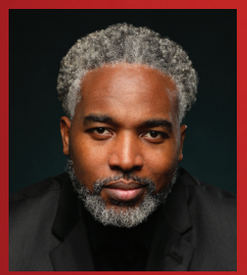
School systems nationwide are struggling to excel as they lurch from crisis to crisis—teacher shortages, school shootings, high turnover rates, ineffective discipline systems, and more. These things can pull the focus of school boards away from why school systems exist: to educate students.

Airick journey crabill has a track record of helping school systems improve student literacy, numeracy, and career- and college-readiness rates while simultaneously strengthening the school's financial and operational standing. *Great on Their Behalf* is your practical guide to igniting the transformation of your school board and enabling it to create the conditions for improving what students know and are able to do.

Step by step, the exercises in this book inspire board members to adopt a student-outcomes-focused mindset as they reevaluate their impact on those they serve. It challenges them to explore effective ways to focus on what students need. Then, it provides the necessary knowledge and skills for school boards to empower their students for success.



Improving student outcomes is airick journey (AJ) crabill's focus. He serves as Conservator at DeSoto, Texas ISD. Under AJ's guidance, the DeSoto district improved their F-rated performances in academics, finance, and governance to B ratings. He's Education Faculty at the Leadership Institute of Nevada and National Director of Governance at the Council of the Great City Schools. He served as Deputy Commissioner at the Texas Education Agency and, as Board Chair of Kansas City Public Schools, spearheaded reforms that doubled the percentage of literate and numerate students. Crabill is a recipient of the Education Commission of the State's James Bryant Conant Award.

BARCODE

LIONCREST PUBLISHING

Great on Their Behalf

airick journey crabill

WHY SCHOOL BOARDS FAIL,
HOW YOURS CAN BECOME EFFECTIVE

Great on Their Behalf

airick journey crabill

Foreword by Michael Casserly

Not everything I wanted to share fit easily into one book. And some materials change regularly, so a book did not make sense for them. Where these circumstances come up throughout the book, I provide links to additional information and opportunities, as written below. You will find them in sidebars on the pages.

FIND A COACH

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/coach to find nationally certified school board coaches.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/community to join a national conversation about effective school board governance.

GET MORE RESOURCES

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to get links to free implementation tools and to take free quizzes that test if you are ready to help your school board become more effective.

ADVANCE PRAISE

"Anyone with a real heart to serve students well on a local school board will find this book compelling and propelling. It makes crystal clear why we have been blind to the need and asleep at the wheel in school district after school district across the country."

—DONNA BAHORICH, TEXAS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, FORMER BOARD CHAIR

"AJ's commitment to working with school boards to embrace a student-outcome-focused governance framework is visionary, unwavering, and contagious! Without a doubt, 'Student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change.'"

—MARGO BELLAMY, ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT, BOARD PRESIDENT

"Good things happen by design, not by accident. The principles and concepts espoused by airick create systems that greatly increase positive student achievement outcomes."

—MICHAEL HINOJOSA, DALLAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, FORMER SUPERINTENDENT

"In Great on Their Behalf, AJ provides wise advice on improving school governance and does it clearly, directly, and profoundly. School governance leaders across our country should read it carefully and take it to heart."

—KIRSTEN BAESLER, NORTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION, STATE SUPERINTENDENT

"AJ Crabill is the authority on building effective school boards. I met Mr. Crabill when I was an elected school board member, and he revolutionized my thinking on both my role as an individual school board member and how to work as a collective board toward improving student outcomes. This book is the guide I wish I had when I was a school board member, and it should be required reading for each of the more than 90,000 school board members serving students throughout our country."

—ELISA HOFFMAN, FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL BOARD SCHOOL AND FORMER BOARD MEMBER OF THE CINCINNATI (OHIO) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"If all school board members could have AJ on their shoulders coaching them regularly, we would see marked improvement in student achievement across the nation. His guidance is practical, achievable, and will result in immediate results, if followed."

—ANDREA MESSINA, FLORIDA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

"Crabill's book provides School Board members a roadmap to impact change in school systems across America on behalf of students. The book is a must for all school board members—recently elected and veterans. America's children are counting on us!"

—JESUS F. JARA, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE CLARK COUNTY (NEVADA) SCHOOL DISTRICT

"AJ Crabill is already recognized as one of our country's greatest advocates, public speakers, and experts on public school governance. Now he has a masterpiece: Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective—a no-nonsense guide to characteristics of successful school boards along with the ups and downs of school board service in these challenging times. You can trust AJ's advice and counsel in person, and you can surely trust his recommendations in this book!"

—JOE GUILLEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NEW MEXICO SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

"Great on Their Behalf is a valuable resource for school boards who are serious about changing outcomes for kids. AJ Crabill has put forward an easy-to-read-and-follow process which explains the why and the how of improving school board governance. By using this resource, school boards can understand and unlock their power and potential to create positive impact for students."

—RICO MUNN, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE AURORA (COLORADO) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"At this point in time, when school board governance is under the spotlight and has become dominant in public opinion, AJ Crabill delivers this powerhouse. He expertly synthesizes current research and offers specific strategies and resources to ultimately benefit the students in our schools."

—DEBB OLIVER, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NEVADA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

"Serving on a school board is the toughest, most important, and most thankless act of public service. AJ Crabill speaks from his own valuable experience as a school board member and provides caring and courageous board members across the country who choose to serve with a practical guidebook on how to keep student outcomes as their North Star. In doing so, Crabill increases the likelihood that board members across the country deliver on their promises to provide the students in their care with the quality education they deserve."

—CHRIS BARBIC, PARTNER AT CITY FUND

"When it comes to educational leadership and school board governance, AJ Crabill is a force of nature. He couples an unrelenting insistence that leaders focus on what matters for kids with painstaking attention to the actions and data that matter. His vision is one that every school board member should study."

—FREDERICK HESS, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AT AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (AEI)

"Airick Journey Crabill is spot on when he says, 'student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change.' Fortunately, for adults genuinely determined to improve outcomes for students, this book is right on time! In America, our over 15,000 local school boards are ground zero for our collective failure as a country to serve our most vulnerable. Fortunately, they are also ground zero for change! Great on Their Behalf is a must-read for adults dedicated to revolutionary change for all of America's schools!"

—CURTIS VALENTINE, MEMBER OF THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY (MARYLAND) SCHOOL BOARD AND THE COUNCIL ON URBAN BOARDS OF EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE

"When I read the phrase, 'why school boards fail,' it triggered my self-deception, so I first rejected the idea before honestly considering whether or not I was part of failing children. In classic AJ fashion, this book provides a pathway for my own transformation so that my school board can be effective and, through us, our students can be successful. This book can both awaken us from our collective self-deception about school boards and provide us a path to improving student outcomes." #OurChildrenMatter

—RODNEY JORDAN, BOARD MEMBER OF THE NORFOLK (VIRGINIA) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"AJ is an amazing advocate of making school board governance effective and focusing on student outcomes. Working with AJ has allowed my mindset to shift. I know my behavior can have a negative or positive impact on our students. When adult behaviors change, so do our students."

—DWANA BRADLEY, CHAIR OF THE DES MOINES (IOWA) PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD

"There were several 'aha' moments during our retreat with AJ and Mike Casserly. The most startling was that Philadelphia's student achievement for students in both traditional and charter schools is among the lowest in the nation. We learned that historically, the District's governing body spent less than 10 percent of its time talking about student achievement. We also discovered that when we returned from state to local control as a new board of education, we struggled to even agree upon and articulate our mission: educating children.

"Since that retreat, our pivot to student-outcomes-focused governance and our laser focus on student achievement have been transformative. It is clear, if we don't change, nothing will change for our children."

—JOYCE WILKERSON, CHAIR OF THE PHILADELPHIA (PENNSYLVANIA) SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD

"AJ captures the practical and challenging conversations that must be had and actions that must be taken to hold any educational system accountable for improving student outcomes."

—DR. JEANNIE MEZA-CHAVEZ, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE SAN ELIZARIO (TEXAS) ISD

"In an absolutely compelling call to action, AJC offers school boards the script for effective governance: own a laser-like focus on that which should always matter the most and the sole reason why school systems exist: the improvement of student outcomes. AJC lays out the reality that the future of students relies upon effective school governance."

—JEFF COTTRILL, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE IDEA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"The most powerful and essential job for a school board is to provide a school district with clear direction towards expected student outcomes, regularly monitor progress towards goals, model a culture of accountability, support, and continuous improvement, and then let the professionals do the work they've been hired to do. Some school board members recognize this and some do not; very few know how. The student-outcomes-focused governance framework shows how. With AJ Crabill's guidance, our board has fully embraced the work of getting better at governance. Our students need us to be the best we can be. The stakes are incredibly high. The work is hard, but our board's sharpened focus and strengthened governance ability are leading to better results in the classroom. AJ's training has been a godsend."

—ELYSE DASHEW, CHAIR OF THE CHARLOTTE MECKLENBURG (NORTH CAROLINA) SCHOOLS BOARD

"When I was elected to my local school board, I was shocked at how little time the school board spent helping students know more. I had been an educator and was elected to try to help the students in my district get a better education. Instead, my board spent most of our time arguing over vendors or other adult issues. That changed when my school board decided to concentrate on student-outcomes governance and work with AJ Crabill. AJ has been instrumental in helping my school board change our meetings from spending the majority of our time arguing over vendors and adult issues, to spending half of our time focused on student outcomes. His book Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective will help you understand how your school board may not be as effective as it should be and give you the foundation to become a student-outcomes-focused school board. By using the detailed methods that AJ has spent years perfecting, your board can spend most of its time on the most important job of a school, which is educating students."

—JOHN CROISANT, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE TULSA (OKLAHOMA) PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD

"AJ Crabill is like a marriage counselor for local school governance—the person struggling or dysfunctional school boards call in to help them mend their ways. This book examines his approach, and its underlying philosophy: (1) schools exist to educate kids, not serve adult interests or agendas; (2) student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change; and (3) how school boards spend (and don't spend) their time matters."

—VLADIMIR KOGAN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

"While perhaps it does not sound particularly provocative to say, 'student outcomes don't change until the adult behaviors change,' in reality the statement is profound. School boards across the country are elected or appointed to serve as leaders of complex systems responsible for student outcomes. However, most of the activity in the board room does not reflect this responsibility. Agendas do not include substantial discussion about student outcomes, and the adult behavior associated with leading a system on behalf of students is often misaligned with this purpose.

"In his book, Great on Their Behalf, Airick Crabill documents the reasons that adult behaviors must change in order to improve student outcomes and provides the tools to transform the work of governance teams. Airick has worked with school boards and superintendents across the nation in assessing their governance practices, looking in the mirror at their behaviors, and creating a plan to transform their behaviors and agendas to ensure that students succeed. The LBUSD Board of Education and I have greatly benefitted from the tools that you will find in Great on Their Behalf—tools that form a roadmap for a governance team to use in gaining focus, creating goals, and aligning adult behavior to the student outcomes that are desired in the system.

If you believe that your students deserve for you to be great on their behalf, this is a must-read!"

—DR. JILL A. BAKER, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE LONG BEACH (CALIFORNIA) UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

"AJ Crabill is an advocate for students. In Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective, AJ reminds us that school systems exist to improve student outcomes. Adult behavior reflects whether improving student outcomes is the focus of your learning organization. This is a must-read for school board members, superintendents, and anyone who wants students to succeed."

—VERONICA VIJIL, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE FABENS (TEXAS) ISD

"AJ has been one of the best resources in my personal 'cabinet' of education advocates. He has helped me to develop as a leader and remain focused on my why—our students! His passion for helping to shift the mindset in the education space to one of true accountability for student outcomes is inspiring. I look forward to working with him and continuing to learn from him for years to come!"

—FELICIA ORTIZ, PRESIDENT OF THE NEVADA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

"AJ gives it to you straight, no chaser. Student outcomes won't change until there is a change in adult behavior. Adult behavior won't change until YOU become the genesis for that change. Great on Their Behalf gives you the background, framework, and mindset necessary to lead this shift in your governance structure with confidence. It challenges you and the stories you've been telling yourself; it shifts you from a place of worry and despair to a place of hope, empowerment, and action. The work isn't easy, but it's worth it."

—ARETTA L. BALDON, VICE CHAIR OF THE ATLANTA (GEORGIA) PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD

"Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective is a must-read for school board members far and wide. Serving on school boards is a thankless job that often leads to very little knowledge or training on how to effectively govern with a focus on student outcomes. This book is a stepping stone for board members to lead in a way that puts student success before the needs and desires of adults."

—DEVON L. TALIAFERRO, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE PITTSBURGH (PENNSYLVANIA) PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD

"If you really are concerned about your school district's student outcomes, have your school board read this book! Both sobering and enlightening, it offers practical exercises to structure your board's actions and meetings to better focus on improving student outcomes. Written by Council of Great Cities Board coach, AJ Crabill, this book will help even the most dysfunctional board to embrace the idea that student outcomes won't change until behaviors do!"

—JERI ROBINSON, SCHOOL COMMITTEE CHAIR OF THE BOSTON (MASSACHUSETTS) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"AJ provided the San Francisco School Board with invaluable insights and perspectives that enabled us to refocus on our commitment for improving student outcomes. AJ's coaching provides groups with the guidance they need to move past obstacles for more effective results."

—JENNY LAM, SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, BOARD PRESIDENT

"Public education has the potential to be a massive lever for equity in our society. Unfortunately, too often, that potential is not realized, and our students are the ones who suffer for it. Crabill's clear thinking—realized here as clear writing—cuts to the core of the issue and provides a focused, practical plan for school boards to focus their mindsets and align their actions around student outcomes so all our students have the best chance to succeed in our schools and in their lives."

—SENDHIL REVULURI, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE CHICAGO (ILLINOIS) PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD OF EDUCATION

"AJ is an expert leader in training school board members on how to be effective. This is a must-read for any school board member or those supporting school board members. Whether a novice or a veteran, governance focused on the outcomes of students will be a game-changer for your students."

—JUDITH CRUZ, CHAIR OF THE HOUSTON (TEXAS) INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES

GREAT ON THEIR BEHALF

WHY SCHOOL BOARDS FAIL,
HOW YOURS CAN BECOME EFFECTIVE

Great on **Their** Behalf

airick journey crabill

GREAT ON THEIR BEHALF
Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective

FIRST EDITION

ISBN 978-1-5445-3487-9 *Hardcover*
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This book is dedicated (1) to the students who depend on school systems to be their bridge to a greater future, and (2) to the former students who weren't fully provided such access. May they all use this book to lead the schools of today to provide our students with what they deserve tomorrow.

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STEP THREE: MONITOR PROGRESS

STEP FOUR: ALIGN RESOURCES

STEP FIVE: COMMUNICATE RESULTS

FOREWORD

—MICHAEL CASSERLY
COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CITY SCHOOLS

If America's public schools are to improve—and improve academically beyond what they were before the pandemic—then its school boards will need to rethink themselves and play a more prominent leadership role in enhancing student outcomes. This book shows why that is important, and more crucially, it shows how it can be accomplished based on years of careful research, practical experience, and work with boards across the country that are making it happen.

Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective is grounded in the premise that student outcomes do not change until adult behaviors change. Most critically, the book is bejeweled with numerous examples of how school boards stray from that premise and let down the children they were entrusted to serve. And it provides generous illustrations of what happens when school boards make student attainment the center of their work.

This groundbreaking new book also provides the missing ingredient in the reform of America's public schools. Up until now, advocates and critics alike have thought of educational reform as being built on five main pillars: high standards, quality instruction, aligned assessments, accountability for results, and capacity building. In this book, AJ Crabill adds another: school board governance.

Crabill effectively calls the question: if the purpose of public schools—any school for that matter—is to educate, why do the people who govern them spend so little time talking about and monitoring how well students are learning? What good are standards, assessments, accountability, and professional development if no one in authority is asking about the children and how they are doing?

The lack of parental confidence in public education, at least in some quarters, emerges in part from the fact that the public so rarely sees its boards of education talking about whether the children are learning what they need to be successful in life. I suspect that both conservatives and liberals could agree on this.

The latest results from the Nation's Report Card indicate that public schools across the nation have lost over the last three years much of the considerable progress they had made through 2019.[1] If we are to recapture the futures for our students and move beyond where we were before the pandemic, then all elements of our national, state, and local schooling will have to be enlisted. School boards cannot sit this one out.

1 https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/

My forty-five years in urban education, thirty of it leading the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), the nation's primary coalition of urban public school districts, tells me that our public schools can make up the lost ground; they have done it before—if our boards will follow the guidance in Crabill's new work.

This book not only lays out the arguments for boards taking a more active role in overseeing student achievement, but it also gives the reader practical tools that boards can use in turning around what they are focused on and why. School district superintendents and other administrators will welcome the guidance too because it affirms why they got into the education space in the first place.

Great on Their Behalf pulls all the reform pieces together with school boards and the students they serve at the center. What could be more important in improving our schools and strengthening the bedrock of our democracy?

INTRODUCTION

HARD CHOICES

I could tell something was wrong when I picked up Josh from school a few days into the start of his ninth-grade year. We had been matched through Big Brothers Big Sisters for several years now, so I could typically read his energy. Even without our connection, however, I would have noticed his sullen mood.

When I asked if he was OK, he complained that he wasn't able to take any advanced placement (AP) courses. As a current school board member at the time, I knew better and corrected him. "When we adopted the budget, we ensured that any student who wanted to take AP courses would be able to do so."

He gave me a look that appeared to be a mix of annoyance and disappointment and shook his head. "Even though the school can hold more than fifteen hundred students," he explained, "our average attendance is less than five hundred, so there aren't enough students signed up to take the courses I wanted. So no,

Mr. School Board Member," he added in a frustrated tone, "I can't take whichever AP courses I want. I can't take any at all."

I sat there dumbfounded. If only one student signed up for an AP course, then we wouldn't offer that course at that school; there's a minimum number of student sign-ups required. We didn't have the technology options we have today. If the enrollment or daily attendance at the school were so low that there weren't enough students signing up, then the few students who wanted those classes simply missed out.

As school populations dropped, previous school boards should have responded by either finding ways to increase enrollment or reducing the number of schools—either strategy would have led to there being enough students at any school to ensure access to AP courses. But because schools are politically challenging to close, given the impact on adults and students, as enrollment declined, decades worth of school boards had failed to do their duty to properly govern the school system; they had failed to make the hard choices. Now, as a direct result, the school system sat at 50 percent occupancy, far less than the ideal 85 percent needed to ensure access to advanced coursework for all of the students who wanted it.

The net result of Josh's revelation to me was this: the school board was keeping the doors of buildings open for adults at the cost of closing the doors of opportunity for our students.

There will always be difficult trade-offs in school system leadership. That's a given. What is in question is whose needs will be at the center of the school board's decision-making processes. When school boards center adult wants and adult preferences above all else, children suffer. When school boards refuse to

make the hard choices that improvements in student outcomes require, children don't experience educational justice. But it's also the case that when school boards become intensely focused on improving student outcomes, they can create the conditions for incredible improvements in student outcomes.

I know school boards have such an amazing power, because I've had the privilege of serving on and with school boards that have made the transition from failure to effectiveness, and because I've had the joy of serving as a school board coach for hundreds of school board members across the nation. I've seen what's possible for their students when they implement the work—work introduced through the Effective School Boards workshops my team facilitates and described in the pages of this book. *Every* challenge a school board faces can be addressed through becoming intensely focused on improving student outcomes.

In Josh's case, the community's vision that we codified into Goals—which included improving our graduates' college readiness—was hollow talk if we didn't do what was necessary to accomplish the community's vision. So, galvanized in part by that conversation with Josh, I supported the superintendent's strategy for freeing up the resources to accomplish the goals; I voted to close schools. It was a difficult decision and was certainly not what I ever expected to do when I ran for the school board. I hated making that decision—hated feeling like I had to pay the price for the failures of previous school boards to take action on behalf of the students they were sworn to serve. But we voted to approve that plan because we were committed to what was possible for our students through doing so.

In the decade following that difficult vote, the school system

made the critical investments in student outcomes that the school board promised. Our students and educators did the hard work to improve student outcomes, but now their efforts were aided and enabled by the school board's work, not undermined by it. We saw literacy and numeracy rates more than double in the first few years, and graduation rates increase by more than fifteen percentage points. We experienced an ever-increasing percentage of our students graduating with AP credit, international baccalaureate (IB) credit, and collegiate dual credit. And then a school district that had been without full accreditation for decades finally gained it from the state. Of course, of particular importance to me, Josh was able to participate in dual-credit courses. Even though he earned no collegiate dual credits his freshmen year, he went on to graduate high school having already earned his associate's degree!

KNOWLEDGE, SKILL, AND MINDSET

School board members and school system leaders are very hard-working individuals who are often highly motivated to improve outcomes for their students and their communities. School board members tend to be intelligent, ambitious, personable self-starters who dedicate their time, talent, and treasure to helping achieve greater equality in education for disadvantaged students. These leaders choose to serve on their school board because they want to make a difference.

Wanting to make a difference, however, is not enough. The moral of Josh's story isn't that closing schools solves every problem; that's foolishness. The moral is that public education is vital—our nation will not long survive if our public school systems are not supported and uplifted on behalf of our nation's

children. In service of that, education leaders must be prepared to engage in whatever adult behavior change is necessary to improve student outcomes, even if it's difficult or unpopular. My stance that "student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change" suggests that adult behavior change is a powerful lever for improving student outcomes.

But changing adult behavior carries its own set of challenges. Such change is not effortlessly accomplished. In my coaching work, I've identified three key levers for inspiring changes in adult behavior: knowledge, skills, and mindset.

The first lever is knowledge. As people know more, they can do more. If my goal is to teach English, but I don't know anything about English, gaining knowledge about English will most certainly have an impact on the quality of my ability to teach English. While knowledge allows for changes in adult behavior, knowledge by itself is not enough to generate the magnitude of adult behavior change I intend. Knowledge is the smallest of the three key drivers: entirely necessary, but also entirely insufficient.

The second key driver of adult behavior change is skill. Skills are all about how we use the things we've learned. My new knowledge about English is good, and it inspires one set of adult behaviors as I teach my students. But add to that knowledge the skills around teaching English: give me pedagogy and instructional strategies about how to teach English and I can make even greater changes to my adult behaviors in the classroom. Skills are a strong driver of adult behavior change, but even still, without the third driver, they are insufficient.

The third key driver of adult behavior change I refer to as mind-

set. Mindset is all about our view of the world, the perspective through which we make meaning of the circumstances unfolding around us.

My senior year in high school, I was passed from English class to English class to English class until I finally ended up spending senior English each day in the assistant principal's office because all the English teachers had kicked me out of their classes. Many of my teachers had learned about my homeless status and my challenges at previous schools and had adopted the mindset that "he is trouble and he doesn't want to learn." During that same senior year, two of my teachers—Mrs. Murphy and Mr. Debarthe—had chosen a different mindset. In Mr. Debarthe's history class, chess club, Model UN club, and forensics competition, I excelled and went on to win state and regional awards. In Mrs. Murphy's economics class and Junior Achievement club, I excelled and went on to win the citywide small business competition. They adopted the view that "he wants to succeed and has the gifts to do so." This was not a fact that could be proven; this was an intentional choice to focus their mindset—their view of what was occurring around them—in an empowering way.

Inside a disempowering mindset, each day offers a series of excuses we rely on to relieve ourselves of being responsible for our children. Inside a disempowering mindset, the smallest foible can disrupt the easiest of objectives. But inside an empowering mindset, even the greatest of challenges—like the defensiveness and insecurities of an angry teen—become surmountable by our nation's legions of dedicated and talented educators.

JOURNEY TOWARD EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Professional school board behavior is not enough to improve student outcomes; *effective* school board behavior is required. Most school boards generally behave professionally: in a manner that allows the operations of the school system to be conducted. But professional behavior is not the same as effective behavior: behavior that creates the conditions for improvements in student outcomes. Instead, it is common that school boards are professionally ineffective: conducting the adult inputs-focused operations of the school system but not inspiring improvements in instructional quality that drive increases in what students know and are able to do. It is common that school boards are not student-outcomes-focused.

Unfortunately, circumstances are arrayed against school boards being effective. For example, most states and state laws focus on school boards being professional, on managing the adult inputs, but almost none of them focus on school boards being effective, on improving the student outcomes. There are a variety of common pitfalls that lead well-intentioned school boards to harm the very students they intend to benefit—and to be clear, having a "neutral" impact on students in need is the same as having a harmful impact. This book explores these challenges in Part I:

- **Chapter 1:** Knowledge-Based Failures—what are things school board members often don't know that could make a difference.
- **Chapter 2:** Skill-Based Failures—what are things school boards often don't do that could make a difference.
- **Chapter 3:** Mindset-Based Failures—what are harmful ways of seeing the world that school board members are, unfortunately, often encouraged to adopt.

Each of these chapters addresses both the common school board failures AND ways that you can diagnose and address them.

Avoiding failure is important but it only prevents failure; it doesn't cause effectiveness. It paves the way for effectiveness but doesn't create it. After avoiding these failures, to be effective, school board members must engage in a never-ending continuous improvement process. This five-step, chronological process—covered in Part II—must start within:

- **Step One—Focus Mindset:** adopt a way of viewing the world that inspires effective governance behavior.
  - To Focus Mindset requires that the school board leads from the stance that school systems only exist to improve student outcomes, that student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change, starting with the school board, and that school boards exist to represent the vision and values of the community. Inside of these views of the world, the school board becomes so intensely focused on improving student outcomes by changing its own behavior that it becomes impossible for the school board to be distracted by unaligned adult inputs, serve an interest that is not the community's, or be seduced into creating a culture of blame. By definition, if a school board is not engaged in continuous improvement routines or spends its time blaming anyone for lower-than-promised student performance, then the school board is not doing the work to Focus Mindset.

Only within the context of a student-outcomes-focused mindset do subsequent steps have the full potency needed to improve student outcomes. Then the school board must acquire the

knowledge and skill to implement four additional behaviors, listed in order of implementation as follows.

- **Step Two—Clarify Priorities:** set the school system's priorities based on the community's vision and values.
  - To Clarify Priorities requires that the school board listen for the community's vision for what students should know and be able to do, listen for the community's nonnegotiable values that must be honored while in pursuit of the vision. Then the school board writes down the vision in the form of SMART Goals[2] about student outcomes, and writes down the values in the form of Guardrails that are prohibitions on superintendent authority.[3] By definition, if the school board has not adopted one to five Goals and one to five Guardrails (we recommend three or fewer of each), and if the community does not experience a sense of ownership of the Goals and Guardrails, then the school board is not doing the work to Clarify Priorities.

- **Step Three—Monitor Progress:** monitor the school system's progress toward the priorities.
  - To Monitor Progress requires that the school board work collaboratively with the superintendent to develop a multiyear calendar that describes which data for the Goals and Guardrails will be discussed during which months, that the superintendent bring forward reports in accordance with the calendar, and that the school board invest at least 50 percent of its time each month

2 SMART Goals (Goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound) and will be fully explained in Chapter 7.

3 Capitalizing "Goals" and "Guardrails" in this book is intentional to emphasize how each has a specific use as defined by this book as opposed to a generalized use of goals and guardrails.

on having a conversation with the superintendent about what worked, what didn't work, and what's happening next. By definition, if the school board has not adopted a three- to five-year monitoring calendar, has not received monitoring reports from the superintendent, and isn't increasing the percentage of its time invested into progress monitoring up to a minimum of half of its total meeting minutes each month, then the school board is not doing the work to Monitor Progress.

- **Step Four—Align Resources:** ensure alignment of the school system's resources with the priorities.
  - To Align Resources requires that the school board minimize its time focused on anything that is not directly related to the Goals, the Guardrails, or legally required, and that when actions are required of the school board, those decisions only evaluate the extent to which the decision being made is aligned with the Goals and Guardrails. By definition, if the school board has not redesigned its meetings to focus at least 50 percent of its time on monitoring progress toward the Goals, and if the school board uses any criteria other than Goals and Guardrails to determine adoption of budgets, policies, superintendent evaluation, and nearly everything else that it votes on, then the school board is not doing the work to Align Resources.

- **Step Five—Communicate Results:** communicate the school system's results on the priorities back to the community.
  - To Communicate Results requires that the school board make school system operations transparent and observable, and that the school board regularly arrange time

for two-way conversations with the community about its vision and values, identify dates each year when it will report back to the community about progress toward the community-vision-aligned Goals and adherence to the community-values-aligned Guardrails, and provide training to the community regarding the school board's use of Goals and Guardrails to govern the school system on its behalf. By definition, if the school board has not adopted a community interaction calendar that includes listening session dates, training session dates, and reporting session dates, then the school board is not doing the work to Communicate Results.

Collectively, these five elements—Focus Mindset, Clarify Priorities, Monitor Progress, Align Resources, and Communicate Results—describe a basic continuous improvement cycle for a governance team. But basic is not synonymous with effortless. It's for this reason that school boards most often need a tremendous amount of support to migrate from being ineffective for the students they serve to becoming great on their behalf.

PART I

WHY SCHOOL BOARDS FAIL

CHAPTER 1

KNOWLEDGE-BASED FAILURES

FAILURE TO FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

When school boards can't tell the difference between the *means* of improving student outcomes and the *end result* of actually having improved student outcomes, effectiveness declines. Being able to differentiate between these ideas benefits from having a logic model based on inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Inputs are resources and activities invested in a particular program or strategy that are usually knowable at the beginning of a cycle and that are a measure of effort applied. In a school system, inputs are things like staff, books, programs, facilities, buses, and everything else that we invest resources in prior to the start of school.

