



EFFECTIVE *Public School* GOVERNANCE:

BEST PRACTICES, GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES
AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

A White Paper prepared by the Education Funders of St. Louis Affinity Group, June 2007



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Education Funders of St. Louis (Education Funders) is a grantmaker affinity group of the Gateway Center for Giving that was convened in August 2006. Private funders, as well as independent and corporate foundations have been investing millions of dollars in the children of St. Louis and their schools, directly and indirectly, for years. These investments support countless programs dedicated to giving our city's children an opportunity to get the education they need to lead productive, independent lives as part of this community. While the dollars are significant and the program providers sincere, these investments can not make a lasting difference if the school system does not effectively provide for the day-to-day educational needs of its students.

Education Funders is a forum whose members identify, share and discuss best practices in public education. The priority of the group is that the children of St. Louis have the opportunity to demonstrate their capability to achieve academically and personally. Education Funders' members developed a set of issues to guide their learning, including governance, student achievement and community engagement. The group's first project has been to ask, "Is it possible to govern an urban public school district effectively?" For this report, they engaged a team of education experts from Saint Louis University College of Public Service and Patricia Barber, an independent consultant, to study urban school governance. Education Funders is marshalling what is already known about the field and seeding support for innovation in improving governance of the St. Louis Public Schools.

Numerous examples exist nationwide where urban school districts have combined governance structures and best practices to give the children in their care the opportunity to learn and demonstrate their capability to achieve academically and personally.

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introduction

Is it possible to effectively govern an urban public school district? In St. Louis and across America, urban districts are challenged by fluctuating enrollments, crumbling buildings, faltering fiscal health and student achievement gaps. These challenges cannot be addressed in the constructive and creative manner they deserve without topflight leadership by school boards and superintendents.¹ The reality of these challenges, and the fact that the St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) has been led by six superintendents in the last four years, have many people in our region asking, “How are other urban public school districts governed effectively and how can their best practices be applied in St. Louis?”

In search of an answer, Education Funders engaged a team of education experts to study urban school governance, focusing on best practices, structural models and national case studies. The good news is that it is possible to govern an urban school district effectively. Numerous examples were found across the country where urban school districts have combined governance structures and best practices to deliver on their obligation to give students the best opportunity to learn and achieve both academically and personally. The bad news is that there is no “magic solution”² that works everywhere. Every governance structure that has a shining example of its success also has a disturbing example of its failure.

After taking these seemingly conflicting findings into

consideration, it is clear that successful governance of urban schools is dependent on people, behavior and practice – not the governance structure the board takes. The ability of a school board to attract members with the right skills and experience, and the capability of that group to implement a straightforward set of best practices, has much more to say about success than whether that board was elected, appointed or some combination of the two.

This paper examines school board governance through a variety of perspectives, including:

- **What are the “best practices” in school board governance?**
- **What can we learn about the governance structure of school boards?**
- **What common characteristics do effective school board members exhibit?**

The answers to these questions are increasingly important as school boards focus their attention on their most critical responsibility: student achievement. Giving every child the opportunity to become a successful member of society is no small challenge, regardless of where that child lives. Parents, educators, civic leaders, the wider community and district leadership must understand the complexity of this challenge. Together, they must support

There is no magic solution to effective urban public school system governance. Every governance structure that has a shining example of its success also has a disturbing example of its failure.

and hold district leadership accountable for achieving this most basic outcome; an outcome that has been at the heart of public education since our nation was founded. Public education has come a long way from its beginnings in the one-room school house. Today, school boards and district leaders oversee complex enterprises. To succeed they must look at the whole enterprise, not just its parts, when seeking solutions. They must plan and implement programs and adjust their plans, with this perspective in mind.³

A number of changes are being made with regard to the governance of the SLPS. The State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has revoked the SLPS accreditation and has put a Transitional School Board in place of the seven-member elected school board. While much is still to be clarified in the coming months, these activities are focused on the same objective: improved governance of the SLPS.

Understanding what good governance looks like and exploring the practices that result in its implementation is essential to progress in St. Louis if we are ever to move past governance to the most fundamental question: Can the SLPS fulfill its responsibility to give our city's children the education they need to succeed in today's world?

As Education Funders focuses its attention and resources on what it will take to reinvigorate the SLPS, our research shows that a strong and competent governing body combined

with a talented superintendent and management team can transform urban school systems into high-performing enterprises. Effective governance is only a first step and it will take time for it to show promising results in raising student achievement throughout the district. In sharing this report, Education Funders' goal is to invite the wider community of stakeholders – including parents, city residents, community stakeholders and all members of the elected and the Transitional School Board – into a more informed conversation about school governance.

This report is the first of what we hope are many steps in providing best practice information about what is needed to support student achievement. Its findings are critical for donors. Every day we look at existing programs and hear about new initiatives focused on the school system's highest goal of student achievement. This and other reports are essential to helping us make the difficult decisions of how to invest limited dollars in programs with needs that far exceed the capability of the charitable sector to support them. Members of the Education Funders welcome the opportunity to be active partners and investors in our community's shared commitment to reinvigorating public education in St. Louis and ensuring our city's children have every opportunity to get the education they need to lead productive, independent lives as part of this community.

what are the best practices in school board governance?

