Board Committees as the Governing Engines

by Doug Eads

Chief executive officers in the proprietary and nonprofit sectors have found that well-designed board standing committees can serve as very effective governing engines, producing several important outcomes. This is true among boards of education as well.

Above all else, standing committees can divide the labor of governing into chewable chunks, enabling board members to delve into governing matters in greater detail than is possible at the full board level. As such, board members are better prepared for full board meetings, which ultimately improves the quality of board decision making.

In-depth committee work builds governing (not administrative) expertise among board members, while also enhancing their satisfaction and strengthening their feelings of ownership and commitment. Board decisions that are supported by detailed standing committee work are firmer because of the ownership that is built at the committee level.

Well-designed standing committees are actually one of the most effective safeguards you have as a superintendent against school board micro-management of district administrative and educational affairs because the committees focus your board’s attention on governing work.

Committees also can be a reliable vehicle for building and maintaining a close, positive and enduring board-executive partnership, primarily because committee meetings facilitate interaction at a deeper level than is possible at full board meetings. Committee sessions also provide a more casual forum that’s removed from the public scrutiny and higher pressures of the regular board business meeting.

Well-Oiled Bodies

Over the years we have learned some practical ways to ensure that standing committees really do function as powerful “governing engines” for your school board. The most important design feature of all is to ensure there are only two or three committees that are organized along broad governing lines, such as planning and development—which cuts across all of the school district’s educational programs and administrative operations. Organizing your board’s committees along broad governing lines satisfies a key principal of organizational design: Form must follow function.

The polar opposite approach is to make committees merely a reflection of the narrower educational and administrative functions of your school district organization—curriculum and instruction, buildings and grounds, personnel, and so on. This setup is notoriously ineffective from the governing standpoint as it invites micro-management. This “old-fashioned silo approach to committee structure inevitably leads to a board that is more of a high-level technical advisory body than a true governing entity. It also encourages board meddling in details better left to the superintendent and executives.

Another important design feature of an effective committee structure is requiring that items reach the full board agenda only through the standing committee. This includes informational briefings as well as action items. Reports should be presented at board meetings by committee chairs, not administrative staff.

Substantive Agendas

Over the past 20 years, I have seen a structure of two “meat and potatoes” standing committees work well in handling critical governing work: planning and development and performance oversight and evaluation.

The board’s planning and development committee is responsible for paying detailed attention to board involvement in making all strategic and operational planning decisions in academics, administration and finances, from values and vision updates at the most strategic to adoption of the annual budget at the most operational.
The planning and development committee would design and host the annual board-superintendent-executive team strategic planning retreat. This committee also should review and recommend board action on key planning products, such as the updated mission statement.

While the planning and development committee focuses on the next academic year and beyond, the performance oversight and evaluation committee focuses on what is happening now and what has happened in the past, paying close attention to monitoring educational, administrative and financial performance reports and reviewing longer-term evaluations of educational effectiveness.

In addition, this committee often serves as the board’s audit committee, reviewing and recommending action on the school district’s annual independent audit report. It also recommends action on operational items already provided for in the adopted budget, such as contract awards and faculty appointments.

Virtual Committees

Even if your school board is small—say 5 members or fewer—you still can apply the concepts underlying the committee structure without actually creating standing committees.

At the very least, your school board’s agenda can be divided into two segments: planning and development and performance oversight and evaluation. To further divide the governing labor without establishing committees, the board might meet twice monthly: once as a committee of the whole dealing with distinct agendas for planning and performance oversight and a second time in plenary session to conduct the board’s regular business meeting.

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FROM THE LEADER OF SCHOOL & DISTRICT JOBS

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 systemic 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

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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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Resources

How can the board use sub-committees to improve the way it does business?

March 08, 2010

There are two types of committees formed by the board:

1. Those that consist only of board members (usually called sub-committees of the board) although they may be attended by others and others may be included in discussions and information gathering; and

2. Those that are formed by the board but the membership consists of both board members and other non-board members, or even all non-board members only.

For the purpose of this answer, we are going to define "sub-committees" as being made up of board members only. Either of these types of committees can also be "standing" committees which exist in perpetuity, or "ad hoc" committees which exist for only the length of time specified in the motion the board makes when forming them.