Outputs are the result of a particular set of inputs that is usually knowable in the midst of a cycle and that is a measure of the implementation of the program or strategy. In a school system, outputs are things like formative assessment scores, interim assessment scores, benchmark results, grades, quarterly finan-

cials, and everything else that measures implementation of the inputs throughout the course of the school year.

Outcomes are the impact of the program or strategy that is usually knowable at the end of a cycle and that is a measure of the effect on the intended beneficiary. In a school system, outcomes are things like graduation rates, summative assessment scores, end-of-year audit results, end-of-year retention rates, and everything else that measures the final result of all the inputs and outputs at the end of the school year.

All inputs, outputs, and outcomes in a school system come in one of two varieties: adult or student. As an example, adult outcomes are results at the end of the school year that are measures of what adults know or are able to do. Student outcomes are results at the end of the school year that are measures of what students know and are able to do. School systems only exist for one reason: to improve student outcomes. Not for adult outcomes, not for adult inputs, not for student outputs. *School systems only exist to improve student outcomes.* All other activities should be in service of that sole reason for existing.

An example of a desired student outcome is having more students scoring three or better on their AP exams. That is a measure of what students know or are able to do by the end of the cycle; it's a student outcome. But the desired student outcomes don't simply occur. They are the result of inputs by staff that lead to outputs that then can lead to outcomes.

Outputs that help lead to the desired outcome might be the increase in the number/percentage of students enrolled in or on track in the AP courses. An input that might help lead to the

aforementioned output is making more seats available in AP courses. This is an input in that it's the investing of resources at the beginning of the school year. These might then lead to the outputs, which are measures of the fidelity of implementation of the input and that are knowable throughout the school year.

The school board that focuses its time on adult inputs to the exclusion of focusing time on student outcomes is a school board that, often unknowingly, sets its students up to fail. The first step in being able to focus on student outcomes is to actually know the difference between student outcomes and everything else.

ARE YOU READY?

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to take a free quiz that tests if you are ready to help your school board become more effective.

FAILURE TO FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

Another aspect of failure to focus is that school boards often operate in a manner that doesn't even attempt to make any outcomes the focus, let alone student outcomes. Most organizations' governing bodies have one dominant focus, one overriding emphasis that defines the body's "why" for existing. That "why" drives many other elements for how the governing body functions, from the way members are selected to daily decision-making. It is important to distinguish between the different types of governing bodies because it is common for school board members to have experience serving on other types of boards and mistakenly believe that their school board service will work the same way. A common belief is that having served on nonprofit boards or

having run small businesses or served as a city/county elected official provides analogous experiences from which school board members can draw and be highly effective. This commonly held belief is wildly inaccurate and can lead to school boards that don't function with a focus on student outcomes.

Four common areas of focus that school boards adopt, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are: founder-focused, contribution-focused, patronage-focused, and outcomes-focused. Whichever of these is the dominant focus for the school board often determines many other characteristics of the organization and of the school board itself.

FOUNDER-FOCUSED

On founder-focused governing bodies, a dominant and/or charismatic organization founder is still leading the organization either from a managerial role or a governance role. This focus drives other factors such as:

- **Member selection:** The founder guides the selection of governing body members.
- **Governance work:** Participation on the board is calibrated toward supporting the success of the founder with minimal distinction between managerial and governance duties.
- **Decision-making:** Organizational decision-making authority disproportionately resides with the founder.

How do you know whether or not a governing body is founder-focused?

- **Common organizational examples:** new single-site char-

ter schools, bootstrapped or angel-funded tech startups, megachurches, nonprofits that are the passion project of the founder.
- **Common behavioral evidence:** The governing body members refer to themselves as a "working board." There is not a SMART Goals–based annual evaluation of the founder's performance.
- **Disqualifying characteristics:** If the organization's founder is no longer involved with the organization in any way, the governing body is probably not founder-focused.

CONTRIBUTION-FOCUSED

On contribution-focused governing bodies, major funders are leading the organization either from a managerial role or a governance role. This focus drives other factors such as:

- **Member selection:** Lead funders guide the selection of governing body members.
- **Governance work:** Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward providing financial and operational support for the organization with some distinction between managerial and governance duties.
- **Decision-making:** Organizational decision-making authority disproportionately rests in the hands of the lead funders.

How do you know whether or not a governing body is contribution-focused?

- **Common organizational examples:** culture-focused nonprofits like symphonies and art museums, venture capital–funded tech startups, charter schools with one major funder, congregation-funded schools.

- **Common behavioral evidence:** The governing body has a minimum "give or get" policy for members. Being a governing body member confers significant social status.
- **Disqualifying characteristics:** If membership on the governing body doesn't require a large financial donation, the governing body is probably not contribution-focused.

PATRONAGE-FOCUSED

On patronage-focused governing bodies, individuals and/or organizations seeking to extract value from the organization exert influence over the managerial and governance processes. This focus drives other factors such as:

- **Member selection:** Beneficiary entities aggressively influence the selection of governing body members to ensure the selection of members who will honor patronage expectations.
- **Governance work:** Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward supporting the needs of the beneficiary entities.
- **Decision-making:** Organizational decision-making authority varies based on which vector—management or governance—can most reliably deliver benefits to the beneficiary entities.

How do you know whether or not a governing body is patronage-focused?

- **Common organizational examples:** state legislatures, city councils, corporation boards that have been the subject of hostile takeover, school systems where the school board is disproportionately supported by and/or beholden to organizations that have contracts with the school system.

- **Common behavioral evidence:** There is an entire industry of lobbyists being compensated to entice governing body members with the support of their patrons. The governing body has never adopted Goals.
- **Disqualifying characteristics:** If the organization is too small to employ a significant number of people, if the budget is too small to allow for significant redirection of funds, or if no external entities participate in the recruitment or selection of governing body members, the governing body is probably not patronage-focused.

OUTCOMES-FOCUSED

On outcomes-focused governing bodies, a narrowly and explicitly defined set of outcomes-oriented SMART Goals are adopted by governance and guide execution by management. This focus drives other factors such as:

- **Member selection:** Member selection can take many forms but to remain an outcomes-focused governing body for long, extensive training and coaching is required—particularly prior to selection.
- **Governance work:** Participation on the governing body is calibrated toward setting outcomes-oriented SMART Goals, monitoring progress toward the adopted Goals, and aligning organizational resources to accomplishment of the Goals.
- **Decision-making:** Organizational decision-making is bifurcated with selection of SMART Goals belonging to governance, and daily execution toward the SMART Goals belonging to management.

How do you know whether or not a governing body is outcomes-focused?

- **Common organizational examples:** purpose-focused corporate boards, patient health–focused hospitals, student learning–focused school boards, community-well-being-focused (when narrowly defined and measurable) social service boards, resident-well-being-focused (again, when narrowly defined and measurable) neighborhood association boards.
- **Common behavioral evidence:** The governing body has adopted SMART Goals that are focused on high-priority organizational outcomes. The governing body has a calendar for when it monitors progress toward its Goals and adheres to the calendar.
- **Disqualifying characteristics:** If the organization has not adopted outcomes-oriented SMART Goals and then invested at least 50 percent of the governing body's time during meetings into progress monitoring, the governing body is probably not outcomes-focused.

Sometimes a governing body may not demonstrate any of the aforementioned characteristics sufficiently enough to characterize it as any of these four types. In the cases where this is true, it generally suggests that the organization is entirely unmoored and that it has become a special case of a patronage board where the beneficiaries are the employees and governing body members. In these cases, the organization may exist only to provide employment for the staff and a sense of authority for the governing body members.

Unfortunately, this information—that different organizations

govern toward different foci—is rarely conveyed to new school board members. And even seasoned school board members can fail to notice, until presented with this information, that their board has slowly migrated away from being focused on the outcomes of its students to something else entirely.

TRAINED TO FAIL

In most states, school board and school system leaders are mandated to attend new or continuing education training programs each year. These programs are often "sit-and-get," boring, not practical, not research-based, and not focused on developing board members into student-outcomes-focused leaders. School board and school system leaders frequently learn little and feel their time has been wasted.

My team conducted an analysis of three year's worth of session offers at nationwide school board conferences to gain a better understanding of which topics were being addressed and by whom they were being delivered. What we expected to find was that the two school board behaviors most correlated with improvements in student outcomes—clarifying priorities and then monitoring progress—would be a dominant topic. After coding nearly nine hundred sessions, here is what we found instead:

NATIONWIDE SCHOOL BOARD CONFERENCE SESSIONS 2015–2017, SESSION TOPICS

Sessions Focused on Clarifying Priorities and/or Monitoring Progress	Sessions Not Focused on Clarifying Priorities and/or Monitoring Progress
3.78%	96.22%

This was a surprising finding until we conducted the analysis on who was leading the sessions. Then it became clearer why school board members were being trained to fail—trained to focus on adult inputs to the near total exclusion of any focus on student outcomes.

NATIONWIDE SCHOOL BOARD CONFERENCE SESSIONS 2015–2017, SESSION LEAD PRESENTERS

Lead Presenter	Percentage of Presentations
School Board Member	9.29%
Central Office-Based Staff	20.87%
School-Based Staff	3.21%
Students	0.46%
State Association Staff	12.16%
National Association Staff	6.65%
Keynote Speakers	3.33%
College/University Affiliated	3.10%
State/Federal Agency Staff	0.34%
Vendors	40.60%

Further interrogation of the data reveals that school board members and state school board association staff focus many of the sessions they lead on clarifying priorities and monitoring progress: –27.27 percent and 45.45 percent respectively. But given that collectively these two groups only represent just over 20 percent of the sessions available and that less than half of those sessions are likely to be focused on student outcomes, it's not surprising that school board members across the nation are not focused on student outcomes either. They are, in fact, being systematically trained to focus on adult inputs by the very

organizations that should be pushing for a focus on student outcomes. School board members are being trained to fail.

EXPECTED TO FAIL

One might hope that school board members are expected to focus on student outcomes—that the states in which school systems reside are not merely encouraging but are actively championing a focus on student outcomes. Sadly, this is not in evidence.

We conducted an analysis on school board training requirements nationwide, by state. The first stunning finding: most states don't even have training requirements unique to school board members. Sure, many of them have basic training expectations for all elected/appointed officials. These tend to focus on legal requirements like conflict of interest and open meetings. But most states do not require that school board members have any special training that prepares them for the unique challenge of serving school children.

SCHOOL BOARD TRAINING REQUIREMENTS BY STATE (AS OF MAY 2021)

States with Training Requirements Unique to School Board Members	States without Training Requirements Unique to School Board Members
Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia	Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming
Total: 25	Total: 25

You can probably guess where we went next: which states have trainings that are actually about clarifying priorities or monitoring progress—which states have training requirements that are actually about improving student outcomes? The answer is sobering.

STUDENT-OUTCOMES-FOCUSED SCHOOL BOARD TRAINING REQUIREMENTS BY STATE (AS OF MAY 2021)

States with Training Requirements Unique to School Board Members That Include a Student Outcomes Focus	States with Training Requirements Unique to School Board Members That Do Not Include a Student Outcomes Focus
Arkansas, Rhode Island, Texas, West Virginia	Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia
Total: 4	Total: 21

It is difficult to imagine a more vital role in our society than the education of our nation's children. For states to not expect school boards to be focused on student outcomes is the same thing as expecting them to fail.

There is one ray of hopefulness in this analysis and it comes from what I generally consider an incredibly unlikely source: the Texas legislature.

In 2017, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 1566, the first law of its kind in Texas declaring:

1. that school boards are responsible for improving student outcomes, and
2. that school board members should have three hours of training every other year regarding evaluation and improvement of student outcomes, and
3. that the state's department of education would be responsible for certifying individuals who were eligible to lead the three-hour course.

The first item, though seemingly logical, is exceedingly rare in state statutes nationwide; it is rarely communicated to school boards through law that their top priority is educating children. The second item seems normal enough, though sadly it's still one of only four such expectations nationwide. The third item, however, is of particular interest. Most states have no quality control mechanism for school board training. As such, many school board trainings are conducted by vendors using the training as a loss leader in order to continue growing their relationship with the school board. Expecting school board trainers—and even more preferably, school board coaches—to meet a minimum threshold is an important step forward.

DESIGNED TO FAIL

Finally, school boards often fail because the currently implemented design for school boards is likely to lead to failure. Here's what often happens:

1. In the absence of state requirements around student-outcomes-focused school board training, and in the absence of school board conferences providing a meaningful quantity of training that is student outcomes focused, it is common

that neither school board members nor potential school board members have any idea what a student outcome is or that it's central to the role.

2. Without this north star in place, school board members will most likely focus on whatever social media or interested parties are being most vocal about in the moment. This will almost always be some aspect of adult inputs. Books, buses, bands, athletic uniforms, facilities, which teacher, which coach, which principal, and the list goes on.
3. Because this is what school board members are focused on, this is what the community comes to believe is the role of the school board. So when the next person announces a run for the school board, they quickly are flooded by adults trying to convince them to focus on the adult input that is most important to them.
4. These new school board members come into the role believing that a focus on adult inputs is the job. These are well-intentioned people who want what's best for children. But they have been misled and, as board members, will almost certainly be mistrained.
5. And the cycle continues.

What we coach school boards to do instead is to pretrain rather than retrain. But if this pretraining does not take place, school board leaders should expect that retraining is very likely to fail. This whole system—the lack of training combined with the mistraining of board members—seems designed to fail.

These design failures are exacerbated by the democratic process, which, for all its merits, does not select for organizational competence or governance capacity. If it did, I would have never been elected. There's no scenario where, if you had lined up

every person in the city and picked out the top nine individuals to serve on the school board, I would have been picked. I wouldn't have made the top ninety. Or nine hundred. Questionable if I'd have made the top nine thousand. But I was selected, nevertheless, largely because I was blessed to have a ridiculously strong and competent campaign team (the campaign team was so powerfully staffed and the campaign so expertly executed—none of this due to my competence—that people routinely asked if I was campaigning for a US Senate seat) and because I had a decent reputation in the community. Neither of these factors would be the dominant selection criteria in a more rational system. What I knew about leading complex school systems or effective governance wouldn't have filled a thimble. But in a democracy, these characteristics hold sway.

The challenge is that these very characteristics often lead school board leaders to treat serving on the school board like an extended campaigning exercise rather than a governing activity. Board members commonly perch at the dais in board rooms across the nation and behave in ways that are appropriate on the campaign trail but not at the board table. The skills for effective campaigning are generally at odds with the skills for effective governing.

HOW TO DIAGNOSE AND ADDRESS KNOWLEDGE FAILURES

Diagnostic questions to ask include:

- Can school board members describe the difference between adult inputs and student outcomes?
- Have all of the board members completed mandatory state trainings?

- Have all of the board members completed additional training about the school board's role in improving student outcomes?
- If school board members have attended a conference recently, which sessions did they attend and what did they learn from each (if taxpayer dollars paid for school board members to attend a training or conference, it is appropriate to expect school board members to report on what they attended and what they learned, preferably in writing)?
- What training is available for parent leaders/teacher leaders/community leaders who might be interested in serving on the school board?

The various knowledge-based failures that lead to the misalignments described are curable. The easiest approach for individual school boards to implement is also one of the most effective: get a school board coach.

Unfortunately, many of these weaknesses are the result of system failures that are larger than individual school boards themselves. Addressing those challenges might involve systemic reforms such as:

- states requiring school board trainings that are focused on improving student outcomes—focused on teaching board members about the process of clarifying priorities and monitoring progress.
- school-board-serving organizations reviewing their conference offerings to ensure that at least 50 percent of their sessions are focused on clarifying priorities and monitoring progress.
- states creating legislative frameworks that align the inter-

ests of the adults in the boardroom with improvements for students in the classroom.
- automatic recall for school boards whenever student outcomes decline in growth beyond a certain threshold over a reasonable period of time.
- regional grade cards for school boards that are largely composed of student outcomes data.
- current student outcomes data being mandated to appear on school board ballots next to the incumbent's name.

Until these types of practices become commonplace, effective school board coaching is one of the strongest approaches to countering school board knowledge gaps that are harmful to student outcomes.

As mentioned in the introduction, knowledge gaps are just one of three different ways that school boards fail to make a difference in student outcomes. A second way is through skill-based failures, which we'll look at next.

CHAPTER 2

SKILL-BASED FAILURES

Knowledge is a driver of adult behavior change, but it is the smallest of the three levers. Once school board members have grown in what they know, they need to also grow in their ability to use that knowledge. When what a school board knows exceeds its understanding of how to implement that knowledge—when there's a skill gap—problems are likely to occur.

FAILURE TO WRITE STUDENT-OUTCOMES-FOCUSED GOALS

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. As such, Goals at the governance level should be about the next step the school system will take in the direction of improving student outcomes. This student-outcomes-focused approach to goal setting is frequently missed by school boards. This is partly because school board members often have experience with goal setting from a managerial perspective rather than from a governance perspective. One example of the intrusion of managerial behaviors into governance Goal setting was in a school system I've worked with that had adopted the following goals prior to inviting me to work with them:

ORIGINAL BOARD GOALS

Goal 1: Student Achievement. Our students' potential is limitless. The achievement and safety of our students will drive all of our decisions and we will invest in programs and initiatives that are proven to support all students in reaching their potential.

Goal 2: Transparency and Accessibility. Effective school governance requires the intentional inclusion of diverse populations and viewpoints in order to support and strengthen decision-making. All voices matter.

Goal 3: One System of Quality Schools. All of our students deserve access to quality schools. While the school board oversees district schools and charter schools differently, both types of schools exist to provide quality educational opportunities to all students. We will work to make sure that all children attending public schools—regardless of life circumstances, zip code, behavioral challenges, or disability—have access to great schools.

Goal 4: Financial Stability. In the end, none of our goals will be possible without balancing the ability to make additional investments while maintaining our financial stability. We will manage our financial resources prudently and seek to secure additional sustainable funding.

While these seem reasonable at first glance, a stronger read reveals that none of them are exclusively about student outcomes and none of them are SMART. This board knew that it needed Goals but its skillset for goal creation is derived from a managerial worldview. In managerial goal creation, goals are about the operational areas the organization wants to improve in; in this context, goals are about how staff get things done. This is completely appropriate for management teams. But it's entirely inappropriate for a governing team.

This phenomenon is incredibly common. Nationwide, most school boards have goals that look like these. The skills boards deploy are most often based on the lived experiences of the school board members. Everyone has a mental model for management because we've all been managed at some point. The failure here is not being able to act in a manner better suited to the governance role of school boards.

Governance-oriented Goals are about **why** the organization exists. Management-oriented priorities are about **how** the organization accomplishes its "why." Because school systems exist to improve student outcomes, governance-oriented Goals are only about which things students know and/or are able to do.

After working with this particular school board, the members were able to make the leap from management-oriented/adult-inputs-focused goals to drafting a new set of Goals that were governance oriented/student outcomes focused.

REVISED BOARD GOALS (THREE YEARS LATER)

Reading: Every student reads on or above grade level.

- **Goal 1:** The percentage of students in grades three to eight who are proficient on the state ELA assessment will grow from 35.7 percent in August 2019 to 65.0 percent by August 2026.
- **Goal 2:** The percentage of third-grade students who are proficient on the state ELA assessment will grow from 32.5 percent in August 2019 to 62.0 percent by August 2026.

Math: Every student performs on or above grade level in math.

- **Goal 3:** The percentage of students in grades three to eight who are proficient on the state Math assessment will grow from 21.5 percent in August 2019 to 52.0 percent by August 2026.

College and Career: Every student graduates ready for college and careers.

- **Goal 4:** The percentage of students who are proficient on all three state high school assessments (Algebra, Literature, and Biology) by the end of their eleventh-grade year will grow from 22.2 percent in August 2019 to 52.0 percent by August 2026.
- **Goal 5:** The percentage of Career and Technical Education (CTE) students who pass an industry-standards-based competency assessment by the end of their twelfth-grade year will grow from 49.9 percent in August 2019 to 80.0 percent in August 2026.

All of these are both focused on student outcomes and are SMART (there will be a deeper dive into SMART Goals in Chapter 7). These avoid focusing on *how* the school system will achieve the student outcomes and instead focus on *which* student outcomes the school system should be prioritizing.

FAILURE TO BE FOCUSED WHEN SETTING GOALS

The school board that tries to focus on everything is the school board that ultimately focuses on nothing. There are many ways that a lack of focus can manifest itself.

One common misstep of school boards is to try to please everyone at the expense of actually being focused enough to help anyone. This approach could be the result of school boards being more worried about being popular than being effective. The ideal number of Goals is between one and five—when coaching school boards, my team and I generally suggest three or fewer, which is usually enough to address the critical needs of the school system, but not so many that the school boards are set up to fail because they are unable to create vertical alignment among staff throughout the school system.

In addition, school boards should avoid pulling Goals about student outcomes out of thin air. Often school boards will focus only on what's popular in the community or the latest thing they've read on social media. When selecting a set of Goals, school boards should focus on the authentically gathered voice of the community *and* the results of a root cause analysis, comprehensive student needs assessment, and/or a similar research-informed tool to support identification of and prioritization of potential Goals. Whether these types of analysis are conducted by the superintendent or by external experts—university partners, research organizations, credible education partners—school boards should not make decisions about their Goals until they are fully vetted. Goals should be focused on the highest need, highest leverage areas of student outcomes.

GET MORE RESOURCES

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to see goal examples and goal non-examples to get an idea of how your school board's goals measure up.

FAILURE TO FOCUS THE BOARD'S TIME

One of the most challenging skills all leaders must develop is time mastery. Time is an incredibly precious commodity for a single leader to manage, all the more so when there are multiple leaders functioning as a single decision-making entity.

Once a school board has defined a set of Goals that are focused on what it expects students to know and be able to do, the next skill is redesigning how the school board uses its time to be intensely focused on monitoring progress toward those Goals.

The following table is an analysis of the agenda from another school system I've worked with. This meeting took place prior to my arrival.

TIME USE ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL MEETING AGENDA

Agenda Item	Agenda Description	Minutes Spent	Time Use Analysis
Meeting Convenes at 6:31 p.m.			
Item 1	Call Workshop to Order; Pledges and Establish Quorum	4:30	NA
Item 2	Citizen Comments	6:01	Adult Inputs
Item 3	Consent Items (One Item)	1:08	Adult Inputs
Item 4	Action Items		
Item 4a	9–12 ELAR Textbook Adoption Approval	13:16	Adult Inputs
Item 4b	Considering and Acting on an Order Authorizing the Issuance of Unlimited Tax Refunding Bonds; Appointing a Pricing Officer and Delegating to the Pricing Officer the Authority to Approve the Sale of the Bonds; Establishing Certain Parameters for the Approval of Such Matters; Approving an Escrow Agreement, and Paying Agent/Registrar Agreement; Levying an Annual Ad Valorem Tax for the Payment of the Bonds; and Enacting Other Provisions Relating to the Subject	12:06	Adult Inputs
Item 4c	Reading Academies Memorandum of Understanding	6:36	Adult Inputs
Item 5	Possible Action Items		
Item 5a	Reading Academies Purchase	28:28	Adult Inputs
Item 5b	Collaborative Classroom Libraries Purchase	32:49	Adult Inputs
Item 5c	2020 Educator Appraisal Waiver	36:14	Adult Inputs
Item 5d	Board Resolution to Address Waiving Local Policies Regarding Ranking/GPA and Employee Evaluations	12:04	Adult Inputs

Agenda Item	Agenda Description	Minutes Spent	Time Use Analysis
Item 5e	Technology 1:1 Purchase	38:26	Adult Inputs
Item 5f	Redesign: Competency-Based Discovery and Capacity Building	27:15	Adult Inputs
Item 5g	(Part 1 of 2)—Princeton Review Summer Programming	4:53	Adult Inputs
Item 5h	Recommendation Regarding Auditor Services	6:07	Adult Inputs
Item 5i	Consider Approval of Resolution Amending Authorized Representatives for Investment Funds	1:30	Adult Inputs
Item 5j	Board Crisis Priorities	21:04	Adult Inputs
Item 5g	(Part 2 of 2)—Princeton Review Summer Programming	1:47	Adult Inputs
Went into Executive Session at 10:55 p.m.			
Items 8	Executive Session	3:13:00	Unknown
Returned from Executive Session at 2:08 a.m.			
Items 9 & 11	Open Session Action Item, Adjourn	26:48	Adult Inputs
Meeting Adjourned at 2:25 a.m.			
Percentage of the Five Hours of Public Meeting Focused on Student Outcomes: 0 percent			

While the most shocking aspect of this agenda may be the eight-hour length, the most important thing to notice is the far right column that indicates whether the focus for a given item was adult inputs, adult outputs, adult outcomes, student inputs, student outputs, or student outcomes. None of this meeting was focused on student outcomes.

This school board cared deeply about the children of its community and they knew that they needed to be focused on student outcomes. They simply lacked the skillset necessary to put their aspirations into practice. With coaching, the board's skill with

agenda setting grew. A year later, they conducted a very different board meeting.

TIME USE ANALYSIS OF THE REVISED MEETING AGENDA (ONE YEAR LATER)

Agenda Item	Agenda Description	Minutes Spent	Time Use Analysis
Meeting Convenes at 6:30 p.m.			
Item 1	Call Meeting to Order	0:44	NA
Went into Executive Session at 6:31 p.m.			
Item 2	Closed Session Items	59:00	Unknown
Returned from Executive Session at 7:30 p.m.			
Item 3	Public Session, Welcome, Invocation by Pastor, Pledges, Student Recognition	14:51	NA/Student Outputs
Item 4	Public Comments	0:00	Adult Inputs
Item 5	Board Monitoring: Goal #4 Individual Growth (4.1, 4.2, 4.3)	1:05:59	Student Outcomes
Item 6a & 6b	Tax Collections, Financials	10:09	Adult Outputs
Item 6c	Administrative Corrective Action Plans	7:09	Adult Outputs
Item 6d	Board Corrective Action Plans	6:02	Adult Outputs
Item 7	Consent Items (All Items Shall Be Acted Upon at the Same Time) (Fourteen Items)	0:38	Adult Inputs
Item 8	Action/Discussion Items (Action Requested)	0:03	Adult Inputs
Item 9	Public Comments on Nonagenda Items	0:03	Adult Inputs
Item 10	Adjourn	1:13	Adult Inputs
Meeting Adjourned at 9:20 p.m.			
Percentage of the Two Hours of Public Meeting Focused on Student Outcomes: 60 percent			

The single most important skill being demonstrated by this school board was the ability to focus on student outcomes for the majority of the meeting. It's a skill any school board can learn, but it takes a great deal of practice to become effective at it.

FAILURE TO MONITOR PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

Simply knowing how to create SMART Goals about student outcomes and knowing that you should spend time monitoring progress toward those Goals is not enough. The next step—monitoring the school system's progress toward those Goals—is equally vital. Goals that do not get monitored become just another collection of pretty words that get placed on a shelf and forgotten.

In the previous examples of school board meeting agendas, the original meeting featured 0 percent of the meeting time focused on monitoring their Goals—even though they had adopted Goals. The revised meeting agenda featured 60 percent of the meeting time focused on monitoring their Goals. Unfortunately, even though the school board had made the shift with its time use, those early Goal monitoring sessions were not yet effective. It would take another nine months before the school board's skill at monitoring its Goals would begin to catch up to its aspirations. For this reason—that is, the challenge involved with skill building around progress monitoring—a significant portion of Part II of this book is devoted to monitoring Goals.

HOW TO DIAGNOSE AND ADDRESS SKILL FAILURES

Diagnostic questions to ask include:

- Has the school board adopted Goals?
- Are all of the school board's adopted Goals about student outcomes, or are they about adult inputs?
- Have all of the board members completed training on setting Goals that are focused on student outcomes?
- Are school board meetings primarily focused on adult inputs or student outcomes?
- Have all of the board members completed training on effective Goal monitoring?

The most important behavior for overcoming skill gaps is to engage in high-quality practice, practice, practice. The more often school boards practice their skills while using a rubric to measure the quality of their implementation, the faster they are likely to improve. Part II of this book will go step by step through *what* to practice and includes rubrics for measuring the school board's *quality* of practice.

However, there remains one more way school boards can fail to achieve student outcomes. Mindset-based failures are more harmful than both knowledge-based and skill-based failures. But it also means that addressing them can have the most powerful impact on improving student outcomes.

CHAPTER 3

MINDSET-BASED FAILURES

Growing in the domains of knowledge and skill are vital steps on the journey from governance failure to governance effectiveness. But the most powerful lever for causing adult behavior change is the third one: mindset.

Mindset is the lens through which we see the world and make meaning out of what occurs in the world around us.

"THIS IS THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT"

One of the more debilitating mindsets that leaders can trap themselves into is the idea that the way it's always been done is the only way and best way it can be done. Inside of the comfort provided by this mindset, there is no transformation, no challenge to existing behavior. Transformation requires effort, at a minimum, and generally requires new knowledge, new skills, and external support to implement. Even if school boards have access to effective student-outcomes-focused training—which, as I've shared, is not likely—the unfortunate reality is that

training is rarely enough to help a school board move from ineffectiveness to effectiveness.

