



Part I

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Mindsets for Efficacy

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1

Moral Imperative and the Governance Core



Governance of local school districts by citizen boards is a basic tenet of American democracy. Given the increasing presence of conflict and the corresponding stress and tension in the public school system around the country, there has never been a time when highly effective governance is more needed. The delegation of responsibility for education to the state and subsequently to the local school districts as agents of the state, places local school boards as critical linchpins in the system. How well boards carry out their governance responsibilities in many ways determines the quality of the education for the children they serve.

While effective local governance was the original intent in establishing school boards, the system of local governance has evolved without much

research and development of what might be the most effective forms of school boards and superintendents working together to maximize individual student learning. We maintain that the study of and development of ever better forms of effective local governance has been education's neglected child.

Democratic systems have changed dramatically over the past 200 years, all the more so in the past twenty years as expectations have risen, only to be increasingly thwarted. The digital world has ironically dramatically increased access to information while presenting greater confusion about what might be true or not. The role of education itself has become incredibly more complex: tackling growing inequity with many factors outside the control of school boards is ever more daunting; students are more diverse and different in so many ways; jobs and the economy are almost completely unpredictable; the world itself feels more mysterious and dangerous; anxiety and stress are on the rise for young and old alike. Almost everyone feels that he or she should have a say in the matter. Intuitively, it seems that quality education for all would be one of the very few positive pathways forward. All of this and more make the matter of governance remarkably complicated. Yet we would venture to say that very few, even those in decision-making positions, stop and think about "What is governance anyway?" In short, governance is crucial and neglected—so let's start with this elusive concept.

THE NATURE OF GOVERNANCE

We have already made the point that there is a big difference between politics and governance. Of course, there is always politics, but at certain times—such as before, during, and just after elections—blatant politics can distort the governance core we focus on in this book. At those times politics can lose perspective as it becomes preoccupied with single hot-button issues that are inevitably superficial or otherwise incomplete. Most effective solutions must consider diverse views and get beneath surface issues to take up the combination of factors essential for solving problems. In this sense we can see the governance core discussed in this book as a corrective factor for narrow agendas. We do recommend "focus," but

also show across the chapters how the governance relationships between trustees and superintendents must develop mutual coherence over time if progress is to be achieved. Our advice then is “Yes, keep focused on your key priorities, but (a) take into account diverse views relative to implementing such matters, and (b) be open to other priorities that might be held by others, or might arise from the environment (but don’t fall prey to “initiativitis” (a continuous stream of ad hoc new priorities and programs); nobody said the job was easy!)”

As an organizational function, governance is often misunderstood and underappreciated. Defining governance isn’t easy because it is a lot of different things. Governance derives from the Greek word, *kubernésis*, “to steer a ship.” Donald McAdams adds, “Simply put, governance is steering; management is rowing” (McAdams, 2005, p. 9). What is generally understood is the commonly held notion that school boards deal with policy and staff with administration. Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. Governance is much more than just adopting policies. One of the unique aspects of local government in the United States is that unlike the federal and state government, the legislative, administrative and judicial functions are centralized under one governing authority, the elected or appointed school board. This has a major impact on the role of governance in the school district. Because the school board appoints the chief executive (the superintendent), an oversight and stewardship responsibility is created for the board in addition to the legislative (policy) function. While the notion that governing boards adopt policies is widely accepted, the responsibility of providing some level of school district oversight is not: at least not until something goes wrong.

Governance is the process where the direction of the organization is set, the structure is established, and accountability both fiscal and programmatic is assured. Governance is the connection between communities and professionals, between policy and application, between strategy and tactics. Generally, governance is about defining the “what” of the organization, and administration is focused on the “how” policy gets implemented. If the discussion is focused on long-term outcomes, it tends to be strategic; if it is about short-term objectives or incremental steps, it tends to be tactical or administrative.

