Welcoming Board Oversight

by DONALD R. McADAMS

A board of education member in an Atlanta-area school district demands information on the state of contract negotiations regarding the sale of surplus district property. Board members in a district near Houston demand the superintendent replace a deputy superintendent because she is not providing the strategic leadership they want.

Meanwhile, in one county system in Maryland, the board has created standing committees to oversee major functional areas of the district: the human resources committee interviews principal candidates and makes selections; the construction management committee selects subcontractors, chooses building materials and inspects construction sites.

No superintendent wants board member involvement in management, and consequently most superintendents are tempted to keep boards as far away from operations as possible. Yet this is a mistake. Inadequate board oversight puts the school district at risk and may put the superintendent’s career at risk. Oversight, done right, improves performance.

Two Extremes
Governance, at its heart, is mission, direction and oversight. Boards represent owners — that is why they exist. And boards, on behalf of owners, are responsible for defining purpose, setting direction, approving strategy and assuring performance. That is why mission and vision statements, goals and theories of action for change are the rightful prerogatives of school boards, and why oversight is a fundamental board responsibility.

Oversight is required to ensure safety, compliance in letter and spirit with all controlling laws, regulations and policies, fundamental fairness and mission integrity, and high performance in the district’s core business of teaching and learning. Oversight also is required to ensure financial health and the wise use of taxpayer and contributed dollars.

The work of overseeing financial and business systems is not easy, and few boards practice it effectively. Many hardly do it at all, simply responding with a lot of questions and blaming the superintendent when mismanagement, waste, budget shortfalls or something worse is uncovered. Other boards, in their zeal to oversee management, cross the line into management, either intermittently by digging deeply into operations as issues and their interests drive them, or routinely through standing board committees aligned with functional areas that become, in effect, management committees.
Both extremes are bad for the board and the superintendent. Inadequate oversight puts both at risk, for when bad things happen, both are accountable — the superintendent for poor management and the board for lack of oversight. More importantly, inadequate oversight deprives the superintendent of the checks and balances that promote systems integrity and results. Micromanagement, at the other extreme, contributes to dysfunctional management systems and robs the board of its most powerful governance tool — the power to hold the superintendent accountable for results.

Superintendents do not have to choose between these two extremes, but they expect too much if they wait for their boards to create effective oversight systems. Most boards don’t know how. Superintendents must take the lead, explaining to their boards what needs to be done and why and showing them how to do it.

A Proper Course
The starting place is to be clear on the difference between management and management oversight. Management is making decisions, decisions about what, where, when and by whom. Key words for managers include selecting, planning, organizing, delegating, motivating, communicating, controlling, evaluating and problem solving. The focus of oversight is integrity and results.

Boards practice effective oversight when they focus on financial and business systems, assuring themselves through board workshops that each of the district’s major systems has integrity, and assuring themselves through annual performance reports that each system is achieving the desired results.

Systems integrity means each major district system has the right mission, the resources and people with the right skill sets to accomplish the mission, and the internal checks and balances to make certain school district interests prevail over personal interests. Achieving results means reaching benchmark indicators of performance that measure productivity and other quality metrics.

Supporting this board focus on systems integrity and results is the external audit and the work of the internal auditor, who, though an employee of the district and part of the superintendent’s team, has a direct line of responsibility to the board. The board should approve the internal auditor’s job description and annual work plan and receive all internal audit reports. This is best done through a board audit committee.

The details of how all this work is done and the nuances involved cannot be fully covered in a short column, but the principles are clear. Superintendents should insist that boards keep away from management decisions. Micromanagement is not management oversight. But they should also insist that boards effectively oversee management by establishing formal processes that focus on integrity and results.

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