



Book Review: What School Boards Can Do

By Robert Rader

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When Dr. Steven Adamowski became superintendent of schools in Hartford in November, he asked all Hartford board members to read *What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools* by Donald R. McAdams, president of the Center for Reform of School Systems.

From reading the book, it is not hard to imagine why Dr. Adamowski pushed board members to read it. Some of the most critical issues facing urban boards, and rural and suburban boards as well, is defining roles and responsibilities of the board and superintendent in a way most beneficial to the education of students. Part of that topic is ensuring that all are on “the same page”, including having a vision of education, including its governance and management, to which all members of the leadership team are committed. This book provides a comprehensive, systemic means of doing just that.

McAdams describes what he views as the most appropriate and beneficial approach to urban school board leadership. McAdams keeps asking the same “big” question of school board members who are reading the book: “*Am I satisfied with incremental improvement in the status quo, or am I profoundly dissatisfied by the status quo and determined to change it as soon as possible?*”

For those who answer the latter (and McAdams obviously believes that, given the poor results in many urban communities, board members should opt for the latter), he proposes “reform governance” as the solution for many of the ills of our urban districts. In his model, urban superintendents are powerful and strong “governance boards” function as “partners” with the superintendent. According to McAdams, “given the condition of many urban districts, concentrating power in the hands of a powerful superintendent... makes sense.” Reform boards, he argues, “need strong superintendents—the stronger, the better.” And, yet, school boards still “do the most important work, for governance makes possible management, not the other way around.”

So, how does reform governance work?

To be successful, boards must be “clear about their core beliefs and commitment. They must have a clear theory of action for change that drives redesign of their districts through the enactment and oversight of aligned reform policies.” He sees leadership through the adoption of policies “one of the three most powerful levers for change placed in the hands of a school board—the others being superintendent selection and the bully pulpit.”

Below are the basics of McAdams’ “reform governance framework”:

- **Core beliefs and Commitments.** Here McAdams suggests that in order to be successful, boards must agree that the “95% or so of the children who do not have severe learning disabilities... can perform at grade level and graduate from high school with an academic diploma... the school effect is significant [student achievement can be greatly affected by school] and that school districts can become high-performing organizations. And they must commit themselves to grade-level performance and achievement to potential for all children and the elimination of the achievement gap”.
- **Theories of Action for Change.** McAdams’ “theory of change” is a “set of beliefs about what actions by the board will create the desired changes” in the school district.
- **Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships.** While stating that board members have many different relationships, “the most important are the relationships board members have with one another and with the superintendent”. In discussing this he takes a rather broad position: “Board members micromanage when they insert themselves into management decisions—about personnel, facilities, student discipline or whatever. Micromanagement “sows confusion, disrupts management systems and weakens the superintendent’s control of the district... it diminishes the power of the board to govern”.
- **Building Blocks of Reform Governance.** Here, he discusses effective board meetings, including development of the agenda, workshops to help the board understand issues and board members with the superintendent in order to do critical constituent service and community-building work.
- **Policy Development and Oversight.** McAdams believes that “perhaps” 90% of all policies are routine operating policies” and that boards should avoid spending time on those, since they relate to operation of the school district and concentrate on “reform policies, those designed to change the district in fundamental ways to improve student achievement and district operations.” He also describes how policies in general should be developed and he develops a framework for using policy to strengthen student achievement.
- **Civic Capacity.** Real reform cannot be carried out unless the community provides its support. “Reform governance means more than leading the district. It means leading the community.”

- **Transition Planning.** School reform is “not the work of one board-superintendent team. It is the work of a succession of gradually changing teams.” This part of the work is aimed at managing succession planning and cultivating outstanding citizens for future board elections.

Of course, the book goes into much more detail in each of these areas, including calls for changes in the way salary structures now exist. There is much good information, which any district considering using this model should examine in detail.

There are other details with which those in the school policy community may take issue. As just one example, McAdams states that when a constituent brings forward a concern, board members must not “assume the constituent is right or suggest a solution to any district employee, including the superintendent. A suggested solution from a board member can be heard as a

directive, and suddenly the board member is making a management solution.”

While board members should refer constituents to the chain of command as appropriate, and should not take on the role of the caller’s “advocate”, there may be times when a board member might have a solution to quickly minimize the issue. In such cases, the superintendent should not take offense if a board member suggests a possible solution. With tact and understanding of their roles, superintendents and board members should be able to communicate their thoughts without being concerned that a suggestion be treated “as a directive.” In fact, strong superintendents would, in many situations, appreciate a board member’s recommendation that may defuse a situation quickly and easily.

Overall, however, the book provides a lot of good information and we wish Dr. Adamowski the best of luck in using it and other means to increase student achievement in Hartford.