



Extending Influence

Through the Governance Core

It's amazing to discover how little has been written about school system governance and the roles of trustees and superintendents as partners in reform at the district and state levels. We consider this to be a squandered opportunity as schools fail to progress in the way they should and could.

In a few cases, relationships between board of education members and superintendents are plagued by degrees of mutual conflict that inevitably render the school district ineffective, resulting in superintendent churn.

In many more cases, the district drifts along without dramatic events in governance but with limited progress on student growth. Nothing is more damning than the faint praise from a superintendent who states, "My board is great. They leave me alone."

A Pair of Notables

We wrote the book *The Governance Core* to place the spotlight on district governance, especially school communities where we found superintendent-trustee relationships to be strong and effective. We wanted to uncover and spell out the features of good governance and offer specific guidance for

Co-authors of a new book highlight the strategies of effective, long-term superintendents in their dealings with board members

**BY MICHAEL FULLAN
AND DAVIS CAMPBELL**



Michael Fullan, global leadership director at New Pedagogies for Deep Learning in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, studied superintendents who integrated governance with day-to-day actions.

how it could be improved in a way that would benefit everyone, especially all students and families.

We were drawn to the work of two California superintendents, Marc Johnson and Laura Schwalm, notably both long-serving. We readily note here the difficulty of getting superintendents in the early stages of their careers to talk publicly about how they relate to their trustees because of the real-time, public nature of the politics and personalities at play. Those with whom we talked and deemed to be on the right track covered much of the same ground that Johnson and Schwalm did. (See related story, page 19.)

The superintendents we studied took purposeful action to create trusting, cohesive relationships with their boards. The results, among other things, included much lower teacher turnover and greater student achievement.

Separating Politics

It helps to make the distinction between politics and governance. Politics is what happens around elections. It usually is partisan in nature. Governance is what should happen between elections. It consists of the day-to-day operation of the organization and should be for the benefit of all.

One of the key transitions for school board trustees is the transition from campaigning to governing. In the worst situations, politics carries over into daily administration, providing a constant distraction to the core business of the organization.

Governance differs from administration or curriculum and instruction. Instead, it is about the overall goals and direction of the district, its moral imperative and the main principles that guide the journey. Governance is a process for setting the direction of the organization, establishing the structure and ensuring financial and programmatic accountability. Generally, governance is about the *what* of the organization and administration is about the *how*.

If one cardinal rule of change management is emerging in system change, it is that direction must be jointly determined or otherwise treated as achieving unity of purpose. Effective superintendents work continuously at fostering unity of purpose with their boards of education, while simultaneously cultivating the same themes at all levels of the system.

Our vision is of a governance system, school board and superintendent working together as a cohesive, unified team with a common vision driven by a shared moral imperative. In essence, superintendents must take purposeful action in addressing governance, especially given the neglect of examining trustee-superintendent relationships.

Tenure as Causation?

We noticed the school districts that were most successful against the odds had superintendents with long tenures who had developed strong relationships with their boards. Were they just lucky? Is correlation, not causation, at work?

In some situations, a superintendent might get stuck with an impossible board or individual member. In such cases, it is possible to be a victim of bad luck. But such a situation is likely to be very much in the minority. Our main premise is that the vast majority of school board members are committed and dedicated to improving the public education system.

In the book, we feature five superintendents who were highly successful at integrating governance and day-to-day actions. All had great relationships with their school boards. What these leaders had in common — beyond at least

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A Pair of Model Leaders to Emulate

Two of the superintendents who best exemplify the ideals we express in *The Governance Core* are Marc Johnson and Laura Schwalm, now both retired. We profile their actions here about their relations with their respective school boards.

Marc Johnson

He served as superintendent of the Sanger Unified School District in Sanger, Calif., from 2003 to 2013 and was honored as National Superintendent of the Year in 2011.