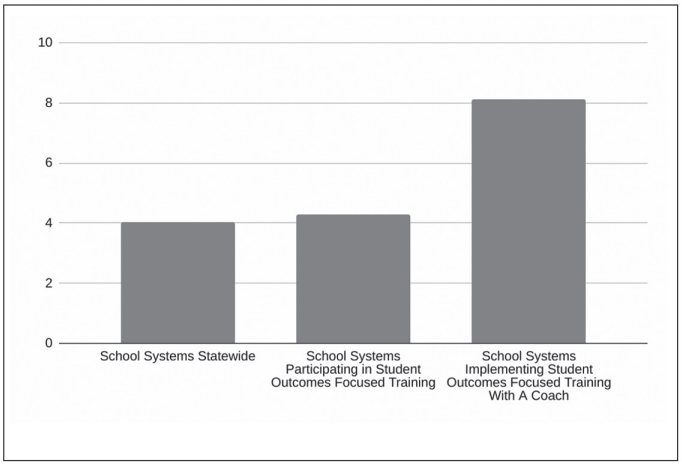
Part of why this disempowering mindset is so challenging to shake off is that it can be hard to notice that you've adopted this mindset while you're trapped inside of it. Even school boards that want to consider a new way of doing things appear unlikely to be able to sustain meaningful change.

In a report released by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that analyzed state accountability data and implementation of the agency's student-outcomes-focused Lone Star Governance (LSG) framework for school board training and coaching, the agency found that there was only minor variation in average school system performance between school boards that participated in the framework training (without coaching) and school boards that did not.

Said differently, even when school boards sought out training that was student outcomes focused—even when they expressed an outward desire to be more effective—the data suggests that it made very little difference.

The report wasn't all bad news, however. The same report found that, on average, school boards that went through the training and received ongoing guidance from an agency-certified student-outcomes-focused coach experienced nearly twice the improvement in the state accountability system over a two-year period.

Statewide Average Accountability System Score Increase, Coaching Use (TEA, 2019)



While these are extremely narrow findings that lack statistical power, they suggest that school boards struggled to shake off this mindset without external support. If school boards want to escape the seduction of "how we've always done it," the school board is going to need more than hope and good intentions: it's going to need very specialized coaching.

"GREAT ON MY BEHALF"

Key to achieving better student outcomes is a willingness on the part of adults to change our own behaviors. Unfortunately, it is common for education leaders to be focused on what we have to contribute and our ability to look like we are being effective, rather than on actually being effective. While most education leaders won't openly admit it—and indeed may not be self-aware enough to recognize it within themselves—a dangerous mindset

is to be focused on my own greatness and being seen as being a great contributor.

Few times in my life illustrate this harmful mindset better than during my first year as a school board member—an experience that taught me that the job I thought I came to do and the job that needed to be done were two wholly different things.

Being relatively new to education, I immediately focused on technology—one of my areas of strength. I had been involved in several tech startups during the dot-com boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Noticing how wildly antiquated the school system's technology was, I saw that this was where I was going to make a big impact.

In the school system's business office, the accounting and business systems were so old that the school board couldn't get the reliable data insights we needed to perform our jobs effectively. School classrooms had some computers, but they were ancient. Recognizing the lack of access to good, quality technology as an obvious impediment to improving student achievement, I didn't hold back at the next school board meeting. I spoke adamantly about the urgent need to address the technology issues I had discovered that were preventing children from learning.

If you had told me then that my focus was *not* on the students, I know that I would not have believed you. But today, it's inescapably clear to me that my focus was zero percent on the students and a hundred percent on me. I never stopped to ask an important question: what is preventing improvements in student outcomes?

Had I asked this question, I would have learned that even though

I wasn't wrong about the tech being antiquated, I was wrong about what was most holding our students back. I would have discovered that the top factor preventing students from being successful at that time was inadequate quality and quantity of instruction—not because our teachers didn't work incredibly hard, but because of poor instructional materials, weak/nonexistent instructional coaching from school leaders, and unaligned professional development.

While technology certainly made it to the list of factors, it didn't even make the top ten. So did I focus on improving technology tools because I cared about children? No. I focused on technology because it's what I happened to know. It's what I had to contribute as a school board member—but it was not the most pressing need.

Even though I didn't see it then, I wasn't focusing on student outcomes. I was focusing on the adult inputs that were comfortable for me to contribute; I was focusing on being great for me, not them. And even though very real tech deficits existed in the business offices and school classrooms, buying new tech at that time would not have addressed my scholars' most pressing educational needs. More urgent issues needed to be fixed first before we should consider buying new computers.

As a new board member with a mission to invest in a complete tech overhaul for the schools, I met resistance. At first, I didn't understand why my fellow board members couldn't see what I saw. What was wrong with them? But after a particularly insightful conversation with another board member and a moment of lucidity, I had to acknowledge to myself that I was driving the tech initiative to serve my own ego. Had I continued

on the path to upgrade the technology above all other priorities, I would have engaged in adult behavior that impeded student success.

I ran for a spot on the board because I wanted to make a difference in children's education. Once I won the seat and stepped up to the plate, I discovered a massive system with such overwhelming challenges that I felt ill-equipped to do anything. So I fell back on what was familiar to me, the areas I was comfortable with, and the things I knew how to change. Perhaps you have seen this, too.

No school board can afford to allow any of its members to behave this way. If we allow just one person to indulge in adult behaviors that fail to consider student outcomes, the end result becomes what we're seeing too often all across the country. We see it in every dysfunctional board where board members end up being more focused on looking good for adults than on outcomes for students.

"EFFORT AND INTENT EQUALS RESULTS AND IMPACT"

In basketball, victory is achieved by the team that scores the most points before time runs out. Scoring is the act of having the ball go through the hoop without any rules being violated. There are many things team players, coaches, and fans can do to enable scoring. Enabling is any behavior that positions your team to score.

As an example, passing the ball to someone who then scores is actively enabling. This is not the same as scoring, because throwing a pass does not give you another point on the score-

board. The person you threw the pass to has to actually put the ball through the hoop without violating any rules before your team gets the point. The possibility for victory lies only in scoring.

Enabling behaviors assist with scoring. You can have some of the most effective enablers and a range of enabling behavior on your side, including:

- Dribbling and passing the ball well
- Playing excellent defense
- Taking high-percentage shots
- Choosing effective players
- Choosing effective coaches
- Practicing, practicing, practicing
- Running the intended offense
- Boxing out under the basket
- Winning the tip-off
- Writing a great game plan
- Shooting the ball in the direction of the goal
- Screaming fans and cheerleaders

All these can contribute to enabling you to get in a position to score and outscore your opponent. Enablers do everything in their power to provide their team with plenty of opportunities to shoot. But none of these behaviors actually create the victory condition—not even shooting the ball. Only scoring leads to winning. The actions of even the most effective enablers can't guarantee victory.

I use this basketball example to help clarify the problem that exists in the mindsets of so many education leaders and school

boards, which is that school board members think they're focusing on student outcomes, when in reality, they're focusing on adult inputs. They're confusing scoring with enabling, but the two are not synonymous. As with basketball, the enablers are important, but focusing on them while ignoring student outcomes—the victory, the true measure of scoring—leads to failure and loss.

In a school, victory is achieved only when students learn to the degree that we expect them to learn before time runs out—before they proceed to their next level of learning. Many things enable learning, but they are not the same as the students actually learning. In a school setting,

- ***Enabling** is the act of behaving in any manner that positions students to learn.*
- ***Scoring** is when the students actually learn what we've intended for them to learn.*

School boards often focus primarily on enabling efforts. But the victory lies *only* in the students actually learning. We can have the most ideal books, great instructional strategies and professional learning communities, great extracurriculars, great meals served, and top facilities—and it's certainly good to have all these enablers—but having those things is not the same as children actually learning. Some schools have all this and more, but the students still aren't growing in what we want them to know and be able to do.

Effort is not enough; results matter. Intention is not enough; impact matters.

The powerful temptation to be satisfied with how hard adults tried—to accept effort and intention as proxies for results and impact—is incredibly harmful to children. Unfortunately, this failed mindset is particularly resilient, in part, because children generally don't select school board members but adults do, and adults often want credit for how hard they tried regardless of the impact. There are few more surefire ways to win political allies than to praise adults for their efforts—especially if those efforts are highly appreciated forms of enabling. Even if those forms of enabling never result in scoring. In basketball, teams are awarded two points for the shot going in, not one point for a great pass and one point for the shot going in. But adults still act like they should be given a point after throwing a good pass.

The extreme reverse of this mindset failure is equally toxic: board members who berate and humiliate school system employees when scoring hasn't happened. The organization that abuses its players when they don't score is just as unlikely to win a championship as the team that can't score.

HOW TO DIAGNOSE AND ADDRESS MINDSET FAILURES

Diagnostic questions to ask include:

- Does the school board have a coach—a trusted external advisor who is willing to tell the board what they need to hear, not just what they want to hear?
- Does the school board have a system in place, like a structured 360 evaluation, that alerts the school board to times when its focus is on its own greatness rather than the greatness of its students?

- Does the school board have a system in place, like a structured self-evaluation, that allows the school board to notice when it has become adult inputs focused rather than student outcomes focused?

The good news is that school board members tend to be community members with noble intentions—it is important to them that students learn. My team consistently finds that most school board members, once confronted with their mindset failures, are open to doing the work to improve. They just need adequate ongoing support to pursue their own continuous improvement.

The effective mindset to adopt when student performance has not improved is neither to give an A for effort nor to create a psychologically unsafe work environment. The most effective approach is to create continuous improvement systems. Part II of this book is entirely focused on the five steps of a school board's continuous improvement work, which begins with developing a focus mindset.

PART II

HOW YOUR SCHOOL BOARD CAN BECOME EFFECTIVE

STEP ONE

FOCUS MINDSET

CHAPTER 4

STUDENT OUTCOMES DON'T CHANGE UNTIL ADULT BEHAVIORS CHANGE

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician who practiced medicine during the mid-nineteenth century before Louis Pasteur's research helped people understand how diseases are transmitted and prevented. The basics of sanitation practices that we take for granted today were not yet known 175 years ago during Semmelweis's lifetime.

He worked at a hospital in Vienna, Austria, which had two maternity wards. One of the wards was serviced by physicians, while the other was serviced by midwives. Both used similar procedures to care for expectant moms and deliver babies, but the ward attended by physicians was experiencing significantly higher death rates among patients than the ward where midwives provided care. This troubled Semmelweis, and as a modern scientist physician of his day who took a meticulous approach to his work, he began to investigate. He was deter-

mined to find out what was going on so that he could make changes to ultimately improve patient outcomes and save lives.

He didn't rule anything out, and he was open to approaching the problem from all different angles. Noticing that other hospitals had priests walking through blessing patients, he invited a priest to do the same at the two maternity wards at his hospital. Perhaps this would give the women hope and improve outcomes. But there was no change.

Semmelweis kept looking for a cause of the very different outcomes at the two wards, continuing to make observations, search for clues, and analyze the data he gathered. In the process, he noticed something especially puzzling. One of his contemporaries had died after conducting an autopsy; this colleague had developed the same symptoms that many of the women at the physician-led maternity ward had developed and died from. How could a male scientist working with dead bodies develop the same symptoms that women giving birth were showing? What was the connection?

As he contemplated this clue, Semmelweis figured out the link: as part of their training, physicians worked on cadavers, but midwives did not. He reasoned that some unknown particles from the cadavers were being transmitted to the pregnant women by the physicians in the physician-led ward and making them sick.

To test his hypothesis, he had the physicians wash their hands whenever they went from working on cadavers to working in the maternity ward. Immediately, the variance in mortality between the two wards normalized. He had found the solution, and it was something as simple as having physicians wash their

hands before they delivered babies. Even though he didn't have a coherent theory of germs, Semmelweis discovered the benefits of sanitation. He didn't fully understand why this worked, but what mattered was that it did work to significantly lower the mortality rate.

He decided to take it a step further and have everyone wash their hands—the physicians in one ward and the midwives in the other ward. The result was that the mortality rates dropped even further. It became clear to him that, regardless of why this worked, washing one's hands before working with any patient greatly improved patient outcomes. This is a practice that today is absolutely standard and required! But at the time, it was revolutionary.

PHYSICIANS HATED IT

The problem Semmelweis faced, however, was that the physicians were opposed to the idea of having to wash their hands. Some hated it so much that they refused to participate. Even though his data clearly demonstrated the benefits, they refused to accept his conclusion, in part because they were unwilling to go along with the notion that something in their practice might have been killing the women they were working with. It was all about their pride and ego.

Rather than being lauded by the physicians of the time, Semmelweis was fired and driven out of the profession. After losing his position, he was ultimately thrown into a mental asylum where he died from wounds he suffered at the hands of the guards.

It was only years later that a clearer understanding of germs developed that completely validated the practices he had cham-

pioned. Only after his death did handwashing and sanitation become the standard we know them to be today. Although his methods brought results and improved patient outcomes, his peers resisted, clinging to outdated practices. Today, Ignaz Semmelweis is recognized as the pioneer he truly was in antiseptic procedures.

I share this story of patient outcomes because it perfectly illustrates the effects our choices have on the populations we serve. In the same way that Semmelweis, if he were here today, might say that patient outcomes don't change until doctor behaviors change, it's incumbent upon school board members to embrace that student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change.

* * *

CHOICES THAT MAKE IT HARD FOR STUDENTS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

As education leaders serving on school boards throughout the nation, we have to be willing to ruthlessly evaluate our own behaviors. We have to be willing to accept that our behaviors could be at the heart of what is killing our children academically. And when evidence is brought forward, we have to be willing to accept it, even if it flies in the face of a hundred years of school board orthodoxy, and even if it implicates us in harming the very children we are committed to serving. We have to be willing to confront the evidence of how we best serve children no matter where that evidence points.

The real-life parable of Ignaz Semmelweis may take place in a medical setting, but it applies to us as education leaders in

a school setting because the lessons are the same. My fellow coaches and I lead workshops throughout the country to help school boards focus on improving student outcomes by changing their adult behavior. In the workshops, we dive right into the heart of the matter with a question each participant is invited to wrestle with:

> What is an example of a time when my choices, my adult behavior, may have made it harder for students to be successful?

As you consider this question, begin to insert yourself into the conversation. Consider the behaviors in your own life that may have—whether through action or inaction, whether intentional or unintentional—made it harder for your students to be successful. Maybe it was not getting involved when your voice could have made a difference. Or going along with negative characterizations of the schools or school system when you didn't yet have all the facts. Or maybe you withdrew your time, talent, or treasure from the schools because you were justifiably frustrated with failures of leadership. Perhaps there was an initiative you knew would make a difference for students, but you chose not to push it because of what pushing might cost you.

This is an uncomfortable question, but a necessary one, and it inspires self-reflection in the very manner that Semmelweis might have intended. Faced with this question, board members in our workshops begin to have a conversation unlike any they've ever had. It's a conversation that invites board members to view the world in a new way that frees each person to take action that perhaps previously hadn't been imaginable.

Also notice that the question is not asking "if" you have behaved

in a manner that may have made it harder for your students to be successful. You have. If you are reading this book, then this applies directly to you. That is not in question. Now the only question that remains is whether you have the wisdom and humility to identify those moments. If you don't, the patterns of behavior in your life that may be making it harder for students to be successful will continue for as long as you are willfully blind to them.

In school systems where the tendency is to stick with how things have always been done, someone needs to be Semmelweis—someone needs to take that first important step in a new, more effective direction that can create better outcomes for students. You can be that someone, but only if you are first willing to confront your behaviors that may have made it harder for your students to be successful. Definitively, if you are unwilling or unable to do so, you are not the leader our students deserve or require.

OUR STUDENTS PAY FOR OUR BEHAVIORS

In group settings, including board meetings, people want to look good. We want to be honored and praised. Every board member harbors a secret desire to be recognized for our brilliance, praised for it, and lifted up as the champion of all things student related. And we want our peers to do what we, in our flawless wisdom, have indicated they should all do.

Despite our desire to look good in front of others, we have to put it all aside and focus on our students. It's not about us. We have to be willing to interrogate our past behaviors that have made it harder for our students to be successful and analyze

them closely, looking for why we chose the behavior we chose. To help education leaders reveal these hidden areas of self-interest, we invite them into this follow-up question:

> In the moment that I chose behaviors that may have made it harder for my students to be successful, what was the benefit **to me**?

Again, notice that the question isn't whether or not there was a benefit to myself; there was. In every moment when I am behaving in a way that may be making it harder for students to be successful, there is absolutely a benefit to me. Now your task is to identify it. Maybe it was that you got to avoid conflict, or be liked, or save time, or fit in, or be comfortable. Or maybe it was just easier. Whatever the benefit—usually something you can sum up in one or, at most, two words—find it. This is a critical step on the journey to improving student outcomes.

In the moments when I am more focused on lifting up my greatness than on pursuing the greatness of our children, there are costs associated with this choice. One of the costs is latching on to my own ideas with such fervor that I lose sight of what the students need most.

Like the physicians in Semmelweis's era who didn't want to wash their hands because they worried it made them look bad—they didn't want the public to think they were responsible for the deaths of their patients—school board members can sometimes succumb to our fears and resist change. We must be willing to put our pride and ego aside. The cost to students of choosing to put ourselves first is simply too great. To support workshop participants in getting clear on this point, we ask this question:

> In the moment that I chose behaviors that may have made it harder for my students to be successful and there was a benefit to me, what was the cost **to students**?

What price did students pay so that I could enjoy the benefits I got in the moment? Only as I fully acknowledge the behavior, the benefit, and the cost am I likely to recognize what's possible for students if I am willing to change my adult behavior.

I must be willing to let go of "they over there need to change first," leaving me with only one idea to embrace: "I need to choose new behaviors." Once that mindset shift happens, we are finally ready to do the work our students need us to do. We arrive at a place where students can actually benefit from our efforts.

WHAT ARE YOU PRETENDING?

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, when I went from being a computer programmer to being a school board member, it took me a while to realize I had to be willing to give up my own desire to look good to the world as an elected official and instead dig into the fact that I was ignorant in many areas where students desperately needed me to be informed. I had to stop pretending that I had a handle on the situation and get out of my own way so I could allow myself to become informed to the degree I needed to be.

The moment I joined the school board, students needed me to fight for them, not to fight for myself. And so every moment I spent focused on what made me comfortable was a wasted opportunity because the things they needed most in the moment weren't getting done. That's another cost of focusing on adult behaviors instead of on student outcomes.

When I learned that the quality of instruction in our schools desperately needed to improve, I realized that even if we'd acquired the best technology in the world, there still would have been no meaningful impact on the quality of instruction students were experiencing. By moving out of my own way and putting aside my mission to bring new technology into the schools, I was able to start learning about the real, immediate need to create a system to reliably deliver the highest quality of instruction so students could reach a higher level of learning.

In those moments, my behavior was to try to make myself look good by showing how much I knew about technology, the benefit to me was popularity and the hope for reelection, the cost to students was lost instructional quality, and to mask my lack of preparedness, I was pretending to know it all and to have all the right answers.

In the moments when I am choosing a behavior that may be making it harder for students to be successful, there is a powerful cognitive dissonance, and instead of confronting the incongruity between my intentions and my actions, I create a pretending to cover it all up. As you reflect on your behavior that may have made it harder for your students to be successful, complete this sentence:

> In that moment I was pretending that…

There are many ways board members indulge in pretending rather than confronting the harmful reality of our actions:

- Pretending to read all the material prior to the start of the meeting

- Pretending to be trustworthy while not being completely honest about the superintendent or another board member to make myself look good
- Pretending to be unified when I'm actually undermining my colleagues on social media
- Pretending that the welfare of students is more important to me than my own reputation and livelihood
- Pretending to be an advocate for my students but then not speaking up for my school system or my students because I want to be popular
- Pretending I'm the only well-meaning member of the board
- Pretending I know what the students need when I have not rigorously investigated this

Pretending only benefits the pretender, and at significant cost to students. While pretending imposes limits on what's possible for students, getting out of the pretending mode by first acknowledging what you've been pretending lets you see the opportunities that exist outside of these constraints. In the space that this authenticity creates—that is, grounded in the acknowledgment of the behaviors that may have made it harder for students to be successful, present to how I benefited in the moment, and present to the cost to my students—you can finally begin to create something new, starting with this question:

> What are new behaviors I can choose that will create new possibilities for our students?

Focus on this question. This is not about self-judgment; it's about recognizing that there is ALWAYS room for improvement. Inside of the willingness to look at my own behaviors directly—to deploy the wisdom of Ignaz Semmelweis—there is

the possibility of victory for our children. In that moment, what's possible in the realm of student outcomes begins to change because of changes in adult behavior—starting with my own.

If you have not fully internalized the notion that, "student outcomes don't change until my behaviors change," then nothing else in this book will help you serve children; the remainder is written with that as the foundation. So if you are still struggling to answer any one of those questions—behavior, benefit, cost, pretending, new behavior—go back and reread this chapter until you can. Or contact a coach who is trained in this work and ask for their support with answering those questions. Absent this mindset—"student outcomes won't change until my behaviors change"—then nothing else—none of the knowledge, none of the skills—in this book will inspire the transformation you seek on behalf of your students.

Only with that mindset achieved do the next steps in the journey work.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS OUR WHY?

ADULT INPUTS OR STUDENT OUTCOMES?

A school board noticed that middle-school reading levels were low. The school board met with the superintendent about this matter, and one of the school board members introduced a literacy curriculum he'd learned about at a conference.

"This curriculum is specifically designed to serve the needs of school systems just like ours," the school board member explained. "This can help us address our low literacy rates. We should implement it."

The superintendent wasn't thrilled by the idea and explained that they already had a lot on their plate. If this new curriculum was adopted, other items would have to be removed from the current list of responsibilities, items that the annual bonus was tied to.

After some discussion, the board and the superintendent came to an agreement. Some of the superintendent's other responsibilities would be removed to make room for the new program,

and his annual bonus would now be aligned with implementing the literacy curriculum under consideration.

With these changes approved, the superintendent began the process of adopting the new literacy curriculum for all middle school students. A third-party group of consultants was brought in to focus on literacy, and the curriculum was implemented with fidelity. At the end of the year, the board was satisfied that the curriculum had been implemented correctly, and the superintendent received his bonus.

What's missing from this story?

As well-intentioned as everyone was, this school board approached the situation with an adult-inputs-focused mindset rather than a student-outcomes-focused mindset. But they are not alone.

Many generations of school boards have been baptized in the adult-inputs-focused mindset. It lives in how school board members are trained, how we are lobbied in grocery stores and church basements, how our school board meetings are focused, and if we are elected, it lives in how we campaign. Because this school board operated from within an adult-inputs-focused mindset, resources were aligned with the superintendent implementing the recommended curriculum. A lot of money was spent to set it up, and the bonus was given to the superintendent for his work to implement the new curriculum.

Inside of a student-outcomes-focused mindset, the board would have said, "Your evaluation will always be based on whether or not the students learn to read at age-appropriate levels."

In the end, middle school literacy did not improve in this school system, resources were spent on a curriculum that did not deliver on its promise, and a superintendent received a bonus that was earned, but not for improving outcomes for students.

If this sounds familiar, take heart: it doesn't have to be this way.

* * *

WHY DO SCHOOL SYSTEMS EXIST?

School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes. This is the only reason that school systems exist.

School systems do not exist to have great buildings, have happy parents, have balanced budgets, have satisfied teachers, provide student lunches, provide employment in the county/city, or anything else. Those are all means—and incredibly important and valuable means—but none of them are the ends; none of those are why we have school systems. They are all inputs, not outcomes. None of those are measures of what students know or are able to do.

School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes.

This idea might sound obvious, but in the middle of facilitating this conversation once, a school board member interrupted me. "Student performance is not one of our jobs," the board member asserted emphatically. When I countered, she replied that "our

job is to pass the budget, make policy, and hire a superintendent." This is the adult-inputs-focused mindset hard at work.

She was not a "bad" person, but she was trapped inside an ineffective school board member mindset. And not because she didn't believe deeply in what's possible for students; she did. She was less effective because whatever actions she took were grounded in her focus on the activities of adults rather than on data about the outcomes of students.

The difference is a focus on the means by which something is accomplished rather than a focus on whether or not someone was accomplished. This might seem trivial, but in practice, this shift in mindset gives access to a game-changing shift in student outcomes.

WHY DO SCHOOL BOARDS EXIST?

A common challenge to the idea that school systems exist to improve student outcomes is that throughout any community, there are many ideas about which student outcomes—which measures of what students know and are able to do—should be focused on (the community's "vision") and which means to accomplish the vision should/shouldn't be used (the community's "values"). A school system can't be effective if it's trying to pursue a myriad of incoherent visions while implementing a cacophony of conflicting values. So the decision was made to select a group of individuals who would collectively represent the community's vision and values. We refer to this group as a school board. School systems exist to improve student outcomes. School boards exist to create the conditions for improved student outcomes by *representing the vision and values of the community*.

This idea—that school boards exist to create the conditions for improved student outcomes by representing the vision and values of the community—is in direct conflict with a great deal of the popular thinking about school boards. Effective school board members place the highest premium on whether or not outcomes for students are improving rather than focusing on what is being done by adults (how the money is being spent, which persons are being hired, which colors are selected, which vendor is selected, etc.). Effective school boards care about these things too—the "how" it all happens—but they know that anytime school boards are focused primarily on the "how," they have stopped being focused primarily on the "why"—whether or not children are better off.

Examples of this divergence in mindset between effective school boards and ineffective school boards include:

- saying, "school boards should take a balanced approach" but then not spending a balanced amount of time each month focused on student outcomes. A truly balanced school board *would* focus 50 percent of its board meeting time each month on clarifying priorities and/or monitoring progress.
- saying, "school boards should just focus on policy" but then never actually setting Goals about student performance or monitoring them. Policies that aren't monitored aren't actually priorities.
- saying, "school boards should be responsive to the taxpayers" but then not focusing on return on taxpayer investment. If return on investment (ROI) is actually important, the "return" can only be known if priorities have been clarified and then progress toward them is monitored. Absent those two steps, it's impossible to know if the taxpayers are experi-

encing a return. The only way to be responsive to taxpayers is to be focused on student outcomes.

- saying, "school boards should also focus on goals about student experiences, not just student outcomes." Students having a positive learning experience is a means, not an end. If schools ensure that children go on field trips and are happy about their schooling, but the children don't actually learn anything, that is not victory, that is malpractice. A wonderful culture and climate is an adult input, not a student outcome; it is necessary but insufficient, and it's neither why school systems exist nor why school boards exist.

School boards exist to represent the vision and values of their communities in such a way that they create the conditions for improved student outcomes. This is easy to say but can be difficult to practice. This is partially because distinguishing between the wants/issues of individual community members and the vision/values of the community can be challenging.

CHAPTER 6

REPRESENTING COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY'S VISION AND VALUES

Before serving on my school board, I served as the vice chair of my neighborhood association. When neighbors had issues, they routinely brought their issues to me with expectations that I would try to solve them. One day Mrs. Johnson, an older matriarch in my neighborhood who was used to getting what she wanted, approached me and said, "I need a stop sign on my block." By this point in my tenure, I had learned a process for distinguishing between the issues that people brought to me and the underlying values behind those issues. But the way to get to that required me to allow the person with the issue to get there for me, not to go there myself. It required me to pose a number of basic but important questions to expose the value behind the demands.

So I asked Mrs. Johnson, "Why is the stop sign important to you?"

"Well, it's important because cars are going too fast," she replied.

"And why is that important to you?" I continued.

Looking annoyed, she responded, "It's important to me because children are out there trying to play."

I continued with the questioning, and through this back-and-forth process, the underlying value behind Mrs. Johnson's stop sign request emerged—it was a matter of safety. While I was not in a position to promise that a stop sign would be installed, I was in a position to promise Mrs. Johnson that we would work on the issue of safety. So I called our neighborhood's city planner.

I let her know that Mrs. Johnson was concerned about safety on her block. "Cars are going too fast," I explained, "and she's worried about the kids on her street. What can we do about safety on this block?"

After listening to me, she visited with other neighbors and asked them questions to see if their concerns about safety were similar to Mrs. Johnson's. She checked with the city's budget office to see how much funding was available for traffic-safety-related projects for the neighborhood. After the city planner inspected the street, several possibilities were presented, including adding a stop sign, putting in a speed bump, and making various modifications to change traffic patterns such as cul-de-sacs or making the street two-way instead of one-way. Once everything was explored systematically, and additional input was obtained from other neighbors, the city planning department was able to analyze different ideas and come up with the optimal solution that made the most sense. In this instance, given all the variables, the optimal solution was to install a speed bump to slow down traffic and make the block safer for everyone.

I was pleased. The neighbors were satisfied. And Mrs. Johnson?

She was livid! "I didn't ask for a speed bump! I said I wanted a stop sign," she exclaimed, clearly disappointed and angry.

It would be years before I fully wrestled with an uncomfortable but inescapable reality: my job as a member of the neighborhood association board wasn't to acquiesce to the wants and issues of every member of my community; it was to represent the collective values of my community. These sound similar, but they are very, very different.

* * *

HONORING COMMUNITY

As a member of a governing board in this story, what was my role?

- *To represent the values of my community, not to try to address each community member's issue*
- *To listen for and address the underlying value of the issue being presented*

Nearly every person who approaches a school board member will have a different stop sign issue, so to speak. It's not a school board member's job to give everyone the stop sign they're demanding. It *is* a school board member's responsibility to listen to the issue and ask questions that expose the underlying value, which can then be pursued.

Mrs. Johnson wasn't pleased. She didn't want a speed bump;

she wanted a stop sign. But the important thing to keep in mind is that I was not there to address the demands of community members. My job was to understand the collective values of all the community members and address those. Mrs. Johnson was an incredibly influential voice in the neighborhood, but she wasn't the whole community. In my obligation to represent the values of the community, it was essential that we reach out to all the other folks who were going to be impacted by this decision as well, and this involved a larger, more thoughtful process.