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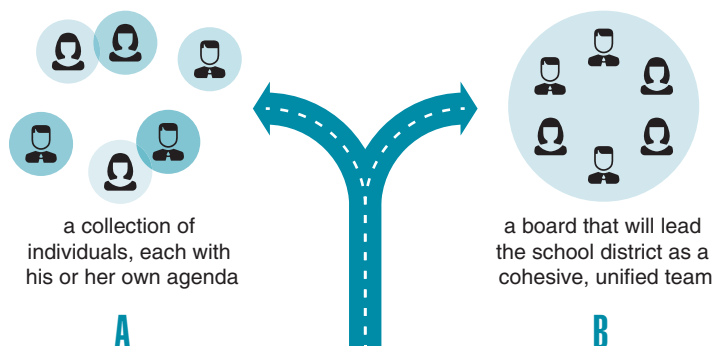
Most research on governance to date has focused solely on relatively narrow board roles, rather than our approach, which focuses on how boards govern. Under a broad and rarely defined concept of “policy,” the traditional definition of board responsibilities seems designed to inhibit or constrain the board’s scope of leadership. But governance is not just passing policies; it is what boards and superintendents do together *and* how they do it.

A FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE

A major decision for trustees on any board is how as a group they choose to govern. Governance is one of the few areas where participants have the option to choose how they will act without the overt pressure of external variables. No one forces a trustee or board to govern well or poorly. The choice is entirely theirs. Will they be a collection of individuals, coming together for meetings, each person with his or her own agenda, own vision, and seeing his or her main function as voting on unrelated issues with little if any coherence or consistency? There are those who argue that all trustees need to do is attend their board meetings and vote. Counting votes on the board becomes the most important skill. There are also those who claim that boards should be totally independent of the agencies they govern—that their fiduciary and oversight responsibilities require they maintain distance from the staff and the programs the agency administers. Or, as we argue in this book, will the board choose to create a cohesive, unified team working together to create a common vision driven by a shared moral imperative? This is a dynamic, powerful role for the board. It assumes that governance is a basic function of the organization, an integral part of the system, setting the direction of the district, assuring the achievement of strategic goals and the moral imperative, holding the district accountable and providing leadership to the community.

This is the critical fork in the road that all boards must face (see Figure 1.1). Their decision will, in large part, determine whether the board will lead the school district or will be sitting on the sidelines or, worse,

Figure 1.1 A Fork in the Road



become a negative, incoherent force. Will the board own the programs they mandate or will they be observers? As observers, the board cannot be a part of the system-wide coherence making that is so fundamental to high-performing districts. As owners, the board should be the ultimate coherence maker. More important, the board can be the link that ensures long-term sustainability of successful programs that provide high-quality education for all students in the district.

There are currently 13,809 school boards with roughly 90,000 trustees governing school districts in every state in the United States. This book is a road map to high-quality, effective governance for school district trustees and superintendents in these districts. It is based on five major themes.

FIVE MAJOR THEMES OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

1. Making a commitment to *good governance*
2. A *shared moral imperative* that drives the work of the school board, the superintendent, and the strategic direction of the district
3. Highly effective trustees and superintendents who have a *governance mindset* to govern effectively
4. Effective school boards as coherence makers who govern with a *unity of purpose*
5. Leadership from the middle: System responsibilities

Make a Commitment to Good Governance

Effective school board governance makes a difference—a huge difference in the long-term success of quality education programs. The board and superintendent together can be an essential force for equity, excellence, and achievement. Donald R. McAdams, former trustee and president of the Houston Independent School district, is an expert on urban education governance. He writes in his book *What School Boards Can Do, Reform Governance for Urban Schools*,

Only boards, because of the democratic power they derive from the people, because of their close links with the people, and because of their stability, can provide the leadership required to redesign and sustain over decades school districts that provide equity and the results for all children. That most have chosen not to do so is not an argument for stripping them of their power. Rather it is an argument for showing them how to exercise their power. (McAdams, 2005, p. 11)

What McAdams recognizes is that despite the difficulties and frequent controversies about school board governance, it is a fundamental part of the American educational experience. But much more important, effective board governance, when it works well, not only makes a significant contribution to the quality of education programs but also creates a long-term commitment to quality and continuous improvement. The key word is *effective*. This book is about putting in place a high-quality, effective governance system, the Governance Core, that will not only support high-quality instructional programs but will also create the stable, sustainable environment necessary for continued growth and improvement.

Commit to a Shared Moral Imperative

A shared moral imperative—a relentless commitment to the learning of all students, no exceptions—must drive the work of the board and its individual and collective action. We say that if there is not a clear moral imperative; if there is not a specific means of implementing it in practice;

and if there are not measurable outcomes that mark progress and attainment; and in the context of this book, if the board and the superintendent cannot articulate the state of play about the moral imperative as a system in action, then *it does not exist in reality*.

