

The Board's Role

*What you can do
to redesign public
education from the
ground up*

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s we enter the second decade of the 21st century, school board members face new responsibilities with historic consequences. Almost every district faces significant long-term inadequacies in education funding, which means board members must do much

more than the traditional hiring and firing of the superintendent, setting major policy, and maintaining good relationships with the voters.

“Setting policy” will include much more than making decisions about buildings and budgets; board members will have a vital role in redesigning public education from the ground up. While those tasks remain essential, board members also must collaborate with superintendents, teachers, and school administrators to challenge long-held assumptions about leadership, teaching, and learning.

In a new monthly column in *American School Board Journal*, I will share real-world examples of how school board members are making a difference in helping their local communities and creating models from which other schools around the world can learn.

Initiative fatigue

To start, let's consider the challenge of the Law of Initiative Fatigue, the phenomenon that affects almost every educational system and organization. Board members with backgrounds in the business, government, and nonprofit sectors will recognize the symptoms, in which a variety of seeming good ideas compete for finite amounts of resources, time,

and leadership attention.

This story has no villains. Every new initiative begins with a champion who believes sincerely that the new schedule, curriculum, assessment, technology, teaching practice, leadership framework, plan, board policy, or other initiatives will have a beneficial impact on students. But in education, as in the business world, most new initiatives fail and the implementation rate is dismal.

To determine whether the Law of Initiative Fatigue affects your district, look at the initiatives discussed in your board minutes five years ago and ask how many of those are implemented today. As one initiative is stacked on top of another, a fixed or declining amount of resources is divided among more initiatives, resulting in each receiving a small amount of time, resources, emotional energy, and leadership attention.

The result is a merry-go-round of initiatives in which the “new” displaces the “old,” even if the new is intellectually indistinguishable from the old.

Fortunately, board members have a tool to confront the Law of Initiative Fatigue, and using it will help focus your attention and energy while building credibility with teachers, parents, and the community. Most important, this tool will help you focus scarce resources of time, money, and leadership attention in the right direction.

This tool is the implementation audit, which asks three essential questions:

- What is our initiative inventory?
- What is the range of implementation for each initiative?
- What is the relationship between implementation and student results?

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These questions may seem obvious, but the answers are subtle and elusive. Let's consider each one.

The initiative inventory

What is the initiative inventory? Having pursued this question in more than 2,000 schools, I have found two consistent themes: First, the central office believes initiatives are in process, but teachers and principals are unfamiliar with them. Second, teachers and principals pursue some initiatives with diligence, even though the central office believes they have been abandoned.

Districts are drowning in data, creating the illusion of greater knowledge about student performance than ever before. The fact is that most data programs give scant attention to what teachers and principals actually do.

Measuring test scores annually to learn about school performance is about as helpful as weighing students once a year to learn about their health. It's interesting data, but it does not tell board members anything about the underlying causes of achievement or health.

Conducting an initiative inventory gives board members and senior leaders an idea of the level of focus or fragmentation that the district faces.

Range of implementation

What is the range of implementation? Working with your senior leaders, create a scoring guide to demonstrate the range of implementation of any initiative. Almost every district claims to be engaged in some process that uses data to make better instructional and leadership decisions. Billions have been invested in data systems so that teachers and administrators have access.

The following range of actual implementation illustrates the variation that occurs in schools. Remember that each school spent the same money on technology, had the same administrative guidance, and received the same training on using data.

■ **Level 4:** Teams of teachers meet two to three times per week to focus on specific performance data. Each set of minutes from these team meetings reflects decisions by teachers and administrators for improved instruction and leadership, and there is evidence in each meeting that these decisions have led to improved student results. Evidence exists that students use available data to set goals and improve performance.

■ **Level 3:** Discussions of data are part of regularly

scheduled faculty meetings. After extensive seminars on the subject, some departments and grade levels can link their data analysis to improved instruction and leadership.

■ **Level 2:** Faculty and staff diligently attended the required training about data. In isolated instances, individual faculty members use the data to improve instructional decisions.

■ **Level 1:** The faculty and staff endured the training—and post charts and graphs about last year's student performance when they are visited by central office personnel. The administration is petrified that any reference to data will lead to a grievance.

The board is not responsible for the data analysis procedures of individual teachers and schools, but you certainly are responsible for answering deep policy questions. Among them: How can we justify spending the same money for data analysis for a "4" school as for a "1" school? If our central job is assessing leadership performance, what is different about the leaders of "4" schools and "1" schools? As a board, what responsibility do we bear in diverting administrators from becoming a "4" school; are we part of the system that generates new initiatives that compete for time, resources, and leadership attention?