Every public official, whether elected or appointed, has a Mrs. Johnson in their life. A person whose opinion we trust. A person who has supported us. A person whose voice is more influential than others. But using Mrs. Johnson as a proxy for the entire community's values rather than doing the work to listen to the broader community and explore its collective values is intellectually lazy, politically self-serving, directly harmful to the community, and intentionally disrespectful of the community's voice. Often this behavior is born of public officials not yet having made the mindset shift from campaigning for the role to governing in the role. Just because we may feel beholden to some individuals in the community doesn't give us the right to dishonor the community as a whole.

In our work, there are three broad strategies that we offer school board members to support their mindset shift away from representing themselves and representing individuals, and that begin the process of moving toward a mindset focused on representing the community.

As school board members, in addition to representing the vision of the community—student outcomes—part of our role is to represent the values of the community:

> Board members must listen for and codify the vision and values of the community, writing them down in a way that clarifies what has to be protected.

Since board members are not doing the work in the schools all day, every day, it's important to express these values in a way that makes it clear that the staff does not have the option of violating them. Everyone on the staff, from teachers to bus drivers, and from cafeteria workers to administrators, must protect these values at all times while pursuing the community's vision—this work lives in *how* school system staff do the work that they're doing on behalf of children.

Board members can protect community values by defining which behaviors are unacceptable because they would be in violation of a value. Rather than trying to prescribe one narrow item that school administrators must do, spelling out what behaviors are not acceptable is more effective.

> To protect community values, list which behaviors are unacceptable.

In our neighborhood safety example, codifying the values of the community in terms of what was unacceptable would lead us to come up with two important, clear guidelines: don't allow our students to be unsafe, and don't allow unsafe conditions on this block.

With this strategy, you can maintain a mindset that stays focused on the values of the community without getting captured by vocal, influential community members like Mrs. Johnson. In the process, you will honor Mrs. Johnson's values (even if it's not

in a manner she appreciates) while empowering staff members to behave in ways that align with the community vision you are trying to accomplish and the community values you are trying to protect.

> Stay focused on the values, not the issues.
>
> Stay focused on the whole community, not just a few community members.

Only once school board members have embraced an empowering mindset—my adult behaviors need to change, I need to be clear about my why, and my role is to represent the community's vision and values—are we prepared to take the next steps on the journey toward effectiveness.

STEP TWO

CLARIFY PRIORITIES

CHAPTER 7

THE COMMUNITY'S VISION AND GOALS

FROM DELUSION TO VISION

"On a scale of one to ten, write down how focused you are on improving student outcomes," I directed the school board members. This was our first session together so, as usual, I started with a quiz to help baseline where the school board was at. Most school board members said that they were sevens, eights, or nines, but one brand-new school board member proudly declared that she was an eleven. I just smiled and continued.

"How many Goals has your school board adopted about student outcomes?" I asked. The school board members all seemed slightly confused by this question. After some discussion, they finally arrived at the inescapable conclusion they needed to see: the school board had adopted zero Goals about student outcomes. I could tell in the back of their minds that those sevens, eights, and nines were starting to seem very suspect. But we hadn't even gotten to the clencher yet.

"Here's a copy of the minutes and agenda from your most recent school board meeting. Take a moment and read through it and then write down the percentage of time during this meeting that was focused on student outcomes."

I let them work for a while, then I asked for their percentages. After some back and forth, it quickly became obvious that there was only one correct answer: in the absence of having adopted Goals about what students should know and be able to do, it was impossible for the school board to have focused any of the meeting on their Goals for what they wanted students to know or be able to do.

Finally, I returned to where we began: "As you reflect on the percentage you just wrote down regarding the meeting and the 'focused on student outcomes' score you gave yourself earlier—as you compare these two things—what are you noticing?" Then I sat quietly as seconds ticked away in complete silence. The school board chair, a student advocate I've come to strongly admire, was the first to raise her hand and speak into the void: "I'm noticing that I'm not at all focused on student outcomes."

After a few moments, the only person who hadn't spoken yet was the brand-new board member. I held up the copy of the minutes and asked her directly, "Is this 'eleven' work?" She tried to deflect, but school board coaches who have been nationally certified are specifically trained to catch that type of behavior and stay dialed into the conversation until it's complete. I asked if she had tried to get the school board to adopt Goals about student outcomes. No. I asked if she had tried to redesign the meetings to be focused on student learning. No. So I held up the pages again and asked in a slightly elevated voice, "Does this demonstrate that your behavior is an eleven?" The entire room

went to a hush with even the audience members in the far back of the room seeming to stop breathing.

"No," she said at last, voice slightly crestfallen, "I'm not an eleven."

I smiled reassuringly as she began to honor impact over intention. "But you *want* to be focused on the community's vision for improving student outcomes. And you will be. Now we're ready to begin."

* * *

FROM VISION TO GOALS

School systems only exist to improve student outcomes. This is the only reason school systems exist. Every community's long-term view of what it wants students to know and be able to do—its vision—will vary because each community's understanding of which knowledge and skills matter most will vary. But at the core, communities choose to continue having school systems for one reason only: to increase what students know and are able to do, to provide students with knowledge and skills, to improve student outcomes. This is why school systems exist.

The community's vision describes a longer-term aspiration for what *all* of its children should know and be able to do. But that is challenging to put into practice on a daily basis. For this reason the school board, after listening for the community's vision, creates a set of policy statements that describe the next measurable milestones that need to be achieved to move the school system in the direction of accomplishing the vision. We refer to these SMART policies as Goals.

A school board's adopted Goals describe the next operational milestones to be achieved in the direction of accomplishing the community's vision for what students should know and be able to do.

To be useful, the Goals must meet several criteria, otherwise they aren't Goals, they're just platitudes that benefit adults politically while not benefiting student outcomes. Goals must:

- be grounded in the community's vision for student outcomes—not about adult inputs.
- be grounded in student performance data, the current reality for students.
- be SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound.

If these criteria are not met, they are not Goals.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

For the Goals to be grounded in the community's vision for student outcomes, the school board must first create intentional opportunities to hear from community members. To do this well, the school board will need to engage in both outreach work and engagement work. Community engagement is two-way communication between board members and community members that occurs at a meeting hosted by the school board. Community outreach is two-way communication between the board members and community members that occurs at a meeting hosted by community members—where the school board members go to the parts of the community that are unlikely to come to community engagement sessions. It is completely unacceptable for a school board to not conduct listening, and

it's unacceptable to assume that all listening will occur at the time and place that is most convenient for school board members. The school board will need to do both engagement work and outreach work to gain a thorough understanding of the community's vision.

Once the school board determines that it has conducted sufficient listening, all of the listening needs to be summarized into a one- to five-page document that provides a summary of the process used for listening and the participants, a thematic frequency analysis of everything that was heard, and the methodology for both. This step is crucial because it will make it easier for the school board to authentically consider the community's voice during Goal setting. In addition, at some point someone will ask the school board members whether or not they listened to the community and what they heard. Being able to provide them with this document is a step in the direction of earning the community's trust.

The first document the school board needs for Goal setting is the community listening summary. But while that is necessary, it is generally insufficient. The school board will also need a student data summary.

HIGH NEED, HIGH LEVERAGE

Effective Goal setting requires describing both the currently known level of student performance and the desired level of student performance in three to five years. Early in the process of Goal setting, effective school boards will ask their superintendent to conduct an analysis of current student performance across the full spectrum of knowledge and skills and produce

a summary that describes their view of the highest-need and highest-leverage areas of student performance.

Highest-need areas of student performance are those where, if student performance doesn't improve, there is a strong likelihood that the community's vision for those students will not be met. If the community wants children to grow up to be critical thinkers but students aren't literate enough to read and comprehend complex ideas, critical thinking skills become harder to obtain. This is a challenging aspect of the analysis both because it requires looking across every student in the school system and because there are so many content areas to consider. But those are also the same reasons why a high needs analysis is so vital; the school board the attempts to focus on everything is the school board that focuses on nothing.

Highest-leverage areas of student performance are those where, if one particular group of students makes significant progress, there is a strong likelihood that many other groups—even groups that did not receive the same treatment—will benefit and grow as well. School systems that conduct a correlational analysis between various student groups and all students often discover that some underserved student groups, when receiving the support they deserve, cause other student groups to grow more quickly as well. While this won't always be the case, where high-leverage opportunities can be found, they present a compelling argument for Goal setting.

Sometimes the areas of student performance that the community most cares about have not been measured yet. If a community most cares about underwater welding but students have never been asked to demonstrate their capability in this

area, then currently it is not known whether or not any students have this ability. In these situations, it is instructive to simply acknowledge that the current baseline is unknown. Importantly, a school board should never shy away from Goal setting simply because current data doesn't exist or because the school system doesn't currently have a way of measuring it. If the school board is convinced that an area of student performance is essential, it becomes the superintendent's job to figure out how to measure it. Discerning the community's vision for student outcomes is the school board's job and it should pursue that task to wherever it leads. Figuring out how to measure it and implement it is the superintendent's job.

Just like with the community listening, the school board will need a one- to five-page summary of the superintendent's findings regarding student data. With this document in hand, the school board not only has useful information for Goal setting, but it also has meaningful evidence that demonstrates to the community that the school board's decision-making is grounded in student outcomes.

For Goals to be effective, they need to be informed by one- to five-page summaries of the community's vision for student outcomes and of the highest-need and highest-leverage areas of student performance. But another key ingredient remains: Goal setting must also focus on being SMART.

SMART GOAL SETTING

Both in the classroom and in the boardroom, a key to improving student outcomes lies in continuous improvement. Ineffective leaders promise quick fixes and silver bullets; effective

leaders create organizations that are constantly improving. Continuous improvement—both in the classroom and in the boardroom—requires having a clear measure of what you are trying to accomplish, then implementing a strategy, then routinely measuring to clarify whether you are moving toward or away from the desired accomplishment, and then the discipline to make adjustments and begin implementing again. Vague statements about what you are trying to accomplish won't set you up for success. You will need Goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound: SMART.

SPECIFIC

The Goal needs to specify a student population. The Goal has to answer which population of students we're looking at, what they know and are able to do right now, and what we want them to be able to do (the student outcome) three to five years from now. Too often, school boards adopt goals that amount to "we hope kids do good" and are then surprised that the superintendent isn't providing convincing evidence of the goal. In these situations, where specificity is lacking, the failure lies with the school board, not with the superintendent.

An additional aspect of specificity is selecting at least one but no more than five goals—and preferably no more than three. This is a challenge because there will never only be three areas of student outcomes that a school board wants to see improvement in. We have seen even school systems with an enrollment of only two hundred students struggle to narrow their Goals to fewer than ten. The benefits of continuous improvement will not come to those who refuse to prioritize. School boards that choose to have more than five goals benefit themselves by

placating adults while harming students by diluting the school system's focus.

MEASURABLE

The Goal needs to specify exactly what is being measured and preferably what the system of measurement will be. It is more effective to say, "the percentage of students who have demonstrated on grade-level literacy skills using the XYZ assessment" than to say, "the percentage of students who have demonstrated literacy." Once a measure has been identified, then the Goal will need to state what percentage of students need to improve in that area.

In addition, Goals need to include a starting point that describes what the students know now, and an ending point that describes what we want them to know. It is more effective to say, "The percentage of students who have demonstrated on grade-level literacy skills using the XYZ assessment will increase from a-percent to b-percent."

Anything can be measured, but not all measures are equally reliable and not all measures will be considered worth the cost of measurement. As a reminder, the school board's role in Goal setting is to represent the vision of the community, so Goals must not be constrained to data or measures that currently exist. If none of the existing measures capture the community's vision, the school board should signal adoption of a Goal about it anyway and it then becomes the superintendent's job to identify or create an appropriate measure. This often creates challenging choices for the school board: go with data that is already available or go with more ideal data that will require a

cost or require waiting for it, or both. All of these are considerations the school board must wrestle with during this process.

ATTAINABLE

Effective Goals live in the tension between two requirements: ensure that the Goal can be accomplished with available resources AND challenge the organizing such that adult behavior change is required. Both must be true, but finding the balance between them can be complicated.

Goals have to be able to be realistically accomplishable because even though Goals are based on the vision, they are not vision statements. A community's vision will be about 100 percent of students attaining 100 percent of the expectation over the long term, but the Goal describes what slice of that vision will be accomplished in the short term. For this reason, Goals rarely describe 100 percent of the students and rarely describe attaining 100 percent of the expectation; a vision statement would, but a Goal likely would not. Goals that cannot be accomplished will generally have the effect of demoralizing staff and slowing the continuous improvement process.

RESULTS-FOCUSED

Simultaneously, however, Goals must challenge the organization and require adult behavior change. If the school system can achieve the Goal by doing the same thing that it has been doing, then it's not really a Goal. Effective school boards adopt Goals that intentionally cause disruption within the organization. That goals are disruptive is a feature, not a bug. It is common for school boards to adopt goals that are easily accomplished,

but this behavior benefits adults—they get to pretend that children are improving—while harming students.

Additionally, it cannot be reiterated often enough: the result for which school systems exist is to improve student outcomes. So if it's not about student outcomes—a measure of what students know or are able to do—then it's not results-focused, which means it's not a Goal. It is common for school boards to adopt goals that are about the adult inputs—what the adults intend to do or are doing—but not actually about student outcomes. The norm nationwide is for school boards to be adult inputs focused, rather than student outcomes focused. Effective school boards must make the transition from being adult inputs focused to being student outcomes focused.

TIME-BOUND

The Goal needs to have a start date and an end date. This both serves to keep school systems on track regarding whether they're making enough progress and is an essential element of determining whether or not a Goal is attainable.

Part of the benefit of having starting dates and ending dates is that they facilitate both patience and urgency. School systems that are pursuing continuous improvement need to be patient enough to allow staff time to implement and strategies time to work. This is facilitated by having ending dates that are no less than three years away. Without this patience, school systems have a bad habit of jumping from initiative to initiative, never slowing to figure out if anything actually worked. This "flavor of the day" approach to education leadership frustrates educators and undermines students' chances at success. At the same

time, school systems must maintain a sense of urgency; too much patience may be nice for adults but our students only have so much time. This is facilitated by having ending dates that are no more than five years away. Having end dates that don't demand improvement until after a decade fail to spur changes in adult behavior today because staff can reasonably postpone any change that is uncomfortable. Vision statements exist on a ten- to twenty-year time horizon; Goals exist on a three- to five-year time horizon.

Altogether, the full list of criteria necessary for a goal to become a Goal includes:

- It must be about student outcome—not adult inputs.
- It must represent the vision of the community.
- It must be grounded in student data.
- It must have a population and a measure.
- It must have a starting point and an ending point.
- It must have a starting date and an ending date.
- It must but attainable but it must also challenge the organization and require changes in adult behavior.
- There should be no fewer than one Goal and no more than five, preferably no more than three.
- The ending date should be no less than three years out and no more than five years out.

If it doesn't meet these criteria, it's not a Goal; it's just a happy thought that will likely benefit adults at the expense of students.

INTERIM GOALS

The Goals set by school boards reflect the student outcomes

the community wants to see. But because these are student outcomes, they are by definition data that are only available at the end of a cycle—typically no more than once per year. For continuous improvement to be effective, adjustments need to be made throughout the year, not just at the end of it. To monitor progress, more frequently available data is needed. For this, the school board tasks the superintendent with developing a set of progress measures for each Goal. We refer to these progress measures that are aligned to each Goal as Interim Goals. Interim Goals are based on interim data that is regularly updated and that allows the school board to know whether or not the school system is getting closer to being able to accomplish the Goals throughout the year. This avoids having to wait until the end of the school year and to find out if Goals are on track. To be useful as progress measures, Interim Goals must be SMART like Goals, but they must also be predictive of their respective Goals, must update multiple times during the school year, and must be things that the administration can influence. The superintendent will select between one and three of these progress measures per Goal.

The purpose of Interim Goals is to provide insight into whether or not the Goal is likely to be accomplished. For this reason, there needs to be a moderate to strong correlation between the Goal data and the Interim Goal data (we recommend no less than a 0.5 correlation). Often school systems will look at the interim data and think that they are on track, only to get to the end of the year and find out that their students were nowhere near where they thought. This happens when there is not a sufficient correlation between the Goal and the Interim Goal. It's like watching a game and assuming that having more cars in the parking lot is a predicator of whether or not your team

will win; there simply isn't a correlation between the two. Now imagine one team invests a considerable amount of time into getting as many people to show up as possible and into getting as many cars in the parking lot before the game as possible. This is important: they worked *very* hard and sincerely to fill the parking lot. This isn't about whether they worked hard, tried hard, or had good intentions; all of that was true. The issue is that what they chose to work on simply wasn't correlated with winning the game. For Interim Goals to be useful, they have to actually be predictive of the Goal.

Because Interim Goals are based on interim data rather than summative data like Goals, they can provide updated insights multiple times per year. At minimum, Interim Goals will provide new data twice per year, but preferably three or four times. The frequency of measurement corresponds with the frequency of adjusting. If you only get fresh data once per year, you can only make informed corrections once per year. But if you get fresh data two or three or four times per year, children aren't left waiting an entire year for adults to figure out that a strategy isn't working.

Finally, effective Interim Goals measure things that the superintendent can actually impact. If the superintendent doesn't have authority over at least 80 percent of what's being measured, then we say they don't have enough control over it for it to be a viable Interim Goal.

GOAL EXAMPLES

- The percentage of students from our Pre-K program who enter kindergarten school-ready on a multidimensional

assessment will increase from 21 percent on August 1, 2023, to 65 percent by August 1, 2028.

- The percentage of graduates who are successfully persisting in the second year of their postsecondary program will increase from W percent on X to Y percent by Z.
- The percentage of free and reduced lunch–eligible students in kindergarten through second grade who are reading/writing on or above grade level on the district's summative assessment will increase from W percent on X to Y percent by Z.
- The percentage of students at underperforming schools who demonstrate proficiency on the district's assessment for collaboration, communication, and problem-solving will increase from W percent on X to Y percent by Z.
- The percentage of males of color who graduate with an associate's degree will increase from W percent on X to Y percent by Z.

GOAL NON-EXAMPLES

- Students will improve academically.
- Percentage persisting in second-year postsecondary will grow by 5 percent each year.
- The number of findings on the audit will decrease from seven in June 2023 to zero by June 2028.
- Number of high-performing campuses will increase to five by 2028.
- Percentage of graduates having completed an associate's degree and/or been awarded an industry certification by graduation will grow from 10 percent to 30 percent.
- The percentage of quality teachers retained each year will increase from 78 percent in May 2023 to 93 percent in May 2028.

FROM VISIONS AND GOALS TO VALUES AND GUARDRAILS

Once the school board has clarified the community's vision for students and where the school system is going, it is ready to discuss the values of the community, including what the community doesn't want to see happen on the journey to the vision.

CHAPTER 8

THE COMMUNITY'S VALUES AND GUARDRAILS

Recently I needed to get from my office to the airport, so I pulled out my phone to get a rideshare. When I opened the app again to get another ride, the first thing I told it was *where I envisioned going*. In that moment, I gave my driver the goal that I expected them to accomplish.

Now on this day, I happened to know that the most obvious route to the airport was a major highway that was temporarily shut down for construction. So when the driver pulled up, I hopped in and told them *not to take that particular highway*. The value I was trying to protect by telling them not to take that route was time. I gave them a **Guardrail** to adhere to on the way to the goal, the airport.

At this point, I've shared two critical priorities with the Uber driver: the Goal—my vision for where I want to be—and a Guardrail—something they aren't allowed to do because it would violate what I valued: getting there before my plane left.

Once I've given them the Goals and Guardrails, who decides which route to take? Yes, the driver. And who decides whether to go left or right? The driver. And who decides whether to speed up or slow down? The driver. As long as they are headed in the direction of my goal while honoring my guardrail, every other decision regarding how to operate the vehicle is theirs to make.

* * *

IN THE SCHOOL BOARD SETTING

From the getting-to-the-airport example, we can summarize several important points that directly relate to the responsibility that board members have to *govern effectively*:

- The vision is the outcome you want.
- The value is what's critical to pay attention to.
- The Goal is a specific step in the direction of the desired outcome.
- The Guardrail is what is unacceptable on this journey toward the desired outcome.
- Once the school board has specified what the vision, values, Goals, and Guardrails are, it gives the administration freedom to use their judgment to create the route to the desired outcome.

Giving the superintendent a rigid roadmap and restricting them to that path at every step is not the most effective way to govern. Effective governance involves first bringing clarity to each vision, value, Goal, and Guardrail that's established, and then giving the superintendent, teachers, administrators, and other staff members a measure of freedom to use their judgment in figur-

ing out how to reach the desired student outcome in the most effective way possible.

We covered visions and Goals in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we focus on values and Guardrails. Guardrails create the nonnegotiables that must be honored while moving through the Goals on the way to the vision for improved student outcomes.

THE NATURE OF GOVERNING

In the relationship between the school board and the superintendent, where the school board represents the vision and values of the community, the board has the responsibility to express exactly what the community wants students to know and be able to do. They also have to express which nonnegotiable values of the community have to be honored along the journey.

- *Values are the nonnegotiables that must be honored on the journey toward improving student outcomes.*
- *Guardrails are the elements that are not acceptable and must be avoided on that journey.*

Once the school board has offered up the Goals and Guardrails, the rest of the details in terms of coming up with strategies to accomplish reaching the vision belong to the professional educators.

> In governing, board members represent the vision and values of the community, and they rely on the superintendent to determine how to accomplish the vision while honoring the values.

A mistake that is often made by school boards is to offer directives instead of Guardrails. This, however, disables the superintendent from being able to make key decisions and pivot when necessary. Because the needs of our students are variable across time and student populations, it's important to give educators enough freedom to create and pursue the most effective strategies as the needs of students indicate. Guardrails provide that needed freedom while protecting the community's values.

HOW TO TELL IF IT'S A GUARDRAIL OR A DIRECTIVE

A simple way to differentiate between directives and Guardrails is this:

- *Directives tell people what TO do and leave only one or two options.*
- *Guardrails tell people what NOT to do and leave many options while removing one or two.*

In your job, which would you prefer: seeking out your supervisor every day to ask for permission before you're about to do something, or having your supervisor provide you once with a list of things you cannot do and the freedom to make choices as long as they don't violate the list? If you are competent, it's much more effective for your supervisor to give you a short list of what to avoid and says, "As long as you don't do any of these things, you can go out there and do whatever you think needs to happen to accomplish the Goal."

Paradoxically, describing things using negation language, as Guardrails do, creates more freedom for our teachers than giving them a series of directives would. Sometimes, though, word-

ing can be tricky and it can be hard to differentiate between a Guardrail and a directive. In these cases, here's what's important to notice:

> Guardrails leave the superintendent and educators with many choices.

Let's say that, to start with, there are twenty options for moving forward. If as a result of the value statement, three of those options are taken off the table, leaving the superintendent with seventeen options to choose from, then the board has most likely provided Guardrails.

On the other hand, if there are twenty options to start with and, after the unacceptable ones are taken off the table, the superintendent is left with only three possible options to choose from, then the board has almost certainly given directives, regardless of how they're worded.

GUARDRAIL EXAMPLES

- Do not make significant decisions without first engaging with stakeholders impacted by the decision.
- Do not allow the inequitable treatment of students.
- Do not allow teacher/principal compensation or increases to be equal across a bell curve of teacher/principal performance.
- Do not allow campuses to ineffectively implement professional learning communities.
- Do not allow teachers or principals in the bottom two quartiles of performance to serve in low-performing campuses.

GUARDRAIL NON-EXAMPLES

- Enroll fewer students in our low-performing campuses.
- Close all low-performing campuses.
- Keep parents happy.
- Do not fail to hire Mrs. Johnson.
- Do not do anything without prior approval from the board.
- Do not allow staff to ignore board member directives.

WHY GUARDRAILS ARE PROHIBITIONS, NOT DIRECTIVES

The rideshare example of Guardrails illustrates this crucial point. There were about eight options for how to get from my office to the airport. By providing a Guardrail—don't take this one route—I'm protecting my value (timeliness) while preserving freedom for the driver (they select which of the remaining seven options to use). Much of the time, school boards behave in the opposite manner. Instead of telling the driver which option is off limits, they tell the driver which option to take. This approach simultaneously fails to center the key value worth protecting while also depriving the driver of the freedom to choose the route they recognize as most effective—instead of choosing from the remaining seven of the eight options based on how best they can protect the value, they're directed to focus on the one of the eight options that they must use regardless of whether it protects the value.

- In the form of a directive: "Take this particular route of the eight available"
  - Decenters the value by dictating the decision, undermining freedom.
- In the form of a Guardrail: "Do not take this particular route of the eight available"

    - Centers the value by delegating the decision, preserving freedom.

At the core, Guardrails are written the way they are to allow the board to protect the values of the community while allowing maximum freedom for educators to serve the unique needs of students. It is not always obvious at first look, but writing Guardrails as prohibitions on superintendent authority—what the superintendent may **not** do—accomplishes these two objectives. Writing them as directives—what the superintendent **should** do—actually violates both.

Guardrails are intended to create freedom. Two examples of this are the Ten Commandments—a framework handed to Moses for the purpose of creating free will for his people within a clear set of boundaries—and the Bill of Rights—a framework handed to us by our founding fathers for the purpose of ensuring freedom throughout our country. In the same way, boards use Guardrails to set boundaries that create freedom for their superintendent.

- **Ten Commandments:** shall have no, shall not make, shall not take, keep it holy, honor, shall not murder, shall not commit, shall not steal, shall not bear, shall not covet (eight of ten are "shall not")
- **Bill of Rights** (**Amendments one through ten**)**:** shall make no law, shall not be infringed, no soldier shall, shall not be violated, no person shall, shall enjoy, no fact tried by a jury shall, shall not be required, shall not be construed, powers not delegated (nine of ten are "shall not")

THEORY OF ACTION: A UNIQUE TYPE OF GUARDRAIL

One of the problems that school systems face as they grow is that it can be really tough to get any kind of behavior alignment among the adults, especially if it's not possible to get everyone together in the same place at the same time. The larger the system, the more tools you can benefit from that are aimed at helping people understand how to work in an aligned fashion.

So as school systems grow, instead of only having standard Guardrails that accomplish negation, it can be beneficial for the board to collaborate with the superintendent to define a special type of Guardrail: a Theory of Action. The key difference is that, instead of using "shall not" to accomplish negation, a Theory of Action Guardrail uses if-then statements. Both standard and Theory of Action Guardrails accomplish negation, they just accomplish it through different means.

In addition, whereas standard Guardrails are focused on more general values held by the community, a Theory of Action is narrowly focused on implementation-level values that are informed by both the community's values and operational insights from the superintendent.

INTERIM GUARDRAILS

Just like Goals have Interim Goals, Guardrails also have a means of monitoring progress through the year: Interim Guardrails. As with Interim Goals, Interim Guardrails are created by the superintendent, must be SMART, and must be updateable multiple times per year.

GIVING A SUPERINTENDENT FREEDOM TO DO THEIR JOB

The intention of Guardrails is to enable superintendents and educators to do their jobs more effectively in the pursuit of board-created Goals that honor the community's values. Guardrails offer the right balance of guidance and freedom to support the work they do while always maintaining student outcomes in focus. Teachers, administrators, and the superintendent all bring key insights that come into play when developing strategies to improve student outcomes.

In the next chapter, we'll go into detail about what distinguishes board work from superintendent work. We'll go in depth into what's expected of each, as well as ways for the two entities to collaborate effectively for better outcomes for our students.

CHAPTER 9

BOARD WORK VERSUS SUPERINTENDENT WORK

Upon reviewing the proposed annual budget, a group of newly elected school board members noticed that some schools were receiving smaller allocations of funds while other schools had big pots of money allocated to them. Finding this peculiar, they delved deeper into the situation and discovered that money was being distributed on a political basis. Groups of parents who had stronger connections to board members, and who tended to be more affluent, had been able to sway school board members to allocate more resources to their children's schools. The distribution of funds had nothing to do with student need or student outcomes.

These new board members decided this wasn't right—money should never be distributed in this manner. Determined to redistribute funds in a more equitable fashion, they asked the superintendent to come up with a weighted funding formula that considers what students need. Each school would then

receive a weighted amount of money based on the needs of the student population at that school.

Two identical schools might end up receiving equal amounts. But if the majority of students in school A are English-language learners while the majority of students in school B are native-English speakers, for example, then school A would likely get slightly more funding than school B to provide additional language learning support. To the new board members, this approach seemed a much fairer distribution based on real student needs. What's more, the principal and other decision makers of each school would be given a significant level of freedom to determine how best to spend the money allocated to their school.

Shortly after this new system was implemented, parents from one of the most affluent communities started to complain about program cutbacks in their children's school. At the next school board meeting, these parents showed up and demanded to know why the board had cut the debate program from their children's school. The board denied cutting this program, but the parents refused to back down. "You used to give us a line item distribution to fund the debate program," they stated. "Now we don't see it. Where is it?"

The new board members explained that the old way of doing things had changed, with funds now being distributed formulaically. But these parents weren't having it. They were livid, and they wanted their line-item debate funding back. "You are harming the outcomes of our students by depriving them of a program that has gotten proven results for years. Where is your commitment to improving student outcomes now?" they demanded.

In response, one of the school board members requested that the item be placed on the next school board agenda for discussion and potential action. If you were the school board member, how would you vote?

Tough scenario, right? Here is where distinguishing between board work and superintendent work becomes critical.

