



Book Review - *The Essential School Board Book: Better Governance in the Age of Accountability*

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One would think that a book entitled “Essential” in the complicated area of school board governance would be hundreds of pages long. After all, school board governance is as much of an art as a science. Many of those who are serving, who have served or who have focused on governance have developed as many lessons on governance as there are political or philosophical differences on boards.

That does not mean, however, that they have learned those lessons.

Nancy Walser has written a relatively short book with many ideas, charts and recommendations that board members and superintendents should be thinking about. Many of the concepts have been discussed and implemented in Connecticut for years, but changing culture is what some of this work involves and not all boards have successfully accomplished this.

A number of Connecticut’s board members and superintendents have been quoted in the book in a positive light to lend credence to these lessons. Ms. Walser is a former Cambridge, Massachusetts board member and currently the Assistant Editor of the *Harvard Education Letter* and coeditor of *Spotlight on Leadership and School Change*. She has written about many of the critical issues in school board governance. However, I did want to comment on the Foreword by Dr. Richard Elmore, the Gregory R. Arnig Professor of Educational Leadership at Harvard University. I know that Dr. Elmore is highly thought of by many educators and those involved in school change. In addition, I am aware that rarely does one comment on the Foreword to a book. However, I was surprised by some of Dr. Elmore’s comments.

I also would mention that in no way does the Foreword detract from the value of *The Essential School Board Book*. As a matter of fact, he has done readers a favor by questioning the role of school boards as the governance model for our public schools today. Doing so sets up a real opportunity for Ms.

Walser to discuss what high-functioning boards do.

Dr. Elmore states that he is “a true skeptic on the subject of local school boards.” He writes that he has “seen the full range of relationships between boards and educators, and, in [his] experience, it is not a pretty picture. Many of the chronic obstacles to continuous, sustained improvement of student learning and performance in schools can be traced to the dysfunctions of local governance structures, including highly factionalized boards, members more interested in building their individual political careers than in learning the complexities of the work, instability in leadership caused in part by the short electoral cycles of school boards in comparison to the longer-term work of school improvement and seemingly arbitrary shifts in the temperament, focus and purpose of school boards accompanying shifts in board membership.”

Now, I know that too many of our boards are wracked by the exact issues that Dr. Elmore describes. While Dr. Elmore states that he is “no less skeptical about local boards”, he does consider himself a “much better informed skeptic, and perhaps one who is slightly more persuaded of the future viability of local school governance” having read the book.

Ms. Walser looked at sixteen “high functioning” school boards whose students are excelling. She makes the point that despite differences, these boards are similar. “They face different challenges, have different structures, goals, meetings and rules; yet a remarkable consensus exists among them about policies and practices that help them focus their efforts – and those of the district and their community—on how their students are doing...” What the book contains are “concrete examples of successful boards – those boards... whose work has contributed appreciably to student achievement.”

So, what lessons could Dr. Elmore and you have taken from these districts? Here are just a few:

- Boards are co-leaders with superintendents under the new accountability system brought about by NCLB

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- Boards and superintendents still have “important and distinct roles that are openly agreed upon and strictly maintained”
- There are many things boards can do to “make service much more manageable”
- Good data is crucial for accountability purposes, for monitoring student achievement and to help board members better understand the need for initiatives recommended by the superintendent
- High-functioning boards don’t just define roles, but police them

While there are many other lessons in the book, I want to concentrate on what Connecticut board members and superintendents stated.

While much of the book contains helpful examples of board mission statements and duties, a critical role of boards is to “create the *conditions* necessary” for collaborative problem solving by those closest to students, as Dr. Elmore has written. Today’s accountability requirements have caused board members to be more like partners with the administration and staff in focusing on student achievement.

Berlin and Bloomfield

But, how does a board stay focused on this topic?

According to Berlin Board Chair (and CAFE Associate Director) Gary Brochu, he sees himself (he is also a school attorney) as a “missionary for what we are trying to accomplish in our schools... “ In order to remind board members and others in attendance of their roles, before each board meeting, Mr. Brochu will state the district’s mission statement, “The board of education is committed to supporting continuous improvement leading to student achievement and student success.” Then he adds, “I hope this meeting is one more step in that process.”

Berlin’s superintendent (soon to be in Region 9) Michael Cicchetti stated that while this may seem like a small thing, “over time the administration, the staff, and the community hear the same thing, and it sinks in. It’s as relentless as our continuous efforts in our district.”

Berlin’s success is tied to the way in which board meetings are conducted. Use of a consent agenda allows routine matters to be dispensed within a single vote. “Every meeting includes one or two presentations by the administration that relate to teaching and learning.” According to Mr. Brochu, the board focuses on issues like math and curriculum. Both board members and department heads also give a 45

second summary of what they’ve been doing in order to give the board and the public a better sense of what’s being done in the district.

The Berlin Board also has a line in the budget to pay for professional development for board members. The idea is to give board members a better understanding of what is occurring so that they are better “partners in the conversation”. Mr. Brochu stated that “You have to be able to understand what quality teaching and rigor mean, and the difference between the rest. I think it’s essential that you can have that conversation.”

Another critical issue is how to solve problems. Ms. Walser discusses Bloomfield and the changes brought to the district when David Title was hired in 2002. When Dr. Title, who is the current Connecticut Superintendent of the Year, came to Bloomfield, less than 50 percent of the students were scoring proficiency or above on state tests on some grade levels.

The board “empowered Title to make many decisions, ceding hiring decisions completely over to him.” Former Board Chair James Michel related that “staffing issues were not our role... You cannot have seven people on a board deciding who should get fired and who should get hired. That’s very inefficient.”

The Board and Dr. Title held annual retreats (with a CAFE facilitator) and they “set out roles, agreed on ways of operating, and changed their meeting schedule, their subcommittees and their budget procedure... board members agreed to follow the chain of command, referring parent and constituent calls about problems to Title and his staff... Meetings were cut from two per month to one and shortened to only thirty to forty-five minutes in length.”

While Dr. Title and the Bloomfield Board were surprised when the *Hartford Courant* printed a front page, above-the-fold article when 10th grade scores “fell apart”, the board supported Dr. Title as he put together a plan to help struggling high schoolers with extra tutoring. According to Mr. Michel, Dr. Title did not blame others and instead, developed a strategy for dealing with the issue.

The *Essential* book is filled with ideas from districts around the country that should be examined by board members as they determine how their boards can be as effective as possible. If you follow some of the suggestions in this book, you might turn even the skeptics like Dr. Elmore into supporters of local boards of education.