For many years, “vision” was seen to be the way forward. But over time vision has lost its cachet and become routine—time and again we see yet another vision statement and set of lofty goals about putting children first. As it turns out, “vision statements,” as statements of intent, without being grounded in intensity of action, have poor track records. Every district has a vision statement on paper, but few of them get realized in practice. By contrast, our Governance Core Model is based on the depth of the moral imperative. The moral imperative *is* about all children learning. It consists of strategies to ensure that the learning occurs. It involves rapport between the trustees and the superintendent. It consists of strong focused relationships between the board and staff. It sorts out what is working and not in specific terms. It zeroes in on indicators of progress. It combines excellence and equity. At its heart, the Governance Core is a force for raising the bar and closing the gap of learning for all students in the district, not just as an aspiration, but as a reality. Beliefs are not strategies. In short, the moral imperative embodies an emotional and empirical commitment that *all children can and will learn*.

When trustees, superintendent, staff, faculty, and parents all operate with the same broad understanding of the moral imperative, the district can accomplish amazing learning—year after year. The moral imperative, deep focus, constructive monitoring, and corresponding action are an unstoppable combination. When this shared moral imperative is lacking, it is difficult to see how a long-term, stable governance system is possible, much less perform in an effective manner.

The moral purpose is geared to real, concrete educational goals for children. It is not so much a philosophical belief as it is a commitment to shared fundamental actions, such as the following:

- All children will achieve; we will not allow an achievement gap in our district.
- All children will have quality teachers.
- All children will be in a safe, healthy learning environment.

Governance Mindset

Governance mindset is a system phenomenon. The single most powerful governance force is the governance mindset displayed by the most successful, high-performing board trustees and superintendents. Governance

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mindset requires a fundamental understanding of all elements of the organization. Governance is about systems, not pieces.

Thus, governance is a strategic, not an administrative, function. It is virtually impossible to effectively govern complex organizations such as school districts without the key policymakers and chief executive officers operating with a common mindset. At the outset, it is important for trustees to understand that governance, as an organizational function, is fundamentally different from admin-

istration and curriculum/instruction. Both curriculum/instruction and administration are functions carried out by administrators and teachers.

On the other hand, governance is a policy, strategic-based function. This is a crucial point because of the potential role confusion for board members if they do not understand this fundamental difference. Governance is a well-defined organizational function that requires specific skills different from administration and curriculum/instruction. Board members are elected to govern, not manage or teach. And to complicate matters even more, boards govern—not individual trustees.

We know of course that professionals in curriculum/instruction have an instructional/pedagogical mindset. In order to become an administrator, individuals go through extensive training and certification and develop an administrative mindset. So, doesn't it make sense that the governance function should also require a specialized mindset: one that is geared to the roles and responsibilities unique to governance?

Agree on a Unity of Purpose

Effective, powerful governance occurs when the board is operating in a unified, cohesive manner with a unity of purpose driven by the moral imperative. In governance, a unique dynamic transitional flow is created when a moral imperative is reached and transitions to a unity of purpose

on the board. One of the best definitions of unity of purpose can be found in Long Beach Unified School District, the third largest school district in California, a complex, urban school district with a high-performing governance system.

Unity of purpose is a common focus, super-ordinate goals and the core values and beliefs governance team members share in common about children, the district and public education. Unity of Purpose helps them transcend their differences to fulfill a greater purpose. (Long Beach Unified School District, 2003, *Governance Handbook*)

The starting place for developing a unity of purpose is around a central moral imperative from which programs and policies for the district flow. If there is disagreement among the board around this central point, then developing a unity of purpose on the board is almost impossible. Without a unity of purpose, then finding common ground around the basic work of the board becomes equally difficult. Finally, we have stressed that unity of purpose is not just about “words.” If it is not rooted in action, it probably does not exist in any real sense.

Leadership From the Middle: System Responsibilities

Local school districts of course operate in the context of system policies and responsibilities. In our work on system change, we, and others like our colleague, Andy Hargreaves, have developed the concept of “Leading from the Middle” (LftM), (Hargreaves & Shirley 2018; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). You can’t get system coherence from the top (too complex), and bottom-up change is too piecemeal. Where is the glue? We have found that one of the major sources of coherence is the middle of a state education system: school districts and other intermediate agencies working together. LftM has three main components: interpreting state policy, working laterally with other districts and regional entities to strengthen the middle, and what we call “liberating those below.”

