

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

Lessons About Effective School Board Governance From Napa Valley and San José Unified School Districts

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The many pressures facing school districts can easily overwhelm educators and distract from the core work of instruction and student learning. Locally elected school boards, the governing bodies responsible for setting district policy, can play an instrumental role in establishing and maintaining focus in a district's work. In today's increasingly polarized political environment, however, media attention to school boards tends to highlight dysfunction and disruption. As a counterpoint to those stories, two California districts offer examples of collaborative and productive approaches to governance that establish and maintain focus on their highest priorities. By exploring the cases of Napa Valley and San José Unified School Districts (NVUSD and SJUSD), we can better understand what the work of school boards entails. Through their example, we can observe ways in which governing teams of board members and superintendents ensure persistent attention to the issues that will enable students to experience success.

Understanding the Role of School Boards

School board candidates appear on the ballot of nearly every California voter, yet members of the general public—and even board candidates themselves—frequently misunderstand the roles and responsibilities of boards and the members

who make them up. School boards, elected to staggered, 4-year terms by voters within the boundaries of a district, govern most of the state's school districts. California Education Code identifies certain school board responsibilities, which include developing, passing, and adjudicating district policies; approving the district's budget; and hiring and evaluating the district's superintendent.

Important dynamics also shape the ways in which board members work together. Candidates for school board need not bring any prior knowledge or experience to their roles. Like many other elected officials, board members' power exists only as part of a collective, because decisions require a majority vote to pass. And the purview of a school board is indirect. Boards' official responsibilities deal with strategy and policy, not operations, and they oversee only a single employee: the superintendent. Successful boards must navigate these dynamics through deliberate actions that establish role clarity and enable healthy patterns of interaction and decision making.

Preparing Trustees to Succeed Through a Strategic Approach to Onboarding

Confusion and distraction often result when trustees misunderstand their roles. Individual board members

might pursue an issue of personal importance or interest to a subset of community members, but they may do so in a way that exceeds their authority as a trustee, sends mixed messages to educators in the system, or even undermines other improvement efforts already underway. In SJUSD and NVUSD, effective governance begins by educating and preparing new board members to succeed in their positions. Both districts have developed an approach to onboarding that extends beyond what most newly elected board members receive to prioritize both relationship building and knowledge development. Through this process, members of the governing team establish a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Moreover, by equipping board members with the knowledge and skills they need, the districts enable board members to govern more effectively in collaboration with their fellow trustees and on behalf of the students they serve.

Ensuring Focus Through a Commitment to District Priorities

Federal and state mandates, funding streams with programmatic and reporting requirements, resource constraints, and demands from vocal and well-organized members of the school community introduce pressures for school districts. Desires to ensure compliance or respond to requests raised during public board meetings can overwhelm district leaders. Too often, the result is system fragmentation: targeted activities planned and executed in isolation from one another, and an overloaded system in which educators struggle to accomplish any of their stated goals effectively. The governance teams in NVUSD and SJUSD have established a clear direction for their districts through the development of and commitment to a strategic plan. The teams in both districts actively use these plans to establish priorities and make decisions about actions to pursue and, just as importantly, requests they must

decline in order to maintain focus. Through their commitment to a clear and limited set of priorities, the districts orient their attention toward doing the things that matter most and doing them well.

Facilitating Effective Governance Through Commitment to Shared Norms

Productive governance in SJUSD and NVUSD involves not only a collective understanding of the district's vision and direction, but also a set of jointly held expectations for how the members of a governing team should interact with one another. By establishing and holding one another accountable for these shared norms, the superintendents and board members in both districts foster consistency in the ways they work together. Examples include a commitment to ensuring that board members are knowledgeable and well informed, that members of the governing team treat one another with respect, that the board operates as a collective body and not merely as a collection of individuals, and that board members embrace the responsibilities associated with their position. Through these standards of behavior, the governing teams in both districts reinforce their attention to overall goals and priorities and avoid many of the interpersonal struggles that can derail district improvement efforts.

Managing Effective Governance From the Superintendents' Chair

Although board policy helps set the direction for a district, the effectiveness of any decision fundamentally relies on the teachers, administrators, and support staff in the central office and at school sites. Efforts to foster system coherence require mutually supportive activities across strategies, departments, and people. The superintendent plays a vital role in



ensuring alignment across the system by bridging policy leadership from the board with operational leadership from the central office. In addition to their leadership of the onboarding process, the NVUSD and SJUSD superintendents foster these strong connections by prioritizing board management and dedicating their time and attention to governance. Proactive and effective communication, part of a broader effort to cultivate relationships with board members, is a crucial aspect of the superintendent role.

Navigating Controversy in the Community

In any large community, differences of opinion are inevitable. Disagreements can become especially intense in a school system, which many families see both as an anchor of their community and a reflection of their own values. These controversial issues can dominate public comment during board meetings and derail efforts to advance key district priorities. In SJUSD and NVUSD, board members have had the courage to make difficult decisions, confident that they are acting in the best interests of the district even when their votes are unpopular. Members of the governing teams have also demonstrated a commitment to engage with community members about their choices—both to solicit input as part of an informed decision-making process and to explain matters before and after the fact. Examples of two highly charged issues—school closures in NVUSD and police presence in SJUSD schools—illustrate ways in which the teams have navigated controversy and maintained focus in the process.

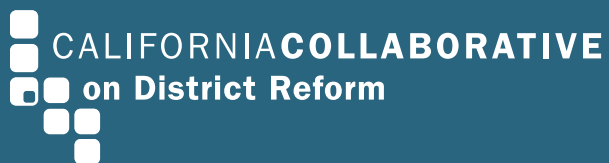
Weathering Threats to Productive Governance

School districts operate in a context that increasingly reflects our polarized political landscape, and school boards in some communities have become platforms for disruption and ideological grandstanding. Members of the governance teams in both districts expressed confidence in the strength of their culture and commitments to one another to withstand some degree of disruption. Nevertheless, any team is vulnerable to a movement strong enough to shift a board majority away from a collaborative orientation. It may therefore be important for school boards to demonstrate the value that comes from working together, disagreeing respectfully, and persistently acting in the best interests of students.

Prioritizing Governance to Ensure System Effectiveness

The approach to improvement in any district must respond to the history, strengths, and challenges in its community. In any context, however, the lessons gleaned from the SJUSD and NVUSD governing experiences can enhance a school board's effectiveness. Taken together, the examples of NVUSD and SJUSD underscore the lesson that governance is a continuing priority that requires constant attention and care. Governance is not merely an initial step before the “real work” can happen; governance itself is part of the real work that will enable other aspects of the system to thrive.





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