* * *

BOARD WORK CRITERIA

Anything that meets the following is considered board work:

- It's directly related to and mentioned in the language of the board's Goals.
- It's directly related to and mentioned in the language of the board's Guardrails.
- It's work that is legally required of the school board and that would be illegal for the board to delegate.

Board work is largely defined by the school board, since the board is responsible for setting Goals and Guardrails. Every school board needs to define and focus on no more than five Goals and no more than five Guardrails (we largely recommend no more than one to three of each). These become the board's priorities.

If an issue emerges that is not directly addressed in the language of the Goals and Guardrails, it is the superintendent's responsibility to work on that (unless there's a legal requirement for the board to work on it). So unless debate is directly mentioned by

one of the Goals or one of the Guardrails (which it absolutely could be, but usually isn't), then resolving how and whether to fund the debate program is superintendent work, not board work.

> Board work invites the school board to lean into the operational areas defined by its Goals, Guardrails, or legally required items. But everything else operational is explicitly delegated to the superintendent.

Superintendent work exists in the void of everything that is not board work. The school board remains focused on representing the vision of the community regarding what students need to know and be able to do, and on representing the values of the community, indicating the nonnegotiables that have to be honored on the way to accomplishing the vision. The superintendent manages the rest of the school system with their guiding focus being accomplishing the Goals and honoring the Guardrails.

WORK THAT'S DIRECTLY RELATED TO GOALS AND GUARDRAILS

School board work that is directly related to Goals and/or Guardrails includes any of the following:

- Listening for the vision and values of the community with regards to student outcomes
- Writing down the community's vision and values
- Codifying visions and values into policy statements that become Goals and Guardrails
- Monitoring progress relative to these visions and values
- Aligning resources to the vision and values
- Communicating progress and results back to the community

If something is, in fact, board work, then the board needs to take the time to discuss the matter. If it can't be resolved during the meeting, then communicate what the next steps will be.

ANYTHING THAT'S LEGALLY REQUIRED

In addition to doing the work that's necessary to create, monitor, and communicate Goals and Guardrails, the school board is responsible for whatever it is legally required to do. What this means:

> For something to meet the threshold of being legally required of the board, it has to be specified in the state or federal law as a requirement for the school board that cannot be delegated to others.

This specificity is important because nobody wants to waste board members' time on tasks that others should be doing. For example, a law may state that the elected school board will ensure an accounting system is in place. This does not mean that board members have to personally install a copy of Quicken the second they get elected! Many staff members within the school system are much better prepared to handle this task. The board must make sure an accounting system is installed, but the job of installing the system can be delegated to other qualified individuals on staff.

There are tasks that cannot be delegated, however. A prime example is the job of hiring a superintendent. I don't know of any state where this task can be delegated—it's a job that the board itself must do. The board cannot outsource the decision-making to someone else.

Therefore, something is legally required of the school board when it meets all of the following:

- It is within the state or federal statutes.
- It is an action that is required of board members.
- It explicitly cannot be delegated.

Any work that does not meet the three criteria of being legally required of the board *and* is not directly related to Goals and Guardrails most likely falls under the category of superintendent work. The moment the board work stops, the superintendent work begins.

SUPERINTENDENT WORK: EVERYTHING ELSE

Anything that's not school board work is, by definition, superintendent work. The work of the superintendent begins wherever the vacuum of leadership of the board ends. Or conversely, the authority of the superintendent ends where the expression of leadership on the part of the board begins.

Even so, there are gray areas where it's not crystal clear whether something is board work or superintendent work. In practice, board members are often unclear as to whether something really belongs to the superintendent. Why is this?

A big reason for having a level of uncertainty is that, often, the people who show up to meetings to make demands of the board are the same ones who show up to make demands of the superintendent. When the same person brings up different complaints, some that would fall under board work and some that would fall under superintendent work, it can be confusing

in the moment to determine whose responsibility it really is. In these instances, a helpful mental framework for distinguishing between the two involves getting clarity on this:

> Are we providing owner service, or are we providing customer service?

CUSTOMER SUPPORT VERSUS OWNER SUPPORT

To consistently differentiate between board work and superintendent work, you need a firm understanding of the key differences between customer support and owner support.

Imagine walking into a national restaurant chain and buying a sandwich. You sit down, eat your food, and leave. When you do this, is your behavior that of a customer or an owner?

Most people would answer that this is the behavior of a customer—and they would be correct. The entire interaction is a transactional exchange of value, where you exchange an amount of value you own (money) for a product with a value that you want (a sandwich). That is classic customer behavior.

Now let's assume that you enjoyed your food so much that, when you go home that evening, you decide to go online and buy stock in the company. The moment when you purchase the restaurant's stock, is your behavior that of a customer or an owner? You are behaving as an owner because you're making a long-term investment in the organization. This behavior is neither transactional nor episodic; you're interested in seeing growth of value over time.

The day after you buy stock, you go back to the restaurant, buy

another sandwich, and eat it. Is your behavior that of a customer or an owner?

What is sometimes surprising is that your behavior is that of a customer, even though now you also happen to be an owner. In that moment, even though you own stock in the company, you are still there for a transaction. You might care more about the transaction now that you're an owner and you might see things through a slightly different lens, but you are still there engaging in a transaction.

> Customer behavior is transactional and episodic.
>
> Owner behavior is a long-term investment.

What this illustrates is that someone can be *both* an owner and a customer. In fact, this is an incredibly common scenario. The defining characteristic of whether someone is an owner or a customer *in the moment* is their behavior: in the moment, is their *behavior* that of a customer or that of an owner.

The Conundrum School Board Members Frequently Find Ourselves In

At a school board meeting, many of the people who are owners of the organization (community members) are also customers of that organization (parents/staff). Public schools belong to the communities they serve, making parents co-owners. At the same time, parents are customers because they're trying to get a specific value that is transactional and episodic, with the transaction concluding once their children are no longer students in that school system.

If someone is both an owner and a customer of the school system, the challenge for the board is to determine who the person is being in the moment. Figuring this out is very important, for the following reasons:

- *The board renders owner service and support—that's board work*
- *The superintendent and staff render customer service and support—that's superintendent work*

The way to figure out how someone is behaving at the moment is to refer back to the restaurant example. If they are behaving in a way that is transactional and seeks value from the organization for themselves or their family (e.g., trying to get their child into a specific class), then it is customer behavior and the issue needs to be handled by the superintendent. If they are behaving in a way that's more long-term and involves investing in increasing the value of the organization (e.g., trying to get a change to the board-adopted Goals), then it is owner behavior and the issue may be appropriate for the school board to address.

Going back to our earlier debate program example, the parents who are frustrated about debate funds being cut are, as community members and parents of students within the school system, both owners and customers. However, when they approach the board to demand debate money, they are exhibiting customer behavior because they are trying to get for their children access to a service of the school system.

So when in doubt as to whether the person speaking to you is acting as an owner or a customer, look at the behavior at the moment. Behavior that involves an exchange of value is

customer behavior that needs to be addressed by the superintendent. Behavior that involves a long-term investment in the organization is owner behavior that can be addressed by the school board. You may be talking to an owner, but if they're behaving like a customer, you need to direct them to the superintendent.

WHY ARE THESE DISTINCTIONS IMPORTANT?

You may be wondering why all this matters. So long as the job gets done or the problem is resolved, does it really matter who takes care of it? The short answer is yes, it matters, and here are a few key reasons why.

Improved customer service: The school board is the worst possible party in the school system to provide customer service. Parents and other community members need customer services to be offered by whoever is closest to the problem and who can solve it in a timely manner. If a parent has a problem with their child's teacher, a conversation with the teacher or the principal will be far more effective than a conversation with the school board.

Less chance that issues will fall through the cracks: When it's unclear who is responsible for what, it becomes too easy for issues to get overlooked because each party believes it's the other party's responsibility.

Less risk of duplicating efforts and wasting resources: Conversely, if both parties take responsibility and immediately start working to address the problem, efforts are being duplicated, leading to inefficient governing and administering, along with

unnecessarily taking up time and resources that may need to be utilized on other matters.

Improved decision-making: The best people to make decisions for children are the people closest to the child. School boards should create the expectation that educators are trusted professionals who are best positioned to address individual student needs.

Improved fairness: The school board, being so far removed from day-to-day operational decisions, is poorly positioned to understand the dynamics at play and make the optimal solution. Instead, what often happens when school boards get involved in individual student or school-level decisions is that they simultaneously undermine the leadership of their educators and contribute to a culture where the people whose children receive the best service and most resources are the people who have the best relationships with a school board member. This is a harmful and immoral manner with which to operate a school system.

WHAT THIS BOARD COULD DO INSTEAD

Of course, this does not mean that the new school board with the vocal group of parents expressing their displeasure with the sudden absence of a debate program should simply ignore them. That would be both insensitive and inappropriate. We coach school boards in these situations to do four things: gratitude, listening, connection, and invitation.

Gratitude: Express gratitude and create for the parents the experience of being valued.

Regardless of how the debate team had been funded in the past, these parents are justifiably upset that a program their children benefited from is no longer in place. Whatever the superintendent decides to do about the situation may or may not satisfy these parents, but at a bare minimum, these parents need to know that the school board is grateful for and inviting of their comments and participation in their children's education. Thank people for their time; honor that the school board members are merely representatives of the community at large, not somehow more elevated sovereigns. School board members have been hired by the community and entrusted with the well-being of the community's children, but they are still community members who are no more inherently valuable or worthy of consideration than anyone else in it.

> **Listening:** Board members need to always take a moment to be generous in their listening and give people the experience of being heard.

It's not enough to passively listen. School board members need to actively create for community members the experience of having been heard. There are many ways for the board to accomplish this. One method we commonly train school board members to use as a means of acknowledging that we are hearing what is being said is to reflect back what we heard people say. Let's assume a parent said to me as a board member, "We're upset with you, and you need to reinstate our funding for debate."

I would respond with, "I heard you say that, 'We're upset with you, and you need to reinstate our funding for debate.' Did I hear you correctly?" This practice mirrors back what the individual said, using exactly the same language they used. This makes it

clear to them that they have been heard. You can then follow up with additional comments, such as, "Are you feeling frustrated? Is your concern that this is unfair to you and your children and you are here for a specific solution?" If they agree that you understood their comment, thank them for having shared.

Even when members of the community are telling you something you don't want to hear, it's important that, as a school board member, you try your best to be gracious about it. Create for them a genuine experience of having been heard. Give them a generous and empathetic reception, regardless of what's being shared. Being courteous and attentive doesn't mean you agree with them; you are simply extending the courtesy of listening to them as their representative.

Once the person's grievances have been listened to and the individual knows, without a doubt, that they've been heard, the next step is for the board to determine whether this issue falls within board work or superintendent work. Since resolving the debate team issue is not directly related to a Goal or Guardrail and the board is not legally required to be involved in the distribution of debate program funds, the board must redirect the parents to where they need to go to get their needs addressed, which in this case is the superintendent.

> **Connection:** Board members need to connect community members to the staff who are closest to the situation and who are in the best position to make a choice.

In a school board meeting, this usually means connecting the concerned community member(s) directly with the superintendent in that public engagement moment. Turn to the

superintendent and state, "This is something we've delegated to you. How do you want to respond to these folks?" It is now the superintendent's responsibility to follow up with the community members who have a grievance. Most clever superintendents will have a member of their staff ready and waiting for such moments, and will direct that staff member to go and immediately engage with the parents.

> **Invitation:** Board members need to extend an invitation to connection about the pieces of the circumstance that are, in fact, board work.

Even though the immediate situation is superintendent work rather than board work, that doesn't mean that there aren't relevant policy concerns that should apply the next time an issue like this is raised. For that reason, the last step we recommend is to circle back and extend an invitation to the aggrieved party. For example, the board can say something similar to this to the debate team parents: "The superintendent will connect with you on this. Once it's sorted through, if you feel something is missing in our policies that might have better addressed this situation, come back and visit with us. We are open to discussing the idea of a policy change."

It's important that community members know that you are leaving the door open for conversation about board work, not simply brushing them off to be dealt with by staff instead.

CHAPTER 10

UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENTS

In previous chapters, we've gone over inputs, outputs, and outcomes. When we set Goals, these Goals are based on desired outcomes: what is the end result we want to create that's a measure of what students know and are able to do? The measure of these outcomes will be some form of *assessment*.

For many people, assessment is a scary word, but it doesn't have to be. This chapter strives to unpack what is meant by the term *assessment data*, how this data can work to improve student outcomes, and how we can eliminate some of our common misconceptions about assessments.

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT?

When we talk about assessments, we're referring to any systematic approach that tries to understand what students know and are able to do.

- *Assessments shine a light on where students are academically and whether or not they've grown.*

Assessments come in several different categories, including the following:

- **Diagnostic:** Conducted before the instructional cycle begins to get a sense of where students are relative to a specific set of student expectations. It provides insights into what the student knows coming in and allows us to calibrate our instructional plan to try to best meet the student's needs. These assessments take place at the start of the school year.
- **Formative:** Takes place in the midst of the instructional cycle to provide a measure of what is happening with student learning during instruction. Quizzes are a classic example of a formative assessment, offering insights into which areas need to be retaught and what changes need to be made to the instructional approach. These assessments happen periodically throughout the year, such as weekly or monthly.
- **Interim:** Occurs in the midst of the instructional cycle to measure to what extent students have learned what we expect them to learn for the year. This assessment gauges the progress students are making toward what we want them to know by the end of the year. Interim assessments happen two or three times annually.
- **Summative:** Done at the end of the instructional cycle, this assessment measures where students are at the conclusion of the school year relative to where we expected them to be.

All these types of assessments offer valuable information board members and school systems can use to make adjustments that will best serve their students. Interim assessments are especially

critical because they offer predictive insights into how students will perform on summative assessments. This matters because, by the time summative assessments are conducted, there is no time left to make needed changes during the school year for the students to succeed.

Much like a scoreboard in a sporting match, interim assessments keep score to reveal where we are in the game so we can figure out what strategies to adopt midgame to improve the final score that's reflected in the summative assessment.

THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENTS IN GOAL SETTING

In terms of the school board setting Goals, it's important to recognize the differences between these types of assessments to be able to base different types of Goals on the right measures:

- Long-term Goals set by the board must be based on **summative assessments**.
- Interim Goals must be based on **interim assessments**.

CRITERION-REFERENCED VERSUS NORM-REFERENCED SCORING

When considering assessments, it's important to be able to distinguish between criterion-referenced and norm-referenced scoring.

- Criterion-referenced scoring measures performance based on a specific set of standards that all students are expected to know. If students answer nine out of ten questions correctly, their score is 90 percent. Assessments scored in this manner show where every student is relative to a set of standards.

- Norm-referenced scoring measures performance based on answers provided by other students. Students are scored on a curve. Assessments scored in this manner show where students are compared to each other.

When setting Goals, it's important to recognize the fundamental differences between both these scoring systems. Performance measurements based on norm-referenced scores provide different information from performance measurements based on criterion-referenced scores. Both provide valuable sets of information, but they're very different sets of information, and the board needs to be mindful of which to use when establishing Goals.

- Criterion-referenced scoring provides data on student proficiency.
- Norm-referenced scoring provides insights into where students are relative to other groups of students.

For example, during the pandemic, many schools sought insights into which virtual instruction systems were most effective. In this case, norm-referenced scoring data was the preferred choice—it provided the information needed to see which students were ahead of the curve, and which were behind the curve, in order to identify the best virtual instruction approaches.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN GOAL TYPES

In addition to being able to distinguish between assessment types and scoring styles, school board members need to be able to differentiate types of Goals.

The three major types of Goals are:

- **Proficiency:** What percentage of students reached or exceeded the threshold we set?
- **Growth:** Where do we expect students to be relative to where they started?
- **Comparison:** What is either the proficiency or the growth of one group of students compared to another group of students?

With proficiency Goals, we define student expectations and we set a value that we want students to meet or surpass. This is an example of a proficiency Goal: The percentage of students who are at grade level in reading will increase from 70 percent to 80 percent.

With growth Goals, we're looking more at steps taken rather than proficiency reached. This measure is about the level of growth experienced relative to where the student started. This is an example of a growth Goal: the percentage of third graders who began below grade level this year and grew at least one and a half grade levels through the course of the year will increase from 70 percent to 80 percent.

With comparison Goals, we want to close gaps between higher-performing and lower-performing groups of students. This is an example of a comparison Goal: the gap between students who started the year below grade level and students who started the year above grade level will decrease from a twenty-point gap to a five-point gap.

GOALS AND ASSESSMENTS

Goals are vital to ensuring that a community's vision for its children is being made the focus of adult attention. But Goals require some type of measure of what students know or are able to do. As such, you can't have a Goal without having assessment data on which to base the Goal. If a Goal isn't measurable, then adults are simply invited to pretend whether or not students were benefited by the Goal. This practice tends to be most harmful for students who are already the most vulnerable.

Without assessment data, school boards have no way of knowing whether or not children are actually receiving the blessing we owe them. So even though assessment is central to pursuing educational justice for students, like any tool, it can be abused. And when that happens, misconceptions about assessment undermine adults willingness to harness the benefits of assessment on behalf of students. To protect our ability to protect children, these common misconceptions about assessment must be addressed.

MISCONCEPTION 1: ASSESSMENT IS INHERENTLY HARMFUL TO STUDENTS

We want engineers building bridges who have been assessed. We want doctors operating on our loved ones who have been assessed. We want a way of knowing if people know the things they need to know to protect ourselves and our communities. Assessments at the career level are on the spectrum of assessment that begins at the schooling level. Assessments are simply intended to measure what students know and how much they've learned in a given time period.

An assessment is simply a tool that's absolutely essential to the effective construction of knowledge. Just as home builders need screwdrivers, levels, and pliers, educators and board members need assessments as tools of the trade. As with any other tools, people can abuse assessments. Board members have to make sure this doesn't happen. When used to provide us with the information we need to help construct knowledge in the minds of our students, they offer a powerful, effective means of making improvements to student outcomes. They are essential for improving instructional practices. If you're not assessing, you're not teaching, because you have no way of knowing if students have absorbed what you've presented, and you have no way of knowing what adjustments need to be made.

What's more, assessments play key roles in the learning process through encouraging long-term memory creation. Part of the neurological science of learning involves students migrating information out of short-term working memory and into long-term memory. One strategy for supporting this migration is assessment. When students are taught something on Monday of week 1 and then quizzed on it on Friday of week 1 (this is usually formative assessment), the process of migration begins. Then when the same material is assessed again at the end of the semester period (this is often interim assessment), the process continues. When students are assessed on the same material again at the end of the year, requiring them to recall information learned months earlier (this is usually summative assessment), the associations with that learning are strengthened and reinforced in the brain's physical structures. In this way, appropriately designed and spaced assessment directly contributes to the learner's ability to master content.

Assessments help improve instructional practices.

Assessments help solidify students' long-term memory creation.

MISCONCEPTION 2: STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS ARE INHERENTLY HARMFUL TO STUDENTS

For all the same reasons that assessments, in general, can be beneficial to students, standardized assessments can be beneficial. When used effectively, they serve as a tool to improve the delivery of instruction to students. Standardized assessments are absolutely essential to learning.

Can they be abused? As with any tool, the answer is yes, so once again, the school board and superintendent need to guard against any form of abuse. For example, if a school is conducting standardized assessments every month over the entire year's material, that's not beneficial to students—that's an abuse of standardized assessments. There's a good reason interim assessments are conducted only two or three times a year. Overuse of interim assessment would be harmful to students, but that's an adult behavior failure, not a failure of the tool. If an adult throws a pair of pliers and hits someone with them, we don't reach the conclusion that all pliers are bad; we address the harmful adult behavior.

When used correctly, standardized assessments serve as a way to determine what students know and are able to do in a manner that is consistent across a group of assessment takers. The "standardized" part of the assessment simply means that the protocol surrounding the assessment should be consistent across groups of students being assessed.

Standardized assessments can be conducted at the classroom level, with every student in that class getting the same quiz, or at the system level, where the same assessment is conducted for different groups of students across all schools. Having some level of standardization in scoring introduces a measure of fairness when comparing results across different groups within a school system.

Standardized assessments provide performance transparency, giving board members and educators insight into how well the educational system is working at one school compared to another school. With this data, leaders can make the necessary adjustments to serve all students better. Standardized scoring simply means you're comparing apples with apples, not apples with oranges, when looking at data sets. Many professions—medicine, technology, engineering, construction, truck driving, and more—rely on standardized assessment as part of their systems for promoting fairness and ensuring performance. This is used to protect all of us—ensure doctors in multiple hospitals all give the right medicine, engineers design bridges across the state that can all carry the right load, system administrators design servers across an organization that all protect our data, etc. When the transparency of performance across multiple sites matters, well-formed standardized assessment is an appropriate response.

Transparency isn't the only good reason to have standardized data. It's also immensely useful for helping complex systems identify outliers and make needed corrections. But if the data isn't apples to apples, it's harder to know what is noise and what is signal. Standardized assessments give rise to system-level instructional practice improvement. They point to where adult

behaviors are working to improve student outcomes so that these behaviors can be duplicated.

MISCONCEPTION 3: STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS ARE ABOUT FILLING IN BUBBLES

Many educators have observed that the way a question on an assessment is constructed—its "item type"—has a meaningful impact on assessment. Assessments where students fill in an a, b, c, d, or e bubble for hundreds of questions for hours and hours conjure up some of my worst personal memories about assessment as well. Fortunately, when we know better, we can do better.

In the same way that families have begun asking for more engaging instructional materials for their students than bland worksheets, educators have appropriately begun demanding more effective assessment methods than just filling in bubbles.

Modern standardized assessments are not limited to this practice. Standardized assessment can involve rubrics that evaluate a portfolio of student work, verbal or physical demonstrations of learning that are scored consistently, and nonbubble item types such as written paragraphs or matching lists of items. School boards can set Goals based on standardized assessments that rely on item types that better match the style of instruction teachers and families want to see in their classrooms.

MISCONCEPTION 4: STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS ARE BAD BECAUSE THEY ARE BIASED

All assessments are inherently biased in some way, whether

or not they're standardized. Every assessment—including everything from first grade classroom end-of-week quizzes to physicians' board certifications—was created by someone who deployed aspects of their worldview, their language, their understanding of the material into the assessment. Asking if standardized assessments are biased is the wrong question. Here is what to ask instead: (1) is the bias that is present harmful to the collection of accurate data, and (2) what have we done to identify and address harmful bias? As an example, here's a question from a third-grade math assessment:

> If 300 crayons are added to 100 crayons, how many crayons are there?

Applying the wrong question actually creates more potential for harm. When asked, "Is this question biased?" most people suggest it is not. That is asking the wrong question and that is the wrong answer to the wrong question. This question is clearly biased. The better questions to ask are, "For whom is this question biased and is the bias that is present harmful to the collection of accurate data?" If children are being assessed who have no familiarity with crayons—as could be the case with some asylee groups (a situation that actually came up in one of my schools) or children experiencing similar traumas—this is certainly a biased question. Does that bias harm the collection of accurate data? It depends on context. For the general population, probably not. The question doesn't require the test taker to know what a crayon is, only that it's an item being counted. But only "probably not" rather than "certainly not" because if a child does not know what a crayon is, this may slow a child down as they try to figure that out, which could have an impact on their overall performance. But if the assessment is exclusively going

to be administered to groups for whom crayons are outside of their cultural context, then yes, the question has a high enough likelihood of harm that I'd consider omitting it. Context matters.

Of equal importance is taking time to ensure that assessments have been vetted for bias. Each item in an assessment should be reviewed by multiple teams in an effort to identify any inappropriate items whether regarding grade level of the standards being assessed, grade level of the language in the questions, developmental appropriateness of the material, or bias.

It's worth noting that while all assessment has the capacity for harmful bias in its design, standardized assessments—when well designed—have a heightened capacity to protect against bias due to the more structured administration of the assessment—a protection harder to achieve in nonstandardized assessments.

MISCONCEPTION 5: STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS ARE BAD BECAUSE THEY ARE RACIST

Can standardized assessments be used in a manner that is disproportionately harmful to some student groups based on cultural, ethnic, or racial background? Absolutely. All assessment contains bias, so it is very possible that the nature of the bias can introduce disproportionality. Anyone who suggests otherwise is poorly informed. As such, concerns about race-based disproportionality in assessment—standardized or nonstandardized—should be taken seriously and evaluated.

That said, the suggestion that standardized assessments are inherently racist and therefore should never be used is dangerously harmful to the very students the idea seeks to protect. If

there is a particular student group that has been underserved by its school system, the most effective way school systems have of systematically identifying and diagnosing that is through standardized assessment. To walk away from standardized assessment is to subject students furthest from educational justice to the ravages of a system that neither notices their needs nor calibrates to attend to them. Proponents of this misguided approach have real concerns that should inspire real action; causing direct and lasting harm to students by perpetuating a school system's ineffectiveness at serving them is not the answer.

INAPPROPRIATE USE OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

An assessment of what our students know and are able to do is a valuable tool, but tools that are not used as intended can do more harm than good. Standardized assessments are designed for specific purposes. Used incorrectly, they can yield misleading data that results in poor decisions being made. Mis-assessing children is a terrible waste of their time and can do lasting harm. The data must always be used the right way.

A standardized assessment can *never* tell you a child's worth. It cannot assert a child's value. The only thing an assessment can indicate is how students performed on the items that were asked. That's it. Trying to read more into the data is an inappropriate use of standardized assessments.

Furthermore, if students are assessed on what they know in these two areas but nothing is done with the data, that is an inappropriate use of standardized assessments. If data is collected but nothing is done with it to analyze what's working,

what isn't working, and what can be improved, then everyone's time has been wasted, especially the students' time.

DOES CONSTANT TEST PREPPING HELP?

No. This is a myth perpetuated by, not surprisingly, the test prep industry. What does support improved performance is a small amount of preparation regarding the item types that will be used in the assessment and the general design of the assessment. This familiarity helps a test taker be better positioned to demonstrate what they know on the assessment. That's a very beneficial thing for the test taker. But it only takes a few hours to do this. Endless test prepping that begins weeks and months before an assessment is time wasted and is a practice that is actively harmful to children. What improves performance on standardized assessments? When students are taught the assessed material to a depth of knowledge that allows them to use the material in new ways. There are no shortcuts.

The first two steps for improving school board effectiveness are developing a focused mindset and then clarifying priorities. School boards get clarity on their community's visions, values, and Goals for the students. They then create SMART Goals based on standardized assessments and set up Guardrails to guide their superintendent. What's next for them to do is to monitor their efforts to ensure that they continue to impact the classrooms in a way that benefits the students and remains in alignment with the community's vision and values.

STEP THREE

MONITOR PROGRESS

CHAPTER 11

EFFECTIVE PROGRESS MONITORING

The literature on leadership echoes the same points over and over: effective leadership teams clarify their priorities and then invest a significant amount of time monitoring progress toward those priorities. It's no different for school boards. But knowing the monitoring progress is a vital behavior in the boardroom is very different than engaging in effective progress monitoring. This is an area where, for most school board members, a significant amount of adult behavior change is going to be necessary.

One of our school boards was getting ready to begin monthly progress monitoring of their recently adopted Goals and asked us to lead a series of practice monitoring sessions. Prior to starting these sessions, we covered monitoring in depth, explaining why it matters, how it's done, what the benefits are, and the major dos and don'ts. Then we held the first practice session.

It did not go well. The board members were making every

mistake we had cautioned them to avoid. They were offering advice instead of asking authentic questions ("Do you plan to start using this strategy I used when I worked in the district?"). They failed to express curiosity about the long-term strategy needed for improvement to take place and instead focused on tactics and frustrations from social media ("Some of the people I heard from said they didn't like the professional development session. Who was leading that?"). And they failed to ask the superintendent any questions about his plan for accomplishing the Goals. I reminded them that their job was to solicit from the superintendent what's working, what's not working, and what's the strategy for moving forward—but that since they were so busy telling the superintendent what to do, they never got around to learning if the superintendent actually had a plan or the leadership skills to implement it.

To bring home the point, I let them hear themselves. "I'm going to play back what I heard during this monitoring session," I told them, "and you need to get ready, because this is not going to be charitable." I proceeded to read to them, word for word, questions they had presented during our practice monitoring session. Then I asked the group, "Which of these is an effective monitoring question?"

The room was silent. "That's correct," I interrupted their silence. "None of the above."

Nationally certified school board coaches are trained to be caring and supportive, but also direct and clear. "After having this 'monitoring' conversation, you have absolutely no additional idea what's happening for your students or whether your superintendent has a plan or an understanding of what the

challenges are. Your children are suffering, and your behavior is a contributing factor."

This group of school board members clearly cared for students and wanted to improve public education. But it's never enough to simply love children and want to make a difference. You have to be able to do the work effectively.

After that session, the board members leaned into the opportunity. They actually read the monitoring report in advance and they planned out some of their questions in advance. Some even asked my team for one-on-one tutoring sessions.

At our next practice monitoring session, there was a world of difference. This time, the board members refrained from offering advice and instead asked questions about the superintendent's strategy for addressing the needs of its students who were furthest from accomplishing the board's adopted Goals. Our second practice session, compared to the first, was a huge success.

To understand why being effective at Goal monitoring in the boardroom is so important to improving student outcomes, it's helpful to reflect on monitoring Goals in the classroom.