It works like this: with respect to the first element, school districts should be “proactive consumers” of state policy in relation to local priorities. There is an element of legal responsibility regarding finances and common goals, but, with respect to the latter, districts will need to interpret

22 PART I: MINDSETS FOR EFFICACY

how local and state goals can best interface. The way we think of this is for districts to be proactive consumers of state policy vis-à-vis local priorities. Second, districts (school boards, superintendents, and schools) can join lateral networks and learn from each other. Such peer learning, as it does within schools when teachers collaborate, strengthens districts. Third, liberating downward, especially enabling groups to work together at other levels, further strengthens the overall system.

By being active, what we would call “system players,” school boards, and superintendents become a valuable source of implementing as well as critiquing state policy. This is the essence of strategic governance. It is essential that school boards and superintendents not be simply receptacles receiving mandates from the state, but, rather, serious and powerful partners in the state policy process. As systems thinkers, trustees must not just think strategically as they lead their local districts but must look up and join with colleagues and superintendents to influence the policies that have such a major impact on their programs.

This role is crucial in all systems and is especially evident in California, where we work a great deal. With a policy of greater local control, less intrusive accountability, monitoring of progress through influence, and supportive capacity building, it is critical that school boards understand the complex interface of requirements and resources. And because they are a system in development, it is essential that districts become active players in the vertical and lateral interfaces that abound. In our view this is a good outcome. Instead of being on the receiving end of state policy, they can become better partners with their peers and other agencies regionally and at the state level. School boards with solid core governance capacity are in the best position to play this role as they get better results locally and contribute to the success of the overall system.

Striving for Common Ground

Sometimes individual trustees, for whatever reason, find it difficult to find common ground with fellow trustees on the board. When this occurs, it can jeopardize the ability of the board to develop a unified, cohesive governance team. If this happens, it is extremely important for the board not to give up but to take the time to try and work together, even in the face of deep differences and difficulties, to forge professional, respectful

relationships. Effective governance requires that adults, on behalf of the children they serve, find avenues of agreement, so that they can govern the district in an effective manner. The responsibility of education governance is so profound that there is no acceptable alternative. The guidelines we recommend throughout this book should help ensure consistent good governance.

We acknowledge that now and then a situation arises where nothing seems to help. Our main recommendation is don't jump to this conclusion prematurely or before exploring other avenues. Addressing this challenge requires patience and the ability to continually re-focus the board's time on the work at hand, which is governing. There is no such a thing as a fix, but rather an approach that seeks to strengthen the relationships and culture over time. The following guidelines are important at all times for those serving on the board, but especially useful when there is friction with an individual trustee.

Guidelines for Serving on the Board (especially during times of friction)

1. Reserve judgment. Trustees with a governance mindset understand that making assumptions or holding on to preconceived views of other trustees, particularly individuals with divergent philosophical and ideological points of view, can seriously undermine the ability to communicate.
2. Listen empathetically. Oftentimes the manner or behavior of a person (especially one who has not yet adopted a governance mindset) distracts us from the substance of what they are saying. Remember to step back and be analytical so you can cut through issues of manner and behavior to understand the core message being given. Even the most aggressive trustee representing a minority view or opinion has important wisdom or perspective to offer. Be open to learning what the person is communicating.
3. Stay focused on content, not behavior or style. Ignore rhetoric. Do not allow issue differences to become weapons in personal disputes on the board. Remain committed to deep learning and to

24 PART I: MINDSETS FOR EFFICACY

understanding in depth the core issues of a moral imperative. It is okay to have many styles on a board, but there can be only one moral imperative.

4. Always be true to the norms of the board. It is at times of stress and difficulty that norms and protocols are most important. Treat every trustee with respect and demonstrate the core values of the board.
5. Do not take differences personally. Stay grounded as a systems thinker with a strategic focus. Remember the only behavior a person can control is his or her own. This can be admittedly challenging at times—we are all human—but the governance mindset requires it.
6. If all else fails after many attempts to accommodate the views or behaviors of a given trustee, it is important for the board to move forward in fulfilling its governance responsibilities. Irreconcilable differences or behaviors that repeatedly violate the agreed upon norms cannot be allowed to keep the board majority from doing its job. Nor can the board allow itself to become consumed by the situation at the expense of carrying out its critical responsibilities. If the board has been fair in trying to resolve the differences over time, the difficult board member will receive little support from peers. In most cases, however, issues will be resolved by following steps 1 to 5.