Sub-committees can be very helpful in assisting the board in doing their work more efficiently and effectively. They work best with boards of seven or more members. Boards of five or fewer are difficult to subdivide into smaller committees. Boards using sub-committees must have a high level of trust among board members. If the members do not trust each other, and insist on redoing all the sub-committee work at the full board meeting, then there is no benefit to having work done in sub-committees.

The benefits of using sub-committees include:

- More thorough research and consideration of information.
- More time at the regular board meeting for regular business.
- Better dialogue between committee members and staff and community members on the specific topic.

The problems that may occur with the use of sub-committees include:

Increased staff time involved in preparing for the additional meetings. Boards that use sub-committees have more meetings overall.

- Discussion of high impact decisions may be held away from the full board. Some topics are better served if they are discussed by the full board at a regular board meeting.
- Sub-committees may assume responsibility for things not within board authority. Beware of micro management.
In order to promote more effective board work, and avoid the pitfalls listed above it is important that the purpose of the committee fits within the board’s governing role.

Suggested committees might be:

1. Board operations committee: This committee would be responsible for preparation of the meeting agendas, the superintendent’s annual evaluation, the board’s self evaluation, any board development planning, and maintenance of the board/superintendent working relationship as well as policy review and development.

2. Budget and planning committee: Responsible for working with the superintendent on preparation of long term goals, vision, mission, and strategic planning and the annual budget for recommendation to the board and district budget committee.

3. Monitoring and reporting committee: Works to design the performance reports that are brought to the board for regular review on all educational and building functions.

4. Community engagement and communications committee: Plans and implements the board role in the communications strategy with the district, clarifies the district’s public image, and maintains strong working relationships with community leaders.

It is not recommended to form committees that describe administrative management functions. For example: Personnel, Building Maintenance, and Extra Curricular activity oversight committees can be invitations to micro manage in areas which are not board work.

Ad hoc sub-committees (or "general committees") are those formed for a specific project for a specific period of time. Frequently boards will use ad hoc committees to research and report on recommendations for building additions/expansions, technology plans, or major changes to the district's operations. It is important that the scope of the work of the committee be narrowly and clearly defined by a set of detailed guidelines voted on by the board.

Small school boards may benefit from using committees of the whole. The board as a whole functions as the sub-committee. In essence a special board meeting is held as a work session to discuss a single topic in detail, and make a recommendation to be taken up for a vote at a future regular board meeting.

Finally, it is important to remember that all committees formed by the board and reporting to the board, regardless of who is on them and whether a quorum of board members is in attendance, must follow all public meetings requirements for meeting postings, accessibility and the recording of minutes.
Policy 0189 – School Board Committees

Purpose:

The purpose of this policy is to provide for the structure and the operation of committees or subcommittees of the school board.

Policy:

1. It is the policy of the school board to designate school board committees or subcommittees when it is determined that a committee process facilitates the mission of the school board.
2. A school board committee or subcommittee will be formed by the school board and will outline the duties and purpose of the committee or subcommittee.
3. A committee or subcommittee is advisory in nature and has only such authority as specified by the school board.
4. The school board will receive reports or recommendations from a committee or subcommittee for consideration. The school board, however, retains the right and has the duty to make all final decisions related to such reports or recommendations.
5. The school board reserves the right to limit, create, or abolish any committee, as it deems appropriate.
6. A committee of the school board will not appoint a subcommittee of that committee without the approval of the school board.
7. The superintendent or his/her designee shall be an ex officio member of all committees.

Appointment of Committees

1. The President nominates board members for a committee who are approved by majority vote of the board.
2. Committees shall have a total membership of three or fewer.
3. The school board will establish, by majority vote, any committee, the number of members, the term of the committee, term of the members, and the charge or mission of each such committee.
4. The committee will designate a chair whose role is to facilitate meetings and establish agendas.

Procedures for School Board Committees

1. A committee or subcommittee will act only within the guidelines and mission established for that committee by the school board.
2. Actions of a committee or subcommittee will be by majority vote and be consistent with the governing rules of the school board.
3. The committee or subcommittee will designate a secretary who will record the minutes or actions of the school board committee.
4. The power of a committee or subcommittee of the school board is advisory only and is limited to making recommendations to the school board.
5. A committee or subcommittee of the school board will clarify in any dealings with the public that its powers are only advisory to the school board.

Adopted: December 10, 2012
Amended: June 17, 2013