the whole for board-meeting agenda reviews, and hold crisp, focused board meetings for the transaction of the public’s business?

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