This range of implementation, from 4 to 1, is not extreme. I have observed schools—with technology budgets equal to those of their counterparts—that have boxes of computers unopened, sophisticated classroom technology unused, and extensive professional development that was never applied. This is not an indictment of teachers and administrators, but an observation that it's not wise for a board to fund initiatives for which there is great initial enthusiasm but minimal follow-through.

The implementation/results relationship

What is the relationship between implementation and student results? This is the acid test for every national, state, and local policy. No board member, legislator, or member of Congress ever voted for an educational mandate because they thought it would hurt kids. Nevertheless, some policy requirements are inversely related to improved student achievement.

For example, much of the time and energy devoted to perfection in formatting school improvement plans is unrelated—indeed, inversely related—to student achievement gains. This is not a libertarian rant against all regulations. Some district and state requirements have a positive

impact; some don't. The board's role is to create a process that elevates evidence over untested claims.

Because every initiative begins with good intentions, it is important that the implementation audit does not become a witch hunt or a source of humiliation for the teachers and administrators who supported it. Simply by noticing that some initiatives are not implemented, you are not impugn- ing the professionalism of people who started them.

Instead, you are only noticing what we all know to be true—there are too many priorities and not enough time to attend to all of them. Moreover, every hypothetical link to student achievement is not supported by evidence. If edu- cators would ask the question that is the constant refrain of Harvard Professor Richard Elmore—"What is the evidence that you have to support this practice?"—we would be less defensive about initiatives that once sounded promising and now must be terminated.

After all, the easiest budget cuts to make are programs that no one uses and that have minimal effects on student results. Rather than cut 15 percent from every budget, boards and leaders should identify some programs for 100 percent cuts, and others for increases.

Fueling revenue, building capacity

As districts scramble to find additional revenue sources to make up for a declining tax base, one important competitive edge will be a body of evidence showing that money— whether from federal "Race to the Top" funds, foundations, or other sources—is being invested wisely.

In testing the integrity of accountability systems at the local and state level, grantmakers may ask, "Which pro- grams have you terminated in the past five years—not due to budget shortfalls, but because you evaluated them and found that they had an insufficient impact on student results?"

A clear and definitive response to that question is rare, perhaps because terminating a program exposes a flawed decision-making process by those who established it in the first place. The implementation audit process makes clear that some programs work and others don't; the difference is not that feckless leaders instigated the latter.

Almost every school district has some inadequate instructional programs. The only issue at hand is whether we learn from our successes and from our errors and apply that learning to better policy decisions in a time of scarce resources.

Building capacity in tough times

Here is the acid test question for every policymaker and school leader: If there were no money and no mandates, would your latest initiatives continue?

The initiative graveyard is littered with programs for

which the answer to that question was "No." If continuing initiatives rely on a single dynamic personality or on funds for expensive externally provided training and licensing fees, then they will not survive when students need support the most, no matter how worthy they are. By contrast, ini- tiatives focused on practices—not programs and prod- ucts—do not require the leaders to have forceful personali- ties or abundant budgets.

Two examples illustrate the point. Wayne Township Metropolitan School District in Indianapolis, Ind., has main- tained the same district accountability system (for which it won *American School Board Journal's* Magna Award) for more than a decade, and through three changes of board leadership.

Norfolk, Va., has had two new superintendents and two new board chairs since it started its accountability system more than 10 years ago (which contributed to its winning the Council of Urban Boards of Education award and the Broad Prize for the best urban educational system), yet the profes- sional practices on which that accountability system was based remain intact.

One of the most important features of these account- ability systems is the annual "science fair" in which each school and central office department displays three-panel display boards similar to those used in student science fairs. On the first panel, the school displays relevant data. The second includes the specific professional practices associated with the data, while the third panel includes inferences and conclusions that the school or central office department drew.

This creates a learning system so that these systems, even in times of resource constraints, use internal expertise to learn from their successes and confront their challenges.

Board members were integral to the system's design, and today they regularly participate in the insight and learning that results. These public displays create a focus on what works and, as a result, schools and departments tend to winnow out programs that can't establish a clear relation- ship between professional practices and student results.

Because educational innovation is of interest to every school system, I hope *ASBJ* readers will join the dialogue. If you have success stories of 21st century innovation and would like to share them, or if you have stories of chal- lenges and lessons learned, send them to me. We will also post each of these articles as free, downloadable podcasts on the *ASBJ* website (www.asbj.com), so you can share useful ideas with your colleagues. ■

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