In 2003, the teachers' union in Sanger sponsored a roadside billboard ad that blared "Welcome to the home of 400 unhappy teachers." A district with 11,000 students and 12 schools, Sanger was listed by the state the following year as the 98th lowest-performing district among more than 1,000 statewide. When Johnson retired in 2013 after 11 years as superintendent, the district had advanced to one of the highest-performing in California.

Johnson made a personal commitment to keep children in the forefront of every decision and deliberation — a theme he constantly reinforced with his board of education.

Johnson established a practice to ensure that, prior to any action, the board was fully engaged and informed. He always made sure the board knew

the *why* behind an initiative before they were asked for approval. In the case of any doubts being raised, Johnson always hit the pause button and re-worked the plan.

He made it a point to engage the board in the work of the district. Throughout the school year, the district held structured school visits for the trustees. They were designed as a learning tool to show the board how the programs they approved with financial backing were being used to benefit students in the schools.

Johnson built in sit-down dinner meetings before every board meeting involving senior staff, and he organized interaction on key issues. Staff members and trustees were paired around specific issues at each meeting as a way to build relationships.

Most significantly, Johnson believed a superintendent always should be honest and upfront with members of the board. Some superintendents, in his view, would present only half the story and give the board a false perception of reality. "You must confront the ugly," he said.

Building relationships with the board was right up there with keeping children as the highest priority.

Laura Schwalm

The superintendent of the Garden Grove Unified School District in Anaheim, Calif., for 14 years before retiring in 2013, Schwalm managed a diverse school system with 48,000 students.

During her tenure, which ended in retirement in 2013, Schwalm's district was selected in 2004 as the winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education and was one of five finalists in both 2002 and 2003 for the coveted award honoring the most outstanding urban school system in America. The district



Laura Schwalm

was one of the state's lower performing in the 1990s.

Schwalm makes it clear that a major factor in her success could be attributed to a purposeful, highly proactive relationship with the school board. She worked closely with board members, making sure they owned the instructional program. She always tried to give the board credit for the major accomplishments of the district and ensured they knew she was supporting them, or as she told us, "watching their back."

While making sure each trustee was fully informed on district programs, Schwalm shared information in a way that would help them communicate with the community. She was conscious of their perspectives and of the pressures they felt as elected officials. She was always conscious of her internal moral compass.

Similar to Johnson, she saw herself working for the children as well as for the board, thus bringing the two agendas together.

— MICHAEL FULLAN AND DAVIS CAMPBELL



Marc Johnson



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10 years of tenure in highly complex, challenging districts — were these characteristics:

- ▶ They knew how to be purposeful;
- ▶ They knew how to establish and maintain an internal moral compass;
- ▶ They could focus, focus, focus;
- ▶ They maintained a districtwide coherence; and
- ▶ They showed they were great teachers and facilitators with the board and the district staff.

Hidden Treasures

We have seen that core governance is about fostering cohesive conditions for implementing the moral imperative of all children learning. Further, this agenda includes internal cohesion at the board level, at the district and school levels and between the two levels. This requires superintendents to build teams and to participate as learners and forgers of purpose.

The moral imperative is front and center throughout the system. We find ourselves speculating that such a preoccupation and its relentless pursuit brings out the best in all people, including trustees. We believe that no matter the initial reason for joining the board, commitment to a shared moral imperative and a well-led gover-

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nance system will build a strong foundation for sustainable excellence for all children.

We end with a seemingly simple, easy-to-overlook but exceedingly powerful human phenomenon: manner. High-performing superintendents understand that the best way for everyone to understand the importance of manner is to model the behavior and demeanor they expect from their trustees and staff (this doesn't mean that anger over injustices has no place).

Everyone is watching the superintendent, but trustees even more so. The slightest innuendo can become magnified. Superintendents, much as the best classroom teachers operate, are better off if they demonstrate respect for everyone. Indeed, respecting those who might not appear to be fitting in may lead to hidden treasures of ideas, attitudes and energies. ■

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