* * *

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

If there is any magic taking place in public education, it doesn't happen in the administrative offices or even in school board meetings—it's happening in the classroom through the connection between the educator and the learner. Therefore, school

systems must constantly be obsessed with how they can increase the magic taking place in each classroom. There are a few ways to go about this, and they center on doing one of the following:

1. Increasing the **quality** of instruction that students are experiencing.
2. Increasing the **quantity** of quality instruction that students are experiencing.

If neither of these two variables is increasing, student outcomes are unlikely to improve. Quality and quantity are the two main levers we can pull on.

Increasing the *quantity* of quality instruction students are experiencing is fairly straightforward. There are many ways to achieve this, including prioritizing quality instruction a few more hours of each day, adding after-school or before-school enrichment opportunities, adding summer school programs, moving to a year-round model, improving school culture so that students spend less time suspended, and other possibilities.

Increasing the *quality* of instruction, however, is not as straightforward. It's a lot harder to do. Increasing the *quality* of instruction means that we're finding ways to ensure that the instruction being offered tomorrow will be even more effective than it was yesterday. One of the most common strategies is to implement a continuous improvement cycle. This cycle frequently involves the teacher working with a coach—who could be a master teacher, instructional coach, or similar role—to set Goals, create a plan for the improvement-seeking teacher to accomplish the Goals, implement the plan in the classroom (often with real-time support from the coach), reflect on what

worked and what didn't, make adjustments, and then start the cycle all over again.

A critical element of this cycle is the coach helping the teacher see what's working, what isn't, and what adjustments can be made for more effective instruction to take place: progress monitoring. Together, the coach and teacher can compare student data to discover which lessons students are learning and which lessons they're still struggling with, and improvement plans can be made so that the next lesson gets increasingly effective. This iterative cycle is repeated again and again, but without progress monitoring, continuous improvement does not happen.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN THE BOARDROOM

Given that monitoring performance in the classroom and making adjustments based on what's observed are critical to achieving improvement in the classroom, it's important to ask what the school board is doing to inspire this **cycle of continuous improvement**. Too often in public education, leaders do not pay attention to what's working and what's not working. The result can be a revolving door of initiatives/programs/silver bullets that drain resources, frustrate staff, and fail students. Breaking this cycle requires having clearly agreed upon data, a predictable cadence of reviewing the data to see what's working/not working, and the expectation that this information impacts what happens next. This is the purpose of monitoring. Goal monitoring is a conversation between the school board and superintendent that provides boards the opportunity to evaluate the alignment between the community's vision for student outcomes (Goals) and current student performance/growth (reality). While Goals and reality may not match perfectly, it

only becomes problematic when there is no evidence of student growth. And even if students aren't yet growing and making progress, that's only catastrophic if the superintendent doesn't have sufficiently aggressive strategies in place for helping students make progress.

HOW IS GOAL MONITORING BENEFICIAL?

In addition to clarifying student and superintendent performance, monitoring—when done well—confers several other organizational benefits:

- **Lead by example:** What happens in the boardroom is more likely to be echoed in the classroom. Board behavior sets the culture for an institution. If board members want a culture where teachers are open and reflective in their craft, they set the stage for that by demonstrating what it looks like for the board and superintendent to be open and reflective—grounded in student outcomes data—in their craft as well.
- **Clarify strategies:** When the board receives monitoring reports from the superintendent, the report should be at a sixth-grade level and include how the superintendent will respond to the data. If the data says things are slightly off track, the superintendent's strategy should reflect that. If the data says that performance is completely off track, the superintendent's strategy should reflect the urgency that the current reality demands.
- **Communicate expectations:** By investing at least 50 percent of the board's time each month into monitoring progress toward the vision, the board makes clear what the priorities of the entire organization are expected to be. This is a powerful tool for creating organizational alignment.

- **Formative evaluation:** With each monitoring report the board is conducting a micro assessment of superintendent performance, which creates an opportunity for the superintendent to make adjustments. As a continuous improvement strategy, providing this regularly recurring feedback loop is a superior approach to the outdated concept of merely conducting annual performance evaluations.

EFFECTIVE MONITORING CALENDARS

Before school boards can begin effective monitoring, they should adopt a thirty-six- to sixty-month schedule that describes which Goals will be monitored during which month. The school board will typically have the superintendent draft a calendar since the administration knows when student performance data is freshly available throughout the year. Nevertheless, it remains the school board's monitoring calendar, not the superintendent's. Qualities to look for include:

- It should span the entire length of the Goals—if the Goals are five years long, the calendar should be five years long as well.
- It should include all of the school board's Goals and Guardrails.
- It often includes all board trainings, board-led community trainings, board-led community listenings, board self-evaluations, board-led superintendent evaluations, and statutory votes.
- It should schedule each Goal to be monitored at least four times throughout the year and each Guardrail to be monitored at least one time per year.
- It should schedule one or two interim Goals to be monitored each month, no less, and definitely no more than three.

- It can schedule as many interim Guardrails to be monitored during a month as the school board wants.
- It should never suggest that Goal monitoring reports be placed on the consent agenda.
- It may suggest that Guardrail monitoring reports can be placed on the consent agenda.
- It should clarify that school boards will monitor Goals during every month of the year that the school board meets.

EFFECTIVE MONITORING REPORTS

Here are four qualities to ask about the one- to five-page monitoring report before the school board can begin progress monitoring (if the answer to any of these is "no," hand the report back to the superintendent and have them complete it before proceeding—likely at the next regularly scheduled board meeting):

1. **The Goal:** Does it clearly show which specific Goal/interim Goal is being monitored?
2. **The data:** Does it clearly show data for the three previous reporting periods (preferably on a line graph)? Does it clearly show the current reporting period? Does it clearly show the target reporting periods (annual targets and deadline target)?
3. **The interpretation:** Does it clearly show the superintendent's understanding of system performance relative to the Goal?
4. **The evidence and plan:** Does it clearly show supporting documentation that evidences the superintendent's understanding of system performance? If the school system is not at target or the superintendent's understanding of system

performance indicates implementation is not on track, does the monitoring report clearly describe any needed next steps?

EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBER PARTICIPATION

Goal monitoring, like school board governance in general, is not always intuitive. It is easy to inadvertently conduct monitoring in an ineffective manner. Here are a few guidelines to follow to increase the likelihood of effectiveness:

- **Do your homework:** Board members should arrive at board meetings having already read the monitoring report, having already shared technical and tactical questions with the superintendent, and having already come up with at least three or four questions each regarding the monitoring report.
- **Understanding reality:** The desired result of monitoring is to understand the current reality for your students as compared to the vision you've adopted for them (Goals). Whether you enjoy the current reality isn't the point of monitoring; whether or not you fully know the current reality is.
- **Keep the conversation going:** If the superintendent presents a monitoring report that is missing the prerequisites or that fails to clarify for board members the extent to which reality matches the Goals, consider tabling the conversation and giving the superintendent a chance to fix it and reoffer it at a subsequent meeting, instead of choosing not to accept it and ending the discussion.
- **No gotcha governance:** Adopt a monitoring calendar that describes which Goals will be monitored during which months. The ideal monitoring calendar will span the full term of the Goals—if they are five-year Goals, the calendar should cover five years.

- **Don't offer advice:** Monitoring is never an opportunity for board members to provide advice to the superintendent regarding what should/shouldn't be done about student outcomes. It's also not about liking/not liking the superintendent's strategies.

EFFECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT PARTICIPATION

How superintendents show up in the monitoring conversation has a huge impact on the conversation's effectiveness. A few guidelines include:

- **Don't hide the data:** The student performance data being presented during the monitoring conversation should be easy for most parents to understand. As such, monitoring reports should be only one to five pages at most, and should be written at no more than an eighth-grade reading level.
- **Don't sugarcoat the data:** The data is the data. Whatever it says is what it says—good, bad, or ugly. Never suggest that the data is saying anything other than what you believe it to be saying. If the school system is off track, say that; don't talk around that. Sugarcoating loses trust.
- **Align monitoring with managerial action:** If the only time each month that the superintendent and cabinet look at the data in the monitoring report is to prepare for school board meetings, then you're probably either looking at the wrong data or doing a poor job of managing the school system.
- **Be prepared:** Many superintendents rehearse for monitoring conversations by having their teams throw every conceivable question at them before the school board meeting. This is a wise practice not only because it helps with the monitoring conversation but because it can help

surface managerial issues and solutions that might not otherwise come up.
- **Don't be defensive:** If the student performance data is disappointing, then it's natural that school board members would be disappointed. Unfortunately, not all of them will manage their disappointment in a mature, adult, and effective manner. Even if this happens, don't get defensive.

MONITORING GUIDELINES

The process of monitoring can be done in a number of ways, but for best results, here are some guidelines for school boards to follow.

- **Don't let data get stale:** Set up the monitoring calendar to make the most of fresh data as soon as it becomes available. Typically the superintendent creates a rough draft of the monitoring calendar, which is then updated as needed by the board.
- **Four key items need to be in each monitoring report:** Every monitoring report prepared by the superintendent needs to include
  - which Goal or interim Goal is being monitored;
  - the actual data being tracked (the newest measurements along with the three previous sets of reporting data);
  - the superintendent's evaluation; and
  - any supporting information.
- **Conversations need to be about strategies:** Keep the monitoring conversations in the boardroom about strategy, not about tactics, advice, or technicalities.
- **Stick to the monitoring calendar:** Sticking to the calendar is helpful to the board and the administration, enabling both

groups to prepare adequately. Data is supplied in a planned (not reactionary) manner, and any emergency of the moment will not override the thoughtful and deliberate approach to monitoring student performance.

- **Work toward continuous improvement:** If your school board is not engaged in monitoring, your school system is not engaged in the continuous improvement model. This is as true in the board meetings as it is in the classrooms.
- **Pay attention to monitoring frequency:** Monitor each Goal at least four times a year. Monitor each Guardrail at least once a year.
- **Focus on monitoring ev*ery month*:** The board needs to **spend half its time** each month monitoring student performance.

ACCEPT HONEST, REAL DATA

No one likes to hear bad news in a monitoring report. We all want our efforts to yield favorable results. As board members, though, it's imperative that we are ready to face and accept evidence-based data presented to us even when we don't like the results.

Board members rely on accurate information brought to them by school administrators via reports, analyses, and other means. The point of monitoring reports is *not* to make board members feel good. The intent of the monitoring reports is to communicate to the board the extent to which the current reality for students matches the expected vision of the community.

This is about truth telling: the good, the bad, and the ugly. As a board member, you need to know what the reality for students

is, and this reality should never be sugarcoated. It must not be modified for PR purposes. To be effective in your work, you need to know what's really going on with the students in the schools in your community. Seeing and accepting the truth as it stands is absolutely critical. You can't cherry-pick data; you have to be open to the whole, honest, and real truth.

When you are presented with data, you need to be able to clearly see whether student outcomes are trending up or down, and this involves comparing current data to past data. Seeing trends start to take shape enables boards to take quick action to try to improve the direction of these trends. Picking up on trends early enables school boards to implement changes in the classroom that can improve student outcomes before the year is over, but this can be done only when honest information is provided by administrators and accepted by board members.

Inside the mindset of representing self or representing individuals, the natural inclination is to reject data that doesn't align with what I want to do or with what my allies want me to do. Within the mindset of representing the community, on behalf of the students we serve, we become free to follow the data where it leads.

ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION

If every time we get an update, we shoot the messenger, then eventually people are going to stop being the messenger. So when the superintendent tells you and other board members the truth, don't beat them up for it. You need them to communicate the reality for students. So if you want them to consistently bring you honest and real information about student performance,

you can't overreact. The only thing that overreacting will do is convince them to stop telling you the truth.

This can be challenging because the well-being of our community's children inspires emotion. If the fact that our children may be failing in a particular area *doesn't* trigger some emotional experience for you, maybe you shouldn't be on the school board. It makes sense that bad news regarding student outcomes would trigger a response in you in the form of frustrated or angry emotions. It's normal to feel upset.

But this isn't about you. Your feelings of anger or frustration that students are not yet achieving in some areas are legitimate, but your feelings don't improve student outcomes. Disciplined behavior that drives continuous improvement does.

You have every right to feel poorly about results that show students are not doing as well as the school board and the community would like. But you serve yourself and harm students when you handle this information in a way that incentivizes the superintendent and staff to hide information from you. It's perfectly acceptable for you to feel whatever feelings may arise and it's absolutely necessary that the school board take appropriate action when underperformance occurs, but creating a psychologically unsafe environment for truth telling doesn't solve problems. When those uncomfortable feelings surface, this is the strategy effective leaders adopt:

> Listen to your feelings, then choose your behaviors intentionally, rather than letting your frustrations control you.

The purpose of monitoring reports from the superintendent is

not to give you a version of reality that you like. Their purpose is to enable you to walk out the door with clarity on what the reality is for your students.

EVALUATING EFFECTIVE MONITORING

Because monitoring progress is such an important activity for school boards to engage in, it's important for school board members to become more proficient at it. As the story at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, it's not enough to care deeply about children; a certain skillset is required.

Since the heart of the monitoring conversation is the monitoring report and the questions that school board members ask about it, a key way to improve is to ask more effective questions. We have identified five characteristics of effective monitoring questions. When school board members are preparing for the monitoring conversation at their next board meeting, we make ourselves available to go over the questions they plan to ask to make them stronger in each of these five areas.

- **Strategy-Focused:** Does the question focus on strategy or is the question focused on technical issues or implementation tactics?
- **Measure-Focused:** Does the question reference specific data in the monitoring report or not?
- **Ask-Oriented:** Is the question open ended or is the question forcing a yes/no or multiple-choice question?
- **Results-Focused:** Does the question focus on understanding the data in the monitoring report or does it focus on sharing opinions, assigning blame, or shaming people?
- **Time-Bound:** Does the question focus on current perfor-

mance caused by past actions or does the question focus on future performance caused by future actions?

TECHNICAL, TACTICAL, AND STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

One area that school board members often struggle in is differentiating between technical, tactical, and strategic questions. As an example, if the Goal being monitored is, "The percentage of our economically disadvantaged graduates who have demonstrated career/college-level proficiency in collaboration skills and problem-solving skills on the soft skills portfolio assessment will increase from 27 percent in August 2023 to 84 percent by August 2028," here are sample questions in each category:

Technical (trying to understand how something is measured)

- What's the alignment of the portfolio assessment with the SAT or ACT?
- What percentage of our students actually submit a portfolio for assessment?
- What are the psychometric properties of the portfolio assessment?
- Why did we single out collaboration and problem-solving skills from all the skills assessed?

Tactical (trying to understand how something is done)

- To whom is the assessment administered?
- Which staff have been trained to administer the assessment?
- What type of PD have staff received regarding the assessment?
- How do staff feel about the assessment?

Strategic (trying to understand how something aligns to the priorities)

- Looking at the data in table 1, which strategy was most effective with our target student population?
- What is a strategy we deployed that didn't work, given the data in table 2, and what did we learn?
- Based on the data in graph 1, why are we seeing such significant growth among our nontarget student population but not our target student population?
- Why is the data in graph 2 showing that system performance on item A is so much higher than item B?

Technical questions focus on understanding the details surrounding the assessment and Goal details themselves. Tactical questions focus on understanding the details surrounding implementation of the assessment and Goal. Strategic questions focus on understanding, relative to the Goal, what we've learned about system performance and what lessons we've learned from that performance. No questions during an effective monitoring conversation are focused on providing advice to the superintendent, board member opinions about system performance, or efforts to project manage the school system.

Technical and tactical questions are often essential to having a full understanding of current system performance; there is nothing wrong with board members asking technical and tactical questions. Timing matters, however. The superintendent is expected to be the strategic leader over the school system's operations. During a monitoring conversation with the superintendent, it is unreasonable to expect them to also have a mastery of every technical or tactical detail. So if school board members

want answers to those questions to be part of the monitoring conversation, they need to ask the questions at least five to seven days in advance of the monitoring session. If that hasn't happened, board members are welcome to still ask new technical and tactical questions during the monitoring session, but the board chair and/or superintendent should advise them that the answers will go out in the next update from the superintendent to the board.

Regardless of whether or not a question is technical, tactical, or strategic in focus, they can just as easily focus on past actions (what have our strategies been and what have been the impacts on performance?) as on future actions (what strategies will we deploy given what our performance currently shows?). Boards that are monitoring effectively will invest the majority of their time—preferably upwards of three-quarters of the monitoring session—focused on understanding the past: where are we, how did we get here, what worked, what didn't work, what did we learn? Only once a board is fully conversant in and knowledgeable of what has happened can it meaningfully engage in future-focused dialogue.

Ineffective school boards succumb to the temptation of mostly focusing on technical/tactical questions, sharing their opinions and statements, offering their advice, or focusing on what will happen next. While some of these things in moderation and appropriately timed can be helpful, these being the focus reflects a weakness of discipline and vision and should be corrected.

MONITORING THE SCHOOL BOARD

To propel the continuous improvement process, it is not enough

to monitor progress regarding the Goals and Guardrails, and it's not even enough to improve at asking monitoring questions. The school board needs to monitor its own improvement across all five areas of the Effective School Board Framework: focus mindset, clarify priorities, monitor progress, align resources, and communicate results.

CHAPTER 12

EVALUATING BOARD PERFORMANCE

I once chaired a data collection team that led an extensive national study. We surveyed school board members across the nation on a number of topics, asking pages and pages of questions, and then we turned the data we gathered over to a research team for their analysis.

One of the questions we posed was this: does your board conduct a structured self-evaluation? For those who answered yes, we also asked what kind of instrument was used to self-evaluate and how frequently the board evaluated itself.

The research team pulled up student performance data, compared it between school systems, and began to look for patterns in the data. One of the more interesting correlations they uncovered was between student academic growth and school board self-evaluation. The analysts discovered that students tended to grow academically at a faster rate in school systems where the school boards self-evaluated, compared to the rates of growth

in school systems where the school boards did not engage in self-evaluation.

While this is correlation, not causation, what this suggested to us was that something about a school board being on a continuous improvement trajectory had an influence on the school system also being on a continuous improvement trajectory. To the extent that this is the case, this is a very tangible benefit to students. We can't think of a reason why a responsible school board—a school board truly focused on improving student outcomes—would not engage in self-evaluation.

* * *

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Members of the community, including parents, school officials, and employers, want students to be taught by teachers who are committed to growing in the craft of teaching. Educators become more effective in part by reflecting on their practice and figuring out what's working, what needs improvement, and how to level up.

Teachers will be more encouraged to do this when they see school principals being involved in their own continuous improvement cycles. If we want principals to engage in this behavior, it would be helpful to have superintendents engaged in continuous improvement practices. And if we want superintendents to do that, it would be helpful to have school boards practicing continuous improvement.

This behavior can cascade throughout the organization, having

a strong impact on the overall culture. As the adults within the organization remain constantly focused on their own continuous improvement and growing in their roles, this can have a meaningful impact on the likelihood that students will grow in what they know and are able to do. Routine and rigorous self-evaluation by school boards is beneficial to students.

KEEPING SCORE

To support the continuous improvement of school boards, we developed a self-evaluation instrument that is on a one-hundred-point scale. Our self-evaluation, perhaps not surprisingly, is built around five principles:

- Focus mindset
- Clarify priorities (vision and Goals, values and Guardrails)
- Monitor progress
- Align resources
- Communicate results

During a board self-evaluation—which we recommend initially take place once per quarter, not just annually—school boards go through each page of the self-evaluation instrument and identify which column they are in. As an example, here's an excerpt from the first page of the instrument.

FOCUS MINDSET: The board will focus on improving student outcomes by changing adult behaviors—starting with its own.

Ineffective Focus on Improving Student Outcomes (0 points)	**Emerging Focus on Improving Student Outcomes (1 point)**	**Effective Focus on Improving Student Outcomes (5 points)**	**Highly Effective Focus on Improving Student Outcomes (10 pts)**
The board is ineffectively focused on improving student outcomes if any of the following are true:	*No items from the Ineffective Focus on Student Outcomes column, and:*	*All items from the Emerging Focus on Student Outcomes column, and:*	*All items from the Effective Focus on Student Outcomes column, and:*
The board has not consistently demonstrated the ability to distinguish between **inputs**, **outputs**, and **outcomes**. The board has not consistently demonstrated the ability to distinguish between **adult inputs** and **student outcomes**. The board has not conducted a **self-evaluation** during the previous twelve-month period.	The board received training on the Effective School Boards framework. The board has scheduled quarterly self-evaluations, with the annual self-evaluation scheduled to take place no more than forty-five days prior to the next superintendent evaluation. The board tracks its use of time and reports at least quarterly the percentage of board-authorized public meetings where there is **time focused on student outcomes**.	The board has hosted and the board members have led or co-led at least one training session on the Effective School Boards framework during the previous twelve-month period. The most recent board self-evaluation took place no more than twelve months ago using this instrument or a research-aligned instrument and the board voted to adopt the results.	The board included students as presenters in at least one of the Effective School Boards framework training sessions during the previous twelve months. Prior to being selected, all newly selected board members received training on the Effective School Boards framework from fellow board members on their board or from a coach certified in the Effective School Boards framework.

The board self-evaluation instrument provides detailed lists of school board behaviors that are most aligned with improving student outcomes. The entire instrument is organized chronologically, with earlier activities to implement being on the far

left and activities that school boards will accomplish over time being on the far right.

As a board, whether you've started with a score of 0 or 60 on your first self-evaluation, your objective is to achieve a score of at least 80 within your first two years. That sounds like a lot of time, but some items take longer than others. Using the sample excerpt above under the first column, providing a training workshop for the school board to understand the difference between inputs, outputs, and outcomes could happen next week. But under the last column, reaching a place where all future school board members are fully trained before they ever even join the school board will take a little more planning.

> As a school board, strive to attain a score of 80 or higher on your self-evaluation within two years.

School boards that score at or above 80 points have been shown to be performing in a way that is conducive to improving student outcomes.

> **GET MORE RESOURCES**
>
> Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to see the full Effective School Boards self-evaluation instrument.

CUSTOMIZE YOUR SCHOOL BOARD'S JOURNEY

The self-evaluation provides many different ways to reach a score of 80 or higher. Some items are nonnegotiable; for example, you have to monitor student performance, preferably 50

percent of the time. If you're not doing that, you'll find it impossible to achieve a total score of 80 points.

While some tasks are nonnegotiable, others offer more variability. For example, when we talk about continuous improvement practices, it would be ideal for the board to include students in its professional development. But if this doesn't happen, the board can still score five points instead of ten, while placing greater focus on other parts of the self-evaluation to achieve a total score of 80.

By building a measure of flexibility into the performance evaluation framework, we're enabling different school systems across different states to navigate their own course to achieve a score of 80 within two years. The process then becomes more akin to choosing your own adventure than to painting by numbers, allowing each school system freedom to focus on what matters most while offering some leeway on the path taken toward improving student outcomes.

I have seen a board go from a score of 0 to 80 in ten months, but this is aberrant and specific to situations where many of the conditions for effectiveness were already nearly in place. Expect that it will take two years to reach a score of 80; it's a marathon, not a sprint. But by doing the work outlined in our self-evaluation framework, you can achieve this objective.

> Once per quarter ask the school board to stop what it's doing and take the time to self-evaluate to determine where it can improve and how to pivot.

Each quarter, the school board will have a new score that identifies where it is and how far away it is from the objective of scoring 80 points. If your school board currently has an *emerging focus* on improving student outcomes, there are concrete steps listed within each section of the instrument that the school board can take to move up to the next level.

Utilizing this self-evaluation tool every three months will help your board take concrete steps in the direction of improving school board performance and, in turn, improving student outcomes. During a self-evaluation, you'll see how you performed these past three months, and you can identify where you could be in three months and what steps you could take to get there.

Board self-evaluation can be a game changer. But the school board doesn't exist in a vacuum. The superintendent plays a significant role in improving student outcomes; they will need to be evaluated as well.

CHAPTER 13

EVALUATING SUPERINTENDENT PERFORMANCE

School board A had a wildly popular superintendent—a great guy everybody loved. He was hired to meet significant operational challenges the school system faced, and he succeeded in addressing the operational messes he inherited. At some point along the journey, the school board noticed that, even though the operational challenges had been met, data revealed that academically, schools were stagnant. No progress was being made toward improving student outcomes.

Having made a commitment to focus on student outcomes, and having spent time monitoring progress, the board eventually came to a radical conclusion. Even though everyone loved the superintendent, and he had helped the school system, the board realized a different superintendent was needed. While being a great guy and knowing how to adeptly handle operations are qualities to be lauded, they aren't enough. At the end of the day,

the only measure of superintendent performance that matters is accomplishing the Goals and honoring the Guardrails that the board sets.

The more the board focused on student outcomes, the more obvious it became to them that this was no longer the right superintendent for their school system. That was a difficult fact to face, because everyone adored him. He'd been the right person when he was hired to fix operational problems, and there was no question that he continued to do great work, but it became increasingly evident that the area of academics was not his strength.

With the operational matters fully addressed, and the board now fully committed to improving student outcomes, the board justifiably let him go. As painful as it was to have to say goodbye to a beloved superintendent, it was the right call.

Then there's the superintendent for school board B. I don't know that I've ever met a superintendent who was more disliked by some of his school board members than this one: a straight shooter, not a charmer, and he did not publicly demonstrate significant charisma skills.

After I got to know him more, I began to see that in smaller settings and in direct, one-to-one conversations, more positive interpersonal skills emerged. But with large groups, and especially in public, those skills were harder to recognize. He talked to people in such a matter-of-fact manner that they frequently considered him cold. Board members approached me on a regular basis to say variations of, "I can't stand this guy. Can we get rid of him?"

My response was always the same: "Well, it depends. How are you doing on Goals and Guardrails? How are your students doing?"

"Ah, we knew you were going to ask about those Goals and Guardrails," board members would reply dejectedly. "Well, fine, we won't fire him now. We'll keep him a little longer. But as soon as we stop seeing growth in literacy, we're going to reevaluate his position."

This superintendent was so disliked that it was almost as if the board was hoping student outcomes would decline so they'd have an excuse to get rid of him! But because his work consistently led to accomplishing Goals while honoring Guardrails, and schools across the community continued to grow in academic performance, the school board continued to renew his contract year after year. Student performance never did provide the school board with the cause to fire him that some wanted.

Both of these boards behaved in a responsible manner. The board that loved their superintendent let him go because he wasn't making progress relative to their Goals. The board that hated their superintendent retained him because he was making progress relative to their Goals. Both of these cases describe examples of conducting a *responsible superintendent evaluation*.

They also highlight the failures of other evaluation methods that are commonly used in school systems across the nation. One of the school board failures that is most valuable to avoid is giving in to an entrenched desire to evaluate superintendents on factors other than the Goals and Guardrails.

* * *

ERODING THE SUPERINTENDENT'S FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

When school boards evaluate superintendents on anything other than Goals and Guardrails, they actively erode the superintendent's focus on student outcomes, and this hurts the school system as a whole and students individually. I find myself frequently fielding questions about adding to the evaluation criteria, questions such as this:

"In addition to evaluating our superintendent on Goals and Guardrails, can we evaluate him on the clothes he wears?"

My answer is, "No. If you add that criteria, he'll definitely start wearing the right clothes, but the energy he spends on making sure his clothes are deemed suitable is energy he doesn't spend on making sure third graders can read."

This is a critical failure most boards engage in. The majority of evaluations focus on how board members *feel* about the person's performance, with questions like, "How do you *feel* about how they interact with parents and staff?" Evaluating superintendent performance based on how board members feel is problematic and ineffective for several reasons:

- Real data is overlooked, ignored, or discounted.
- Most members have never been superintendents, so they are not in a position to make qualified assessments based on feelings and impressions.
- Student outcomes fail to be considered.

Unless the school board adopts a Guardrail about personality or operational issues—how they *feel* about the way the superintendent gets along with people, dresses, communicates, handles the budget, interacts with staff, or conducts any type of business—effective school boards abandon these as evaluation topics. Superintendent evaluations must never be about board member opinions; they must always be about accomplishment of the Goals and honoring of the Guardrails.

INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM SCHOOL SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

What many school boards throughout the nation currently do is a recipe for failure. They separate how the school system is evaluated and how the superintendent is evaluated into two separate categories.

Too many school boards measure school system success based on whether students are learning, while measuring superintendent success based on whether the superintendent has done things that board members like. This method is flawed.

In a student-outcomes-focused approach to governing, the single most important point to understand about the superintendent evaluation is that **the superintendent's performance is indistinguishable from the school system's performance**. When school boards develop different criteria for measuring school system performance and superintendent performance, it becomes easy to reach the conclusion that the superintendent is performing according to expectations, but the school system is not.

This is a dangerous conclusion.

Think about other community-serving organizations; they would never operate this way. Can you imagine if the local safety net hospital behaved in this manner? If none of the patients are improving, the CEO would not be evaluated favorably for wearing great clothes and interacting well with others. The CEO would be under fire for the hospital failing to serve patients. In effective organizations, leadership is evaluated based on results, with organizational performance interconnected with CEO performance.

It needs to be the same in school systems. Even if the superintendent is a fantastic person who interacts beautifully with everyone and dresses impeccably for photo ops, none of that is more important than whether student outcomes throughout the schools are improving.

> Having two separate criteria for evaluating school system and superintendent performance is a fundamental failure of school boards nationwide.

Using separate criteria unwittingly incentivizes the superintendent to *not* focus on what children need most to succeed. It sets children up to fail, and most school boards don't even recognize this is happening.

Because the stakes for doing a superintendent evaluation accurately are high, this is not something the school board should take lightly. Every school board member should internalize the same core understanding: s*uperintendent performance is indistinguishable from school system performance.*

HOW TO EVALUATE SUPERINTENDENTS

The superintendent evaluation template we share with school boards consists of nothing but Goals on the left and Guardrails on the right. Here's an excerpt from our template.

