ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

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# Foundational Principles of Effective Governance

As the corporate entity charged by law with governing a school district, each 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 benefits for how much? Effective ends development requires attention to at least two key concerns: student learning and organizational effectiveness.

- Ends express the benefits the school district should deliver, thereby providing the entire system with clarity of purpose and a clear direction. A School Board rarely creates district ends; rather, it most often detects them through listening and observing.
- Ends reflect the district's purpose, direction, priorities and desired outcomes and are recorded in statements of core values/ beliefs, mission, vision and goals.
- 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 and assess organizational success (Principle 5).

## 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.

- Effective communication is essential to create trust and support among community, Board, Superintendent and staff.
- The School Board must be aggressive in reaching out to the community – the district's owners - to engage people in conversations about education and the public good. In contrast, people who bring customer 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 compliance with written Board policy.

- An effective School Board develops and maintains a productive relationship with the Superintendent.
- The employment relationship consists of mutual respect and a clear understanding

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of respective roles, responsibilities and expectations. This relationship should be grounded in a thoughtfully crafted employment contract and job description; procedures for communications and ongoing assessment; and reliance on written policy.

- Although the Board is legally required to approve all employment contracts, the Board delegates authority to the Superintendent to select and evaluate all district staff within 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.

- Ultimately, the School Board is responsible for everything, yet must recognize that everything depends upon a capable and competent staff.
- "Delegates authority to" means empowering the Superintendent and staff to pursue Board ends single mindedly and without hesitation. A Board that does (or re-does) staff work disempowers the staff. High levels of Superintendent and staff accountability require high levels of delegation.
- Delegation is difficult for anyone accustomed to direct action. However, to appropriately stay focused on the big picture and avoid confusing the staff, members of the School Board must discipline themselves to trust their Superintendent and staff and not involve themselves in day-to-day operations.

## *5. The Board Monitors Performance.*

The Board constantly monitors progress toward district ends and compliance with written Board policies using data as the basis for assessment.

- A School Board that pursues its ends through the delegation of authority has a moral 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 obligated to express their opinions and respect others' opinions; however, Board members understand the importance of the Board ultimately speaking with one clear voice.

- The School Board's role as trustee for the community is unique and essential to both the district and community.
- While the Board must operate within legal parameters, good governance requires the Board be responsible for itself, its processes and 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 nurturing a positive and inviting Board culture.

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