Reducing Friction With Good Governance

An incumbent, who was vice president of his board, was running for re-election. The board had a three-two split with the vice president one of the board majority. The incumbent was defeated in his election. The individual who won was perceived to be sympathetic to the point of view of the board members in the minority. The remaining two trustees of the previous majority were understandably upset and very antagonistic to the new trustee. It had all the elements of a potential highly charged dysfunctional governance dynamic.

However, the new trustee took the lead to establish a new culture. He treated all members of the board with respect and refused to be drawn into personal drama. He reached out to the two dissident board members to find common ground ignoring past disputes. It took time. But because the new trustee was resolute in his approach to governance, over time agreements became more common than disagreements. The board, despite differences, was working well together and with the superintendent. At the end of the new trustee's tenure on the board, one of the leaders of the dissident block made a motion of commendation praising the new trustee.

In short, personal disputes may not always be resolved readily, but following our guidelines above and those throughout this book will result in more productive outcomes in the vast majority of cases.

THE GOVERNANCE CORE

Let's return to the key theme and organizer of this book. One of the characteristics of school district governance is that in most cases it functions without an agreed upon, well-established theoretical structure. In many districts, governance is defined by what the board does when it meets, with little or any framework within which to work. Many school boards make up their modus operandi as they go. The basic functions are identified and understood: hiring the superintendent, approving policies, voting, all mostly driven by the board agenda; but there usually is limited definition of how best to carry out the full set of the board's responsibilities.

Our book is based upon the assumption that governance cannot be left to chance. Highly effective governance requires a well-defined infrastructure that provides definition, guidance, and direction.

For a number of years, renowned Harvard professor Richard Elmore has focused on the importance of the instructional core in curriculum and

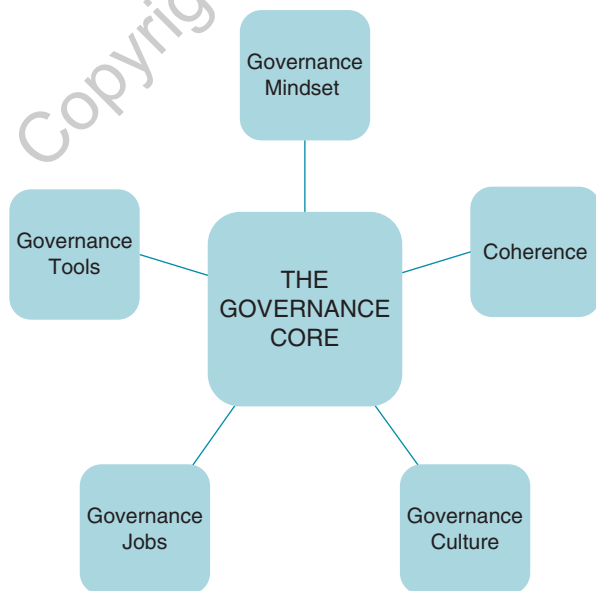
Highly effective governance requires a well-defined governance infrastructure that provides definition, guidance, and direction.

instruction. The instructional core is about the relationship and interaction between the student, the teacher, and the content. The governance core presented here is based on the same principle of interdependence and symbiotic relationships. To be effective, trustees and superintendents must develop a governance mindset, a shared moral imperative, and unity of purpose utilizing sound principles and practices—the keys to effective governance.

We have organized the Governance Core into five main components (see Figure 1.2): Governance Mindset (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), Coherence (Chapter 5), Culture (Chapter 6), Jobs (Chapter 7), and Tools (Chapter 8).

The Governance Core represents an integrated, systemic approach to effective governance. It is dynamic, grounded in transforming a moral imperative to measurable, high-quality outcomes. As applied to education, these outcomes will substantially improve the life of children the system serves. This system is based upon a firm belief that successful organizations require a high level of coherence shared by boards of trustees,

Figure 1.2 The Governance Core



superintendents, staff, principals, teachers, and, yes, parents. All must share understanding of the nature of the work of the system. Once a moral imperative is shared, all aspects of the organization can be harnessed to deliver outstanding results. Boards can govern strategically, becoming deep learning organizations unto themselves.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this book we take the position that trustees and superintendents must examine more comprehensively their core governance responsibilities. Investing time in establishing the governance core will yield multiple benefits. We believe that at the end of the day trustees and superintendents will find their work together to be much more satisfying and impactful. In short, we will all benefit!

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