Goals	SY21 Target	SY21 Actual	Met or 2/3 Met
Goal 1: The % of 0–5-year-olds from low-income census tracks who benefit from aligned 0–5 programming will increase from 22.80% in Aug 2023 to 34.8% in Aug 2028.	24.8%	23.1%	2/3 Met
Interim Goal 1.1: abc will increase from 23% on x month/year to 45% by z month/year.	24%	24%	
Interim Goal 1.2: abc will increase from 56% on x month/year to 70% by z month/year.	60%	62%	
Interim Goal 1.3: abc will increase from 15% on x month/year to 24% by z month/year.	19%	17%	
Guardrails			
Guardrail 1: The superintendent may not allow educators to be without weekly, high-quality coaching supports.			**Did Not Meet**
Interim Guardrail 1.1: abc will increase from 78% on x month/year to 91% by z month/year.	81%	80%	
Interim Guardrail 1.2: abc will increase from 34% on x month/year to 68% by z month/year.	37%	35%	
Interim Guardrail 1.3: abc will increase from 77% on x month/year to 100% by z month/year.	80%	78.7%	

For each Goal and Guardrail, target measures and actual measures achieved are entered. Next to each Goal and Guardrail, there is a column for indicating whether interim Goals and interim Guardrails were met for the specified time period. If two-thirds or more of the interim Goals of a Goal, or the interim Guardrails of a Guardrail, are met, then the target for that Goal or Guardrail has been met.

For each Goal and Guardrail, then, the data collected compared to the target measure for that time period provides a clear picture of whether that Goal or Guardrail was:

- Fully met
- Two-thirds met
- Not met

At the conclusion of the analysis, the board determines what the summative results of the evaluation data for Goals and Guardrails mean. The board determines whether or not to weight results, along with what are satisfactory thresholds.

GET MORE RESOURCES

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to find a downloadable superintendent evaluation template.

In effective superintendent evaluation, the only measures are:

- How much progress was made toward the Goals?
- To what extent were the Guardrails honored?

If sufficient progress was made relative to the intended Goals, and the Guardrails were honored, then the superintendent met expectations.

If progress was not made relative to the intended Goals, or if the Guardrails were not honored, then the superintendent did not meet expectations.

The process involves filling in the metrics for Goals, interim

Goals, Guardrails, and interim Guardrails, and then checking those metrics for whether or not expectations were met.

WHEN SUPERINTENDENT PERFORMANCE IS NOT SUFFICIENT

If the superintendent evaluation reveals that the performance metrics have been met, the superintendent is free to keep doing what they've been doing.

If the evaluation shows that the performance metrics were not met, then it's time for board members to engage in a meaningful conversation to explore options and decide what to do next, in addition to having a conversation with the superintendent. Questions to be asked include:

- Why were the performance metrics not reached?
- Were there reasons that the school board considers valid for not meeting these metrics?
- Has the superintendent presented a sufficient plan for improving the metrics?
- Do we renew the superintendent's contract, or do we begin the search for a new one?

As board members, we need to set aside how we feel as adults so that we can focus on getting the job done for children. Initially, boards may not like this data-driven approach to evaluating the superintendent, especially when it leads to deciding to keep someone with a difficult personality or let go of someone everyone loves. In the long run, though, the responsibility to focus on students—to help them grow and learn—makes adopting this process imperative, even if it means making some sacrifices as

board members to let go of our need to have our feelings aired; the focus has to be on improving student outcomes.

Monitoring the board and superintendent performance is the only way to know whether a board's efforts are actually doing what they are supposed to be doing: improving student outcomes. But it takes more than monitoring for a board to be effective in any capacity. An effective school board is aligned on all fronts: in how it uses its time, makes decisions, creates policies, and sets procedures.

STEP FOUR

ALIGN RESOURCES

CHAPTER 14

THE MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE

The school board meeting had an extended, forty-five-minute debate that culminated in one of the board members banging his fist on the board table repeatedly while emphatically stating, "I am philosophically opposed to nonyellow school buses."

I didn't even know this was a philosophical position to take.

The debate and his outburst came about because of a proposal that was being considered to partner with the city; had it been approved, it might have resulted in children having to ride buses that came in colors other than yellow. The debate consisted of all manner of absurdity, even arguing over which shade of yellow is acceptably yellow.

During the two weeks between that school board meeting and the next one, staff members throughout the school system spent inordinate lengths of time researching the ins and outs of buses, including bus colors, the cost of paint, which Pantone color of

yellow is the truest yellow, which shade of yellow is the safest, which colors are unsafe, and so on. Not to be outdone, the teachers' union asked its members how they felt about the possibility of students being transported in nonyellow buses. The local newspaper, not missing a chance to have its say, weighed in with editorials on this subject.

At the next school board meeting, the superintendent and senior staff came fully prepared, delivering a detailed, hour-and-a-half-long presentation on the ins and outs of school bus colors, safety ratios, respective costs, and related topics. Once this extensive research was shared, what action do you suppose the board took?

They did absolutely nothing. The whole issue was dropped and never mentioned again.

* * *

HOW THE BOARD INVESTS ITS TIME MATTERS

There is a vital lesson to be gleaned from these school board members spending time debating school bus yellow: how the board invests the rare, precious moments it has matters immensely. The tragedy in this nonyellow school bus debate is that, during those two weeks when everyone put time, energy, and effort into the matter of school bus colors, the board members, administrators, and teachers were *not* solely focused on whether children were learning. Students suffered from that lack of focus.

> Whatever school boards are focused on, they are incentivizing everyone else to focus on as well.

As an entity, the board exists *only a* few fleeting moments each month during legally called meetings. Of course, board members exist 24/7, but the board itself does not exist unless a quorum of members is present. Those precious few moments are culture-creating; they send a signal about what all the other adults in the organization need to be focused on. How that time during board meetings is spent has a massive cultural impact on adult behavior within the entire school system.

This is why, years ago, my team and I began tracking and coding board meetings to identify how much time the average school board focuses on student outcomes. More recently, it has expanded nationwide through the Effective School Board Initiative (ESBI). Wanting to figure out what percentage of time each month board members spend on student outcomes across various meetings, we coded hundreds of meetings over six years. This has led to a sobering conclusion:

> Most school boards spend between 0 and 5 percent of their time monitoring progress relative to their Goals for student outcomes, with the majority of school boards spending less than 1 percent.

Our students deserve more. You can give it to them.

TIME-USE EVALUATION

To improve how school boards use time—their most valuable currency—we created a *time-use evaluation* that provides a high-level view of how a school board spends its time across a

month. Its purpose is to highlight the exact percentage of time being focused on student outcomes. The time-use evaluation lets school board members answer these important questions:

- *How do we spend our time?*
- *How focused are we on student outcomes each month?*

The time-use evaluation is divided into the five Effective School Board Framework categories—focus mindset, clarify priorities, monitor progress, align resources, communicate results—then into activities completed within each category, minutes spent on each activity, and the percentage of time spent on an activity in a month. Using this tool, school boards are able to evaluate how effectively they're spending their time, and what changes they can make to improve.

Once the school board has adopted Goals, our coaching is for the school board to spend at least half of its time each month monitoring progress toward its Goals for student outcomes. If board members are spending one thousand minutes in school board meetings each month, ideally five hundred of those minutes are being spent on monitoring whether children are actually learning and deciding what to do in response.

IT'S ABOUT EFFECTIVE TIME USE

Revisiting the school board situation from the opening of this chapter, it goes without saying that school safety is imperative for our students, and we can't have favorable student outcomes if we can't even get students to school safely. Some people will argue that transporting students safely to school is of paramount concern and that exploring the safety of yellow buses

versus nonyellow buses is a necessary function of the school board.

This is partially why school boards so often fail to focus on student outcomes. There is *nothing* that doesn't have some type of influence on student outcomes. Within a school system, there is no adult behavior that is purely neutral. Every teacher's, principal's, superintendent's, and board member's actions and decisions have an effect on student outcomes. If the measure of effectiveness was, "Did the school board spend time on adult inputs that might have an influence on student outcomes?" then every school board is 100 percent effective. But that's not the measure for two reasons: not all behaviors are equally weighted, and there is a finite amount of time to work with.

Some adult behaviors have a much more profound impact on student outcomes than others. Whether a student has a quality teacher is probably much more impactful than the color of the bus that transported the student to school. Extensive safety training for bus operators is likely far more important than the school bus color. Why would we let a board derail itself and waste its time, as well as wasting teachers' and administrators' time, on researching Pantone shades of yellow? Time is limited because students typically only get one year in each grade, so the focus of the work needs to be prioritized.

THE CRITICAL ERROR SCHOOL BOARDS MAKE

Even if school board members focus on the most important school-controlled variable in improving student outcomes, improving instructional quality, and we know everything there is to know about how effective each teacher is, that information

still fails to tell us what students have learned. It's very possible to have the very best teachers in a school system and still have students not learning.

> Focusing on those things that have an impact on student outcomes is NOT the same as focusing on what student outcomes are.

While we can talk about teacher effectiveness during board meetings, and we can talk about school bus safety, knowing that time is limited, we have the responsibility to focus on what matters most and do what our students require of us. A critical mental error that school board members make is considering what *might* have an impact on student outcomes instead of looking at data that actually tells us whether or not children have learned. This data enables us to determine if we need to adjust our strategies.

When in doubt regarding what you should be doing during school board meetings, always opt for taking action based upon data about student outcomes. Don't look at the factors first; look at what is happening with student performance first. Look first at what is happening with student performance, and then make decisions about which factors must change.

If you're looking at student performance and the data clearly suggests that students on some bus routes are radically outperforming students on other bus routes, and upon closer inspection you discover that the superperforming students are riding in yellow buses while the underperforming students are riding in green buses, then—and only then—might it make sense to have a two-week dialogue about nonyellow buses. But

you would never start there arbitrarily. You would go there because that's where the evidence took you.

The most effective way for a school board to approach any issue is to come at it from the student-outcomes-focused mindset. Start with student outcomes, figure out what there is to learn, and use that information to make decisions about which adult inputs need to be changed later.

But time isn't the only factor determining whether or not a board is being as effective as it needs to in order to meet its Goals. Board members could have an impeccable use of their time, yet get little accomplished if they are not aligned in their decision-making.

CHAPTER 15

ALIGNED DECISION-MAKING

The time was quickly approaching for one of the school boards we support to approve a budget. The superintendent met with board members and asked what they would like to see on the budget. After receiving a shopping list from the board, the superintendent crafted a balanced budget, fitting in as many of the requested items as possible to keep everyone happy, at the same time knowing that including everything board members wanted was cost prohibitive.

The superintendent presented this budget to the board at the next meeting and was soon addressed by an unhappy board member who did not find her request included in the budget. "This budget is not focused on students," she stated. "If it was, then this group of employees would be getting raises. I want you to add that in."

There was no logic to the request other than the fact that these individuals had worked hard to get her elected to the school board, and now she wanted to repay their efforts by providing them with raises. To be certain, these employees definitely

deserved raises. However, so did many other groups of employees. This board member was weaponizing the language of being focused on student outcomes for her own gain and not for systemic student benefit, not in a fair manner for all employees, and not in a strategically aligned manner.

The superintendent explained that it was not possible to afford everything the board had requested. There wasn't enough money to go around.

The board member was insistent. "I don't care. These educators deserve raises. I care about children more than you all care about children, and we're going to make sure these employees get pay raises." For those not paying close attention to campaign contributions and endorsements, the decision as to which educators deserved raises and which did not appeared arbitrary.

Regardless, several other board members soon were in agreement. A motion was put forward to decide how much of a raise this handpicked subgroup of educators should receive. An amount was decided and voted upon; focused on their own political futures, the board voted to provide these educators with raises.

The superintendent had spent a lot of time and a great deal of effort to present the board with a balanced budget packed with as many requested goodies as he could fit. Board members, under the guise of wanting to focus on students—but in reality, acting to further their own self-interests—rejected his budget and passed a revised one that was nowhere near balanced. Millions of dollars were added to an already balanced but strained budget for raises for a specific group of educators.

This left the superintendent with the task of balancing the budget, again. The money that board members had allocated for raises did not exist. In the end, the superintendent found himself having to conduct layoffs. A number of educators who had received raises were laid off so that other educators could get the mandated raises. Additional positions, including custodians and cafeteria workers, had to be cut to make room for the board-voted raises. With about 85 percent of every school system's budget focused on people, letting go of people was the only real solution the superintendent could come up with to accommodate the board's approved budget.

Suddenly, the specific support that the students needed wasn't present, since money had gone out the door to a group of educators as a result of the board's last-minute vote. School employees lost their jobs, and students were not being served, all because of the school board's behaviors that were not aligned to the school board's adopted Goals.

* * *

WHAT THIS BOARD COULD HAVE DONE

This is a completely normal example of what it looks like when a school board fails to align available resources with the priorities of the community. This board made huge mistakes at every turn.

The superintendent initially approached the board asking, "What priorities do you want me to consider for the budget?"

The board should have responded with, "We don't have any new priorities. We've already adopted our priorities in the Goals and

Guardrails we've identified and written down, so we've already presented you with our priorities." Having Goals and Guardrails safeguards a school system against priorities gone wild.

> The Goals should be the first priority for resource allocation and those, combined with the Guardrails, become the superintendent's focus when crafting a budget.

The superintendent should have been held accountable for delivering a budget focused on accomplishing Goals and honoring Guardrails established by the board. Even with a superintendent more focused on keeping their job than doing their job, the board should never have gone for the bait when asked what they wanted on the budget. The temptation of personal preferences was so great that they failed to resist it. They lost all focus on student outcomes. Instead of filling up the budget with resources focused on accomplishing priorities aligned with Goals and Guardrails, they were instrumental in giving rise to a stretched budget filled with political goodies that made various adults happy.

On top of that, at the eleventh hour this board compounded the disaster-in-the-making by going along with an ill-conceived political hack that was thrown into an already barely balanced budget. The resulting imbalance triggered unscheduled, unplanned layoffs of critical positions within the school system in direct response to the school board's lack of discipline.

By failing to maintain a steadfast focus on the Goals and Guardrails, the board failed to make sure the superintendent's proposed budget allocated resources in a manner that prioritized a focus on improving student outcomes.

ALIGNING RESOURCES WITH GOALS AND GUARDRAILS

Everything covered in this book to this point has the purpose of developing clarity on what our priorities are as board members:

> We determine what we want our students to know and be able to do (Goals), we pinpoint which values need to be honored along the way (Guardrails), and we put in place a process to make sure we systematically evaluate whether or not those priorities are happening (monitoring).

Setting Goals and monitoring progress toward them are, by far, the school board's most powerful actions for creating the conditions to improve student outcomes, and boards need to spend at least half their time each month on these two activities.

Some may wonder why spend only 50 percent of the board's time on setting and monitoring student-outcomes-focused Goals. Why not spend all their time on this? The reality is that the role of the school board is larger than that, for two main reasons:

- The board also has to be involved in other governance activities.
- The board also has to complete what it is legally required to.

When board members engage in these other types of activities, it's important that they remain aligned with the Goals and Guardrails that were developed to improve student outcomes. What does this look like? Let's walk through several examples.

GET MORE RESOURCES

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources for an implementation guide for each of the following sections.

SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH

When conducting a superintendent search, the first thing any school board must do is clarify priorities. What we want our students to know and be able to do needs to be written into our Goals. Once the priorities have been clarified, the entire superintendent search process can be built around identifying leaders who have demonstrated a capacity for accomplishing similar Goals.

For example, if you're a board member in a coastal community that highly prizes marine biology and underwater welding, and the school board has adopted a Goal about preparing a high percentage of its students to pursue careers in these fields, you may want to search for a superintendent who has demonstrated leadership at educating students in this area.

As a school board, getting ultraclear about your priorities enables you to align school resources with those priorities. You can then come up with effective screening elements for locating and evaluating potential superintendent candidates. An aligned approach leads to reviewing relevant questions such as:

- What evidence do we have that a candidate has been successful in improving student outcomes in the areas of our Goals?
- What evidence do we have that a candidate has been successful in improving operations in the areas of our Guardrails?

- Which of the candidates best demonstrates a history of accomplishing similar Goals while honoring similar Guardrails?

Exploring questions like these helps board members set criteria to narrow down the list of candidates and consider only those who demonstrate ability in the priorities the board has set. Ideally, a school board will develop a set of screening elements that result in the exclusion of 90 percent of superintendent applicants from consideration. In a process like this, other than a final spreadsheet that lists all of the applicants highlighted in red, yellow, and green to indicate the results of the screening process, the school board will never see any information about the screened-out applications and will instead ideally focus all of their attention on the green candidates. This is what it looks like to engage in aligned decision-making for a superintendent search.

One additional note: if you choose to use a search firm but they can't help you answer the above questions about the candidates they're proposing, don't use that search firm. If that search firm can't help you be intensely focused on student outcomes, find one that can or consider leading the process yourself.

SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION

Another important activity board members are expected to complete is the superintendent evaluation. Aligning resources for this activity with the priorities the board has set involves looking for evidence that the superintendent caused the school system to make progress in the direction of our Goals without violating the Guardrails.

When board members don't align the school system resources to the priorities and instead evaluate the superintendent on anything else—and especially when those are highly subjective "competencies" that seem to be favored in most evaluations—the evaluation process gets disconnected from the priorities. Board members should *not* be evaluating based on whether the superintendent wore the right tie, attended enough athletic events, is liked by parents, or is liked by teachers (and yes, like everything else in this book, these are actual examples!). Whether or not the superintendent is keeping adults happy is only relevant if it was adopted as one of the school board's Guardrails. Instead, these are the only two questions that need to be asked:

- What measurable, previously agreed upon evidence do we have that they are accomplishing the Goals?
- What measurable, previously agreed upon evidence do we have that they are honoring the Guardrails?

The superintendent evaluation must center on whether Goals are being accomplished while Guardrails are being honored. This becomes the basis for aligning the resources of the school system with the outcomes of our students. If the school board evaluates the superintendent on anything else, those things become the superintendent's focus rather than causing the superintendent's focus to be aligned to the Goals and Guardrails.

BUDGET

Even though the budget is a managerial document, not a governance document, it falls within the scope of the school board's responsibilities in most places due to state laws. Essentially, the budget is a plan that reveals what the school board hopes will

happen, not a strategic guarantee of what will happen. In most places, school boards will amend their budgets one or more times throughout the year in response to changing realities occurring throughout the year. That's generally an indication that the item is more managerial in nature. But since state legislations require school boards to adopt a budget, that makes it a legal obligation. Like all legal obligations, budget adoption should be as closely aligned to the Goals and Guardrails as possible.

When reviewing the budget that the superintendent has created, aligning resources with the vision and values of the community means that the board must ask the superintendent the following questions:

- What evidence do you have that reaching our Goals is the first priority of your resource allocation plan?
- What evidence do you have that the budget doesn't violate the Guardrails?

The design of the budget should not be contingent upon what was done last year. It should not be about adding in what parents, teachers, or board members want. In budgeting, the only focus of the school board should be requesting evidence from the superintendent that the budget prioritizes accomplishing the Goals while honoring the Guardrails.

This may be a radical departure from the way budgets are typically handled, but asking your superintendent to produce convincing evidence that the proposed budget aligns with the Goals is an effective way to remain focused on student outcomes. Once the board is convinced by the evidence, it can then proceed with adopting the budget.

STAFF ALLOCATION

Another important responsibility that the school board often is involved with is staff allocation. In some states the board is required to play a role in approving hirings, terminations, and staff placements. Much like with budgets, these are not governance tasks, they're managerial tasks. But when state legislatures assign a role to the school board, they become legal obligations to which the school board must attend.

Typically, classroom staff allocation is handled by asking teachers where they would like to teach. The most tenured educators are asked first, followed by other teachers in order of seniority. New teachers rarely have a say in the matter; being at the bottom of the list, they're typically assigned to whatever is left. Once all the assignments are made, the board cosigns on the new staff allocation plan.

The problem with this approach is that, in the vast majority of school systems, positioning of talent is a function of adult preferences and comfort, not a function of considering what is needed to improve student outcomes. Within any school system, the time of our teachers is the most valuable resource because they are the educators who are in the classroom day after day working directly with students. The quality of instruction that teachers provide is the most influential factor to improving student outcomes that school systems control. Teachers are so central to the improvement of student outcomes that any strategy that doesn't ultimately benefit and support teachers at increasing the quality of instruction their students experience probably will never have an impact on improving student outcomes. If a strategy is not helping teachers be great with the time they have with students, then it's unlikely to ever help students be great. For these reasons, how educators are allocated and distributed within the educa-

tional system is deeply meaningful. The placement of teachers and their time—the most valuable resources in a school system—needs to be aligned with where the need is greatest and where the teachers will have the most impact on student outcomes.

> A student outcomes approach to staff allocation strives to create the context where students with the greatest need relative to the Goals are consistently matched up with teachers who can deliver the highest quality of instruction.

This is what aligning the resources with our Goals around student outcomes looks like in the staff allocation process. Such an approach brings together within each classroom students for whom the learning gaps are the widest with teachers who have demonstrated the greatest capacity to close those gaps. Instead of giving senior teachers preferential treatment, boards need to start assigning them to classrooms where they can apply their skills to do the most good for their students.

In this approach, the board and the superintendent work together. The superintendent selects the appropriate personnel resources to meet the needs, and the board holds the superintendent accountable with requests like these:

- Show us how your allocation of educators is focused on accomplishing our student-outcomes-focused Goals.
- Show us how we are intentionally prioritizing that our children with the greatest needs relative to our Goals are getting access to our most effective educators.
- Show us how you are identifying which of our educators have demonstrated the most success with helping students grow in the areas of our Goals.

Aligning the resources with the priorities isn't always easy. If it was, everyone would already be doing it. Adult preferences need to be put aside when aligning the resources of the school system with the needs of the children. This method requires a more in-depth analysis of evidence-based data to ensure that tasks like passing a budget, evaluating the superintendent, and assigning teachers to classrooms are completed with an intentional, consistent focus on improving student outcomes.

As a final note on this topic, forcing teachers to go where they don't want to be has consistently failed as a strategy. Instead, school systems should be creating the conditions that inspire their most effective teachers to serve in the places where student needs are greatest. If the superintendent can't articulate how their staffing allocation strategies will accomplish this inspiration, school boards should be wary.

SYSTEM DIETS

Aligning priorities is just as much about what you stop doing as it is about what you start doing. To ensure that the school board's focus is increasingly aligned with its Goals and Guardrails, the effective school board must adopt a certain flavor of zealotry in unburdening itself from activities that, while perfectly legal and reasonable and expected, do not align with its ability to drive performance improvements for students in the areas of the Goals. Often, the system of governance is simply bloated and needs to be dieted.

The system diet has three basic steps:

1. Identify the aspects of the existing process that are aligned to the Goals and Guardrails.
2. Collectively choose whether to keep, delete, or modify the unaligned aspects.
3. Implement the diet.

AGENDA DIET

School boards can benefit greatly from doing an *agenda diet* that reveals which specific items on the agenda are focused on student outcomes. The intent of the agenda diet is to help school boards be more thoughtful about redesigning how time is being deployed.

In other words, how focused on student outcomes are the individual items on future meeting agendas and past meeting minutes? This evaluation enables boards to tactically modify meeting agendas to achieve a higher focus on student outcomes.

> Ideally, 50 percent of school board meeting time is spent on monitoring its student outcome Goals.

Goal monitoring plays a critical role in agenda diets. The data that board members use to identify which items need to go into (or need to be removed from) meeting agendas comes from monitoring reports. While the time-use evaluation is a big-picture awareness tool, the agenda evaluation is a tactical tool that involves making changes to the actual agenda.

The procedure for accomplishing this is straightforward. The board pulls up a copy of an upcoming agenda, or a copy of min-

utes from a previous meeting, and goes through the listed items, one at a time. For each item, this question is asked: is this item focused on student outcomes?

Essentially, it's a monitoring question. Another way to phrase the question is:

> Is this item on the agenda being used to monitor the board's adopted Goals for student outcomes?

Going through the agenda, one item at a time, board members identify which items are and which items are not being used to monitor student performance. All the items that do not focus on student outcomes are reviewed a second time, one by one. As each one is reviewed, three questions are asked:

1. Do we want to keep this item?
2. Do we want to delete it?
3. Should we modify it?

An agenda item may be modified to make it more aligned with student outcomes. Or if an item is not focused on student outcomes, it may be modified to take up less time during a meeting. As the board goes through the entire agenda, the process is repeated, with board members determining whether to keep, delete, or modify each agenda item.

In the end, how many items are left is not as important as ensuring that what remains on the agenda results in the board spending at least half of its time focused on student outcomes. The agenda evaluation is a way to prioritize agenda items so that more time is spent on what matters most. By taking the

time to prioritize what's most important, board members craft meetings that make better use of limited time.

COMMITTEE DIETS

Another helpful tool for using time more effectively is the *committee diet*, which is similar to an agenda diet, but instead of prioritizing agenda items, committees are prioritized. A big reason committees need to be evaluated, prioritized, and in some cases removed is that there's a tendency to treat committees as if they are fiefdoms.

I recently worked with a school system whose school board members oversaw all types of committees. Each of the members created a committee they wanted to oversee; to me, this process was so transparently self-serving. It went something like this:

- "What committee do you want to be the chair of?"
- "I really care about early learning, so I'll be the pre-K chair."
- "My people care about the budget, so I'll be the budget chair."

It was all about building fiefdoms for themselves, generally to help them advance politically. Board members were coming up with whatever they wanted to chair without having clarity on the purpose or Goals of these committees. The majority needed to be disbanded. Interestingly enough, no one stepped up to be the student outcomes committee chair!

Every now and then, we do run across a school board that has formed some type of academic committee, but even in these situations, our recommendation is to shut down that committee. Why? Because student performance must be the top priority for

every board member and not just the concern of a subcommittee. The entire board needs to be having ongoing conversations about how students are growing.

GROUND RULES FOR COMMITTEES

Committees created and run by school board members must never serve self-interests. To avoid wasting time on anything that's not directly related to student outcomes, we provide school boards with several guiding principles:

1. Don't form a committee simply for the sake of having a committee.
2. Don't form a committee simply because a board member needs to feel important.
3. Start a committee only if it exists to do board work.
4. Don't form committees for doing superintendent work.
5. If senior staff must be present for a committee to be effective, that committee is likely doing superintendent work, not board work, and needs to be shut down.
6. Effective committees have a specific, measurable deliverable and a specific deliverable date.

Committees should exist to help the board do board work. If the superintendent needs a committee to help with doing superintendent work, forming that committee is *not* work the board should be doing—it's the superintendent's responsibility to get that done.

In addition, a board member who doesn't know what the specific deliverable is or by what date that deliverable is due is not ready to chair a committee.

> A committee should exist only as long as a specific deliverable is due. Once the due date is reached, the committee should cease to exist.

If the SMART, measurable deliverable is dispatched or achieved by the due date, then the committee has accomplished what it had set out to do, and there is no longer a need for it to exist. The committee can now be disbanded.

If the deliverable is not achieved by the specified due date, then the committee should cease to exist. The committee chair has failed to do what they set out to do and should not be given a second shot at failure. Should the school board decide that it still wants a committee to do that work, someone else needs to be appointed as the chair.

POLICY DIETS

The way the community knows what a board values is by watching where it invests its time. If a board cares about something, then it should have a policy about it. And the school board further demonstrates caring when they are willing to invest time in the policy. So said differently, if the board is willing to invest time monitoring the policy at least once per year, then it cares sufficiently that it probably makes sense as a policy.

If the board *isn't* willing to monitor the policy at least once per year, then the board should avoid creating a policy about it and instead delegate responsibility for that area to whomever will implement it (and let *them* create a policy/regulation/procedure for it if they want). Having hundreds of pages of policy language doesn't clarify what the board prioritizes; it typically obscures

it. Simultaneously, the thousand-page-policy-manual approach almost always invades the areas of delegation from the school board to the superintendent.

One solution to this is to contemplate a policy diet wherein the school board delegates all operational policy to the superintendent, who can then adopt it as managerial policy/regulation/procedures—whatever makes the most sense—and the school board only retains as board policy the most prioritized elements of the community's vision and values.

The traditional thousand-page board policy framework does have benefits, but if a school board wants to be intensely focused on improving student outcomes, those benefits are insufficient to justify the harm that the thousand-page board policy approach does to the school system's ability to focus on a narrow set of priorities.

To achieve focus, effective school board policy will clearly and succinctly answer four questions: what is the community's vision (as expressed in Goals); what are the community's values (as expressed in Guardrails); what is the relationship between the school board and the employee(s) who report directly to the school board (delegation); and what is the relationship between the school board and the community, the school board members, and the full board (governing).

The end result of a policy diet is typically a revised board policy manual that contains these four sections:

- Goals (board's direction to the superintendent on the community's vision)

- Guardrails (board's guidance to the superintendent on the community's values)
- Delegation (board's relationship with staff who directly report to the board)
- Governing (board's relationship and processes with community members, board members, and the board as a whole)

Any policies that don't fit into that framework can be deleted, which has the effect of delegating them to the superintendent for modification and/or inclusion in the appropriate managerial policy document.

It's easy for a school board to say that it wants to be effective and that it is willing to be focused on student outcomes. The words are simple to repeat. But the real test is in how the school board chooses to spend its time and in whether or not it aligns its work with the Goals and Guardrails.

