

# Foundational Principles of Effective Governance

As the corporate entity charged by law with governing a school district, the school board sits in trust for its entire community.

The obligation to govern effectively imposes some fundamental duties on the board:

## 1. The board clarifies the district purpose.

As its primary task, the board continually defines, articulates, and re-defines district ends to answer the recurring question — who gets what, for how much? Effective ends development foundationally requires attention to two key concerns: student learning and organizational effectiveness.

- Ends reflect the district’s purpose, direction, priorities, and desired outcomes. Ends are recorded in statements of core values/beliefs, mission, vision, and goals and are articulated by the school board through written board policy.
- Ends express the benefits the school district intends to deliver, providing the entire system with clarity of purpose and direction. A school board does not develop district ends; rather, it detects them through listening and observing.
- In effective school districts, every part of the organization is aligned with the ends articulated by the school board in written board policy.
- Well-crafted ends enable the school board to effectively and efficiently monitor district performance.

## 2. The board connects with the community.

The school board engages in an ongoing two-way conversation with the entire community. This conversation enables the board to hear and understand the community’s educational aspirations and desires, to serve effectively as an advocate for district improvement, and to inform the community of the district’s performance.

- Community engagement, also called public engagement or civic engagement, is the process by which school boards actively involve diverse voices in the constituency in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative thinking around common interests for their public schools.
- The school board’s role as trustee for the community is unique and critical to both the district and community. Effective community engagement is vital to create trust and support among community, board, superintendent, and staff.
- The school board must be intentional in reaching out to the community to engage people in conversations about education and the public good. In contrast, people who bring individual concerns to board

members should be appropriately directed to the superintendent and staff.

- A board in touch with community-wide concerns and values will serve the broad public good rather than being overly influenced by special interests.

### 3. The board employs a superintendent.

The board employs and evaluates one person — the superintendent — and holds that person accountable for district performance and adherence to written board policy.

- An effective school board develops, cultivates, and maintains a productive relationship with the superintendent.
- This relationship is built on mutual respect and a clear understanding of respective roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This relationship starts with a thoughtfully crafted employment contract and job description and is grounded in protocols for communication and processes for ongoing assessment.
- Although the board is legally required to approve all employment contracts, the board delegates authority to the superintendent to select and evaluate district staff in alignment with the standards established in written board policy.

### 4. The board delegates authority.

The board delegates authority to the superintendent to manage the district and provide leadership for the staff. Such authority is communicated through written board policies that designate district ends and define operating parameters.

- “Delegates authority” means empowering the superintendent to manage the district to pursue district ends. High levels of superintendent accountability require high levels of delegation.
- Members of the school board must discipline themselves to depend on their superintendent and maintain their governance role.

### 5. The board monitors performance.

Using data as the basis for assessment, the board constantly monitors progress toward district ends and adherence to written board policies.

- A school board that pursues its ends through the delegation of authority has an obligation to itself and the community to determine whether that authority is being used as intended.
- Unless the board is clear about what it wants, there is no valid way to measure progress and compliance.
- A distinction should be made between monitoring data (used by the board for accountability) and management data (used by the staff for operations).
- The constructive use of data is a skill that must be learned. The board should have some understanding of data, but will typically require guidance from the staff.

### 6. The board takes responsibility for itself.

The board, collectively and individually, takes full responsibility for board activity and behavior — the work it chooses to do and how it chooses to do the work.

- Individual board members are expected to express their opinions and respect others’ opinions. Ultimately, however, board members are obligated to abide by the majority decisions of the board.
- Good governance requires the board be responsible for itself, its processes, and its contributions. Board deliberations and actions are limited to board work, not staff work. The board seeks continuity of leadership, even as it experiences turnover in membership. The board accomplishes this by using written board policies to guide board operations, by providing thorough orientation and training for all members, and by promoting a respectful and collaborative board culture.