Assuming the school board takes meaningful steps in the direction of being effective, it now creates the context in which the superintendent can begin to cascade a focus on improving student outcomes throughout the entire school system.

CHAPTER 16

CASCADING PRIORITIES THROUGHOUT THE ORGANIZATION

One of the school boards my team supports had recently completed the adoption of its Goals and Guardrails. While the superintendent had been skeptical of the school board going through this process, they followed their school board's lead and participated fully by developing interim metrics that would be used to monitor progress toward the Goals and by beginning the process of aligning all central office employee evaluations with the newly adopted Goals and interim Goals, Guardrails and interim Guardrails.

As the superintendent was working with their team to develop the monitoring report, they noticed that something in the data didn't seem to make sense. As multiple people looked at the data, eventually it became obvious: there was a group of students who, if a couple key changes weren't made immediately, should have been eligible to graduate but wouldn't be.

Once they found the issue, they were able to immediately address it through corrective action. During our next monthly check-in, they shared that "if we hadn't been going through the monitoring process in partnership with our principals, we would not have caught this until too late." The fact that they were monitoring made a real difference for their students that year, but so too was their intentionality about pushing the monitoring conversation all the way through the organization. This was the moment when the leadership team became fans of this work because they saw its ability to help them improve student outcomes in real time. This cascading process begins with developing interim metrics that will be used for progress monitoring.

Note: This chapter focuses more on the superintendent's role in implementing the board-adopted Goals and Guardrails. It's helpful for school board members to have an understanding of how their work interacts with the superintendent's work, but this is still superintendent work, not board work.

* * *

DEVELOPING INTERIM METRICS

It's not only the school board that plays a role in creating an effective governance system; without the superintendent and their team's involvement, it can't happen. This is why we refer to a governance team as both the school board and the superintendent. The superintendent is not a part of the school board, but they are a part of the governing team. Once the school board has clarified its priorities—Goals and Guardrails—the baton gets passed from the governance team to the management team.

The trouble is that Goals and Guardrails are lag measures in that, by the time you know the data, it's too late to make a difference; by the time you know who wins the game, it's too late to impact who will win the game. So the next step in the process is for the superintendent to develop interim Goals and interim Guardrails that are lead measures. These are the measures knowable throughout the school year, influenceable by the management team, and that are predictive of the Goals and Guardrails. These three properties—knowable, influenceable, and predictive—allow lead measures to be used for conducting routine progress monitoring. The superintendent's job is to achieve the Goals—the lag measures—but this is accomplished by focusing energy on the lead measures, the interim metrics.

Knowing whether or not interim metrics are sufficiently meaningful is always challenging. Here is a set of questions that management teams should evaluate prior to settling on a set of interim metrics:

- What is the degree of correlation between the interim metric and the Goal metric?
- Are the interim metrics' leading indicators relative to the Goal/Guardrail rather than lagging?
- Are there exactly three interim metrics for each Goal and for each Guardrail?
- If all three of the interim metrics are accomplished, will that ensure the accomplishment of the Goal?
- Can the data be monitored on the school board's monitoring calendar within thirty to sixty days of when it is collected?
- Do any of the interim metrics utilize data sourced from outside the school system?

- Do any of the interim metrics rely on data that is historically unreliable or highly variable between individual schools?
- Do the interim metrics fully address the content of the Goal/Guardrail?
- Are each of the interim metrics updateable multiple times per year?
- Are each of the interim metrics outputs rather than inputs?
- Are there significant unintended consequences that need to be considered?
- Does each interim metric have a starting point, ending point, starting date (month and year), and an ending date (month and year)?
- Does each interim metric have only one data set rather than multiple?
- Do all of the interim metrics appear as part of the leadership team's annual evaluations?
- Is the interim metric the data that management actually uses for decision-making?

The last question is worthy of particular focus. Monitoring done well simply reveals managerial decision-making. If monitoring reports contain no information that management is actually using on a routine basis but instead is just data to show the school board for the sake of this process, monitoring of that data will be worthless.

DEPLOYING GOALS, GUARDRAILS, AND INTERIM METRICS WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT

With the interim metrics selected, the next step is to refine the new superintendent evaluation based on the Goals/Guardrails/interim Goals/interim Guardrails. The key idea of the interim

Goals and interim Guardrails is that if all of them are accomplished, it should have the effect of the Goals and Guardrails having a high likelihood of being accomplished.

GET MORE RESOURCES

Visit www.GreatOnTheirBehalf.com/resources to see examples of Goals and Guardrails that other school systems have adopted.

Once the superintendent evaluation is created, the superintendent will need to explain the full process to their team and provide them with a copy of the superintendent's evaluation. Then the superintendent needs to work collaboratively with the staff who report directly to them on how those staff will cascade this work to the next group of employees.

DEPLOYING INTERIM METRICS WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT'S LEADERSHIP TEAM

In the same way that the Goals and Guardrails are how the superintendent is evaluated, the interim Goals and interim Guardrails become the performance metrics used in the leadership team's annual evaluations. Then, just like the superintendent develops a set of interim Goals and interim Guardrails to track progress toward the Goals and Guardrails, leadership team members go through a similar process. Each leadership team member takes the interim Goals and/or interim Guardrails that are assigned to them and identifies a set of SMART initiatives that they will use to accomplish their respective interim Goals and interim Guardrails. The aim is that if all of the initiatives are accomplished, it should have the effect of the interim Goals and interim Guardrails being highly likely to be accomplished.

For this to be useful, leadership team members should have one to five initiatives that are being annually evaluated against, but no more. In identifying these initiatives, wise leadership team members engage with their entire team of direct reports and rely on their collective wisdom to help determine which initiatives will have the strongest leverage impact on accomplishment of the interim Goals and interim Guardrails. To recap, here's an example:

Board adopts Goals → These are outcomes that describe what students should know or be able to do

- **Early literacy:** The percentage of third graders reading at grade level on the state assessment will increase from 45 percent in July 2023 to 68 percent by July 2028.

Superintendent adopts interim Goals → These are outputs that are predictive of the Goals

- **Literacy growth:** The percentage of third graders who began the year below grade level in reading but who are on track to grow by at least 1.5 grade levels in reading will increase from 20 percent in September 2023 to 50 percent by September 2025.

Leadership team member adopts initiatives → These are planned sets of inputs to accomplish the interim Goals

- **Literacy intervention:** The percentage of target third graders who receive a monthly average of an additional two hours of support from a reading specialist each week will increase from 0 percent on the first day of school to 90 percent by the end of the first semester.

- **Literacy coaching:** The percentage of target teachers—teachers who are teaching target third graders and who are not rated highly effective in literacy instruction—who receive at least twenty hours per month of in-classroom coaching and modeling on literacy instruction from a master teacher or instructional coach will increase from 0 percent on the first day of school to 90 percent by the end of the first semester.
- **Literacy curriculum:** The percentage of school days throughout the year for which third-grade teachers have been provided with aligned and sequenced literacy instructional materials will increase from 50 percent on the first day of school to 100 percent by the end of the third quarter.

An intention of this step is to reach a place where if every leadership team member perfectly executes their initiatives, the result should be that all of the interim Goals and interim Guardrails are accomplished, and if all of the interim Goals and interim Guardrails are accomplished, the Goals and Guardrails should be accomplished. This surfaces three common and serious challenges worth getting comfortable with.

1. These steps are incredibly difficult because finding the right set of initiatives depends on expertise, credible and timely student performance data, and a variety of other confounding elements. That's why it's important to be clear that the leadership team won't get it perfect. And that's okay. This is a continuous improvement process. So long as the remaining steps in the process are honored—the routine project and performance management activities—refinement and then improvement will come with time.
2. This step in particular will most often result in different leadership team members having varying degrees of diffi-

culty concerning the interim Goals and interim Guardrails to which they're assigned. Generally speaking, interim Goals tend to be harder to achieve than interim Guardrails. And if there are interim Guardrails about culture/climate issues and about finance issues, for example, the culture/climate interim Guardrails tend to be hard to achieve. This reality—that different leadership team members will have easier or harder tasks—is an inescapable norm of this work.

3. It is very common for the same interim Goals and interim Guardrails to be the shared responsibility of multiple leadership team members. For example, an interim Guardrail about ensuring that highly effective educators disproportionately end up working in schools with greater need could overlap with the leaders of human resources, assessment, and finance. Each of them is likely leading different but highly interwoven initiatives. In these situations, shared responsibility will require collaboration and shared decision-making. This adds to the complexity of coordination and execution, but is an inevitability, particularly in highly siloed organizations.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Once initiatives are in place they need to be project managed to ensure that they are being implemented with fidelity, and as time passes, the results from the initiatives need to be performance managed to ensure that the initiatives are having the intended effect.

The next step is to then have leadership team members work collaboratively to design/modify the annual performance eval-

uation template to accommodate at least a 50 percent focus on the interim Goals/interim Guardrails for which each individual leadership team member is responsible (the remaining 50 percent of their evaluation will likely be characteristics specific to their leadership role or job function). It is normal for the redesigned/modified annual performance evaluations to be rolled out on a sample basis in year one and then for real in the second year and beyond. This can be an uncomfortable step, particularly in organizations that are not used to having annual performance evaluations or where those evaluations are typically 100 percent subjective rather than being 50 percent or more tied to specific, objective interim metrics.

After the redesign of the annual performance evaluations is in process, the next step is to create performance management routines. Two separate but simultaneous routines are recommended: one that is leadership team member oriented and that provides an opportunity for management to identify patterns and whether or not the correct interim metrics are being pursued, and one that is Goal/Guardrail oriented and that provides an opportunity for management to identify patterns and whether or not the optimal initiatives are being pursued.

- **Leadership team–focused monthly performance meeting:** Use one leadership team meeting per month as a performance check-in meeting where each leadership team member provides a ten-second red/yellow/green-style status indicator for each of their one to five Goal/Guardrail-focused initiatives (leaders will likely have other nonaligned initiatives that they are working on as well and that are very important, but this is not the time for addressing those). This information should be gathered, compiled, and pro-

vided to all leadership team members the day before, but it remains very important to have each leadership team member state their performance out loud to their peers. After giving their red/yellow/green for each initiative, each leadership team member should also detail one or two steps they will be taking between now and the next performance check-in to move the needle on their initiatives. After each leadership team member has done their "R/Y/G + 2," then the leadership team can have a larger conversation around what's working, what's not working, where folks want support, which initiatives simply aren't the right initiatives, and so forth. Critically, this performance management routine is *not* a project management exercise. The purpose of this performance check-in meeting is for everyone on the leadership team to know the status of everyone else's key initiatives—especially since many of them will be intertwined, making it hard for one to succeed unless they all succeed—and to discuss whether the optimal interim metrics have been identified. If project management needs to be done between two leadership team members, that needs to be taken to a more appropriate meeting.

- **Goal/Guardrail-focused monthly performance meeting:** Host a monthly performance management check-in for each Goal and for each Guardrail individually (so if there are three Goals and three Guardrails, there will be six meetings per month). This check-in should include every initiative owner for a given Goal or Guardrail. So if it's the monthly performance management check-in for the third-grade literacy Goal, every initiative owner whose initiative is connected to interim Goals of the third-grade literacy Goal would gather and do a "R/Y/G + 2"-style activity. Again, this performance management routine is *not* a project management exercise.

> The purpose of this performance check-in meeting is for everyone who is an initiative owner to know the status of every other related initiative—especially since many of them will be intertwined, making it hard for one to succeed unless they all succeed—and to discuss whether the optimal initiatives are being deployed. If project management needs to be done between two initiative owners, that needs to be taken to a more appropriate meeting.

Once the performance management routines are in place, then a common set of project management routines should be designed and deployed. While the performance management routines described above are organized around leaders and Goals/Guardrails, project management routines can be organized around the execution of individual initiatives.

TOOLS

Common performance management systems include OKRs, WAGs, BHAGs, 4DX, and many more. These systems are intended as a means of keeping track of whether or not progress is being made relative to the board's Goals and Guardrails.

Common project management systems include Gantt charts, Excel spreadsheets that track implementation timelines, and many more. These systems are intended as a means of keeping track of how/whether strategic objectives are getting accomplished.

If your organization already has systems like these in active use, it's advisable to leverage them and, where necessary, upgrade capacity whenever possible rather than starting over from

scratch. If there are tools that the organization already uses competently, it often makes sense to keep using them.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Implementing rigorous and public project management and performance management systems can create anxiety and, when misused, a toxic work environment. It is easy for these systems to be used in punitive and embarrassing ways that demoralize and humiliate staff. This isn't just horrible because of its impact on the affected staff, but also because it will contribute to a culture of hiding issues rather than acknowledging them, of protectionism rather than measured risk-taking that could benefit students.

Performance shouldn't be personal; it shouldn't be hidden away. If a set of initiatives is failing significantly and every other leadership team member and initiative owner relying on it doesn't know ASAP, children get caught in the crossfire. In those moments, individual pride is causing adult behaviors that are directly harmful to student outcomes. In the same way that teachers closing their doors and engaging in "private practice" rather than collaboration and team planning is demonstrably poor professional behavior, school system leaders who refuse to participate in regular, rigorous, and public performance management routines are choosing "private practice" over what's possible for students.

But if staff are feeling uncomfortable, it's likely because the culture is already toxic and needs to be directly addressed. Rather than inspiring the best of people, performance management and project management routines can calcify them into a zero-sum

tribalism from which no organization can succeed. Value creation stops when people do not feel psychologically safe. Retired Admiral Bill McRaven has proposed three steps toward creating psychological safety within the organization: leaders must (1) publicly acknowledge their fallibility and appreciate people who point it out, (2) create regular opportunities for people to give feedback and invite them to surface concerns, and (3) show and earn trust by going into the trenches.

1. **Acknowledge fallibility:** Leaders can take the first piece of advice by eagerly embracing opportunities to own when they have erred or when initiatives under their guidance have faltered. The common, but opposite, behavior: blaming your staff for failures. If something goes wrong, use it as an opportunity to publicly acknowledge the leadership lapse in your own practice that contributed to the issue rather than mentioning any other staff. Taking responsibility for your role—and if it happened on your team, you definitely played a role—rather than passing the buck is a powerful strategy for generating psychological safety.
2. **In the trenches:** Leaders should consider spending a defined amount of time each month—1 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent—participating in the toughest tasks of their direct reports and their teams. One superintendent joined the substitute pool once per quarter. Another superintendent drove a van to pick up kindergarteners when the transportation department was short on bus drivers due to the pandemic. Another senior leader spent one lunch per week tutoring middle schoolers. One leadership team member who supervised a compliance-related division joined them each year during their heaviest compliance crunch time. When leaders aren't seen in the trenches, it can contribute to a toxic

tribalism, an us-vsversus-them mindset between central office–based leaders and school-based staff. Spending time in the trenches helps to avoid this phenomenon.

3. **Feedback opportunities:** People want to be heard and have their voice honored. This is appreciated even when people don't get their way on a decision. To encourage authentic feedback, leaders should make sure that no steps in the feedback cycle are missed:
   A. Listen both through random interactions and through intentional listening sessions.
   B. Report out what you heard.
   C. As much as possible, integrate what you heard into the final decision.
   D. Once a decision has been made, articulate how you used the feedback you heard.
   E. Invite the people who shared to provide feedback on how implementation goes.
   F. Repeat.

An incredibly common error is to not communicate what you heard and how you used it; be certain not to miss these steps.

CASCADING BEYOND THE LEADERSHIP TEAM: CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC ABANDONMENT

Once the prior steps are complete, it's time to do it all over again, but now with leadership team members leading the same process with their direct reports—annual performance evaluation redesign and all.

The cascading process will inevitably surface how much is already taking place within the organization. Some existing

activities will be seen to align with the accomplishment of the Goals and honoring of the Guardrails. But some will not. It will be important for the superintendent and their leadership team to recognize that other things will need to be abandoned or redesigned.

If you've followed through on the first four steps, by now you have a board with a mindset focused on improving student outcomes, you've set Goals and created Guardrails based on your community's vision and values, you're monitoring your progress, and you've begun to align your resources to ensure the Goals are met. It's now time to let the community know about the progress made, the plans for the road ahead, and to share with them a deeper understanding of what effective school board governance looks like.

STEP FIVE

COMMUNICATE RESULTS

CHAPTER 17

RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY

Even though it was 9:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning, the largest room in the community center was already nearly full. We hoped for a good turnout, but we never expected *this*. Mingling in every corner of the huge space, the parents, teachers, neighborhood leaders, current school board members, and other elected officials all seemed in good spirits. Drawn by the novelty of the event, a couple of camera crews from local TV stations were on the scene as well. As one of the event's organizers, I stepped to the front of the room and welcomed all of the participants to our first ever School Board School.

Throughout the daylong event that was designed to increase interest in running for the school board, we provided breakout sessions to educate participants regarding the current state of the district, what effective school board governance looked like as distinct from how the school board currently behaved, and what needed to be expected of future school board members.

As soon as I opened the floor for questions, a gentleman's hand shot up. As he stood to ask his question, I could already tell that he seemed frustrated.

"So are you saying that when I get on the school board, I'm not allowed to fire bad teachers who are hurting students?"

"That's correct," I responded, "because the school board has delegated the job of deciding which teachers are effective or not to the superintendent, and the superintendent has delegated that task to the principals. The school board has decided that to accomplish our goals, we need educators making those decisions, not individual school board members." While there was a lot more on my mind, I was proud of myself for answering in such a restrained manner.

"Then why would I bother running for the school board?!" With that, the man huffed incredulously, grabbed his things, and immediately left.

Until that moment, I had not fully appreciated how ingrained our school district's march toward dysfunction was. As long as the community was unclear about our priorities, unclear about our progress, and unclear about the most effective role for the school board in addressing both, all newly elected school board members were likely to arrive with the same expectations as this gentleman. If we, as the currently seated elected officials, weren't having these conversations with our community about effective school board governance and about current school system performance, who was?

That the school board hosted a training about the Goals and

school board behaviors that support accomplishment of the Goals was a victory for the community. That he learned in advance about the incompatibility between his desired actions and effective school board behaviors was a victory for students.

* * *

RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY

In addition to the school board needing to align school system resources with priorities necessary for improving student outcomes, the school board has to be intentional about communicating the school system's results back to the community. Since the school board represents the vision and values of the community, it serves as an agent of the community and thus has an obligation to update the community periodically. This responsibility requires more attention than is immediately obvious, however. If the school board isn't seen as listening to its community, it's less likely to be listened to. And even if community members are open to listening, if the context gap between community members and school board members isn't bridged, school board members will, at best, simply sound out of touch and, at worst, aggressively negligent. Both of these issues need to be addressed as part of the larger strategy of communicating results. This gives rise to three critical tasks of the school board: listening, training, and reporting.

It's worth noting that these are duties of the school board. School board members don't represent the vision and values of the community; the school board collectively does.

LISTENING

Until community members have had the experience of being heard, they are likely to focus their energy on being heard. Few issues in life are more motivating and/or triggering for people than the welfare of their children. As such, the most reasonable thing to expect is that when opportunities to visit with school board members emerge, people will rush to the microphone to air their concerns about the needs of their children even if that is not the purpose of the meeting. Rather than fighting against this reasonable and understandable urge, school boards should lean into it by routinely hosting listening sessions and by having them scheduled and announced far in advance. Community members should never have to wonder when the next opportunity for an authentic two-way communication opportunity with the school board will be available, they should never have to feel satisfied with the unsatisfying one-way communication opportunity that is the "public comments" section of most school board meetings, and they shouldn't feel like hijacking other meetings is the only way to have their voice heard.

A challenge with the school board hosting listening sessions is that more often than not the conversation will be dominated with requests for stop signs. This requires that the school board members be well trained to listen for the vision and values that are underneath the stop sign requests. We strongly recommend that all school board members do role-play practice with a coach prior to hosting listening sessions.

If community members are frustrated or triggered about something during these sessions, our coaching for the situation follows a basic pattern:

1. Express gratitude.
    A. This usually just sounds like, "Thank you for making time to share today" or "Thank you for sharing."
2. Create the experience of having been heard.
    A. There are many ways to do this. The method we most commonly use is to simply reflect back what they said—as word-for-word as you are able—so that they know they were heard. On multiple occasions, I have had people publicly express frustration with this practice, but then privately express appreciation for evidence of listening.
3. Determine board work versus superintendent work.
    A. If superintendent work, refer.
    B. If board work, discuss but do not make a decision. Decisions should be made after reflection and homework, not in the moment to appease constituents.
4. Identify a next step.
    A. If superintendent work, let them know that the school board will first need to let that process play out. But that after that process is complete, if they want to visit with the school board about policy changes for the future, that the school board would welcome that conversation.
    B. If board work, identify the remaining options available to the community member and which, if any, the school board will proactively pursue.

TRAINING

The next obstacle to effectively communicating results is that even though school board members may know everything in this book, it's unreasonable to expect that community members will. The school board is responsible for bridging that gap by providing opportunities for community members to learn

more about effective school board governance. In the absence of attending to this duty, school board members should expect that community members won't distinguish between board work and superintendent work. This accelerates the likelihood that efforts to report out will devolve into requests for stop signs.

School Board School is the most common example we offer for a systematic approach to providing community training. Our coaching is to host School Board School.

REPORTING

Once community members have had the experience of being heard and have clarity regarding how school boards can best serve their children, then the way is paved for reporting out school system results. This should be done on a regular basis, at least annually, and should include a clear explanation of how the school system is progressing toward the Goals, as well as any challenges or barriers that have been encountered. The school board should also be transparent about any changes that have been made to the Goals or the strategies being used to achieve them. In order to be effective, the reporting process should be designed to be accessible and understandable to all members of the community, regardless of their level of education or expertise in education.

When reporting out results, the school board needs to communicate five critical aspects back to the community:

1. This is what we have been doing.
2. Here is where we are now.
3. These areas are working.

4. These areas are not working.
5. This is what we will do next.

Keeping the community updated can improve engagement and support. At some point, the community will be called upon to support the school system in some way. That request may come in the form of a proposed tax increase, or it may involve recruiting volunteers from the community to get involved and invested in the lives of students.

> Because school boards call on the resources of the community—whether their time, talent, or treasure—they have an obligation to keep the community updated on progress.

People who are approached for help will be more likely to want to participate if they've been kept informed of progress—the good, the bad, and the ugly. If this is the first time they've heard from the school board since the last time it asked for something, that's unlikely to generate much support or enthusiasm.

Responsibility as a Community Representative

Another reason that communicating results is so essential is that a routine call-to-action is needed on the part of the community. The community members need to know when things are or are not improving. School board members were selected to represent them, and they have a right to hear from their representatives regarding how local schools are performing.

For community members, the benefit of selecting a representative is having someone responsible for seeing through the vision and values of the community. Each community member can

go about their daily routine confident in the knowledge that someone is working explicitly on their behalf to serve students in the school system. Most community members don't want to think or worry on a daily basis about whether or not the local educational system is improving—but they have a vested interest, and they have a right to be informed about the state of schools at regular intervals.

> Communicating results is not a marketing ploy. It is a way to communicate progress, or lack of progress, by providing the community with candid updates.

This is not the time to share with the community all the great programs and initiatives across the schools. This is the time to communicate where the school system is relative to the Goals that were set. It's not a marketing campaign; it's a status report focused on the Goals and Guardrails. Whether you're near the end of a five-year Goal or you've obtained results on your first-year interim Goals, the community has a right to know what the data reveals about student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

By engaging in the behaviors and processes laid out in this book, a truly transformative experience for the school board, the school system, and ultimately the students we serve can take place. I'll never forget the powerful call I received from a board chair whose board and superintendent I'd trained two years earlier.

He called to let me know the training I'd provided had made a huge difference, enabling the board to complete a five-year Goal in just two years. As he spoke, he became emotional and began to choke up.

"I've been on this board for years," he said, his voice thick with emotion and mourning, "and we were never focused on student outcomes. As soon as we got focused on student outcomes, we didn't have to change anything else. We didn't change the students; we didn't change the staff. As a district, we have the same amount of money as before. All we changed was our focus. We

set Goals and focused on them at every board meeting. And that enabled us to reach a five-year Goal in only two years. I'm so grateful for what we've accomplished. I just wish somebody had told me about this work sooner; we could have made a difference for so many more students."

Are you willing to lead your school board toward an intentional focus on improving student outcomes? Are you willing to transform your own behaviors as a means of accessing transformation on behalf of your students?

Regardless of whether you're a community member, a parent, a staff member or teacher, a current school board member, or even a student, you have the tools to begin the transformation. The mindset shift that starts with you enables you to see openings for action that you may have missed in the past. You can make a difference in the culture and environment of your school system, understanding that student outcomes change when adult behaviors change—starting with me. This can be the beginning of an exciting new journey for you and your community, a journey of continuous improvement for the sake of the students you serve.

WHAT YOU ARE NOW EQUIPPED WITH

The arc of human history bends toward justice, and this is certainly the case within school systems as well. If you compare the outcomes of students today with the outcomes of students twenty or thirty years ago, our nation's children are academically better off today, and that's great news. The arc of improvement has bent in the direction of improving student outcomes, as observed in significant changes that have happened in just three decades:

- Academic gaps between students of color and other students have declined.
- Literacy rates for children have improved.
- Rates of numeracy for children have improved.

These advances give us cause to believe that improving student outcomes is possible. Think of how much more student outcomes can improve in the next thirty years when our nation's school boards fully commit to a system of continuous improvement that is intensely focused on student outcomes.

But improving student outcomes isn't a one-time activity; it's an ongoing effort. If your school board hasn't yet started its journey of transformation, it's time to initiate a conversation. That conversation is vital to starting a new, effective culture of governing. With your leadership, guidance, and influence, the next board members who come along can enter a markedly healthier school system to serve students better. You can start this virtuous cycle to launch the next generation of improvements in student outcomes.

AN INVITATION TO PRACTICE

Now that you've reached the end of this book, I want to conclude the same way our workshops end: with an invitation to practice. If I want to get better at throwing a ball, I need to practice. If I want to get better at playing the piano, I need to practice. And if I want to become effective at focusing on student outcomes, I need to practice. What you want for your students emerges from your willingness to practice the five behaviors—focusing your mindset, clarifying the community's priorities, monitoring progress toward those priorities, aligning the community's

resources with the community's priorities, and ensuring that the results are effectively communicated.

But it won't happen by accident; it'll happen by practice. You are poised to create a movement to shift the way school boards operate so that student outcomes may improve. To start that movement, here is your first assignment:

> Get a copy of your most recent school board meeting minutes and conduct an agenda evaluation.

This will take you fifteen to twenty minutes to complete, and it's something you can do right now, on your own. What's more, this step will reveal a great deal of information about how your board is operating and where its focus lies. Is there anything on the agenda that discusses how students are performing?

Once you've completed an agenda evaluation, keep going. Your next step might be one of the following:

- Calculate how much time is focused on student outcomes, and present your findings to the board.
- Find a student-outcomes-focused coach to work with.
- Start a book club and have school board members read this book with you.
- Read this book with parent leaders and figure out how to start making a demand of your board to do this important work.
- If you're a teacher, read this book with other educators and determine how your teachers association can place a demand on the school board to do this work.
- If you're a school board member, begin discussions about

which elements you can start implementing at your next board meeting.

You've read this book because you believe in what's possible for our students and want to do your part to improve student outcomes. A radical redesign of how school boards work in this country begins with you. Become an active participant in radically redesigning school board governance. Start that conversation with your community this week. If you are willing to act, it is within you to be an advocate for students such that school boards are great on their behalf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Improving student outcomes is Airick Journey Crabill's relentless focus. AJ currently serves as the Conservator at DeSoto (Texas) Independent School District. During his guidance, DeSoto made double-digit literacy gains and improved from having F ratings in areas of academics, finance, and governance to the district earning B ratings. He's also education faculty at the Leadership Institute of Nevada where he trains cohorts of aspiring principals and superintendents; collaborator with the Effective School Boards Initiative, a nationwide school board research consortium; and national director of governance at the Council of the Great City Schools in Washington, DC, where he leads school board supports for the nation's largest urban school systems.

He served as deputy commissioner at the Texas Education Agency and he spearheaded reforms as board chair of Kansas City (Missouri) Public Schools that doubled the percentage of students who are literate and numerate and, eventually, led KCPS to full accreditation for the first time in decades. Crabill received the education commission of the state's James Bryant

Conant Award, which recognizes extraordinary individual contributions to education, was a finalist for CGCS's Green-Garner Award, recipient of the KC NAACP's Lucile Bluford Special Achievement Award, and recipient of KCPS Education Foundation's Loyalty to Scholars Award.

His passion to improve student outcomes is rooted in his past: raised in and out of foster care, he bounced around enough to have attended eleven schools as a child. He attended urban, suburban and rural schools; private, public, and parochial schools; lived with white families and families of color; lived in racist communities and inclusive communities; experienced loving homes and homelessness. Guided by the idea that student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change and drawing on his intimate familiarity with the triumphs and terrors of America's safety nets for children, he has devoted much of his adult life to advocating for the well-being of the United States' most vulnerable youth.

A former tech startup entrepreneur and avid volunteer, when AJ is not providing education leadership and coaching across the nation, he still enjoys coding, training high schoolers in student-led restorative practices, experimenting with flavorful vegan recipes in his kitchen, serving as a CASA volunteer, and zooming around on his electric unicycle. Inspired by his parents, who fostered more than 80 children, Crabill has mentored dozens of young people, has helped raise five young people, and will not be surprised when God sends another young person to his open door.

To learn more or to be notified when he posts, visit www.ajcrabill.com.

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