Looking at school districts across America, Education Funders research has found that in successful urban districts, the schools are led by school boards, superintendents and management teams who are in sync about how to boost student performance. Together, they pursue excellence in a steady but relentless fashion over an extended period and maintain a focus on the educational success of youth in their care.

The National School Boards Association, Iowa Association of School Boards and the Center for Reform of School Systems,⁴ have identified similar best practices of effective school boards, including:

Establishes a Shared Vision and Purpose

Maintains a focus on student learning through a shared clear vision, high expectations and dynamic leadership at all levels.

Focuses on Policy

Understands and practices good governance and forges an effective partnership with the superintendent, maintaining a focus on policy while avoiding micro-managing.

Allocates Resources to Align with Shared Vision

Allocates funding for and alignment of resources needed to advance student achievement.

Monitors Progress Toward District Goals

Develops a culture of continuous improvement by establishing an assessment and accountability process with measurable criteria at regular intervals and using evaluation data to drive decision making.

Builds Relationships with Parents and Community

Fosters collaborative relationships and participation in strategic planning, community visioning and instructional improvement to provide educational resources for students.

Builds Effective Relationships with Superintendent and Staff

Models a climate of respect, professional behavior and commitment to continuous learning with board colleagues, superintendent and staff.

Advocates for Student Achievement

Advocates student achievement as a top community priority by engaging legislators and political leaders around educational issues and staying abreast of state and national educational issues.

Provides Clear Communication Regarding District

Creates a highly effective infrastructure of people and systems that interacts in a consistent, clear and jargon-free way to communicate district information with parents, students, staff and the community.

Commits to Training and Development of Board Members and Staff

Shows a commitment to developing and implementing plans for staff development in understanding educational issues, as well as for board development, planning and teambuilding.

Plans for Transition and Intentionally Recruits Board Members

Designs and implements a powerful strategy to build civic capacity to cultivate and recruit outstanding citizens to serve.

The outcome of these best practices is an environment and culture of confidence in the school district. To achieve this outcome, school boards and administrative leaders must be held accountable by parents and community stakeholders. In St. Louis, a commitment to these best practices would help realize SLPS's vision to be the district of choice for families in the St. Louis region that provides a world-class education and is nationally recognized as a leader in student achievement and teacher quality.

what can we learn about the governance structure of school boards?

Just as in St. Louis, urban school districts across America have been challenged to make sure that a good education is available to every child in every community. The need for informed, committed district leaders who can move school systems toward high levels of achievement for all students is greater than ever.

Three types of governance structures for school boards exist – elected, appointed and a hybrid of the two. Across the different types of governance structures, our research has identified several examples of urban school systems that have implemented best practices to give the children in their care the opportunity to learn and demonstrate their capability to achieve academically and personally. Effective partnerships among board members, superintendents and management teams are the key to success.⁵ The following governance structures and examples of their successful application show early indicators of what the governance branch of districts can do to accelerate achievement over an extended period.

Elected Boards – such as St. Louis’ board of seven members elected at-large – are the most common governance structure, comprising 96% of all school boards in the country.⁶ In terms of democracy and accountability, locally elected school boards are thought to be held accountable by the public for school results, decisions about community vision and policy on education, and to help balance the governance roles of community stakeholders, state officials and professional administrators.⁷

On the other hand, rarely do more than 10 to 15% of eligible voters turn out for school board elections.⁸ The average voter participation in St. Louis Board of Education elections over the past three elections is nearly 12%. Low voter turnout may call into question the ability and authority of elected boards, which also struggle with the possibility of promoting personal and special agendas, causing the board to be reactive rather than remaining focused on policy and oversight without micromanagement.

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) is an example of a locally elected school board that is successfully implementing best practices in school board governance. Their nine members are elected from six geographic and three at-large districts, and serve four-year terms. The board elects a new chair and vice chair every two years. APS has been commended for their best practices in several areas. They focus on student achievement, with a curriculum defined and communicated for student learning. They provide support and resources for educators and principals based on academic goals, have continuous monitoring of student proficiency toward those goals, and reward, adjust and intervene as necessary.⁹ Their board maintains a focus on policy and delegates management to the superintendent, who has served through the changes resulting from board elections. Together, the board and superintendent have built relationships with the community, cultivating extensive business and civic leader partnerships to bring additional financing and volunteer efforts into the schools. APS has built effective relationships between the board, the superintendent and staff, fostering a working team who respects their individual governance and management roles, devoting their time to educating children and finding innovative ways to do it. Atlanta’s achievements, supported through governance best practice implementation, include reducing the achievement gap, lowering the dropout rate, and consolidating and renovating 46 schools to modern state-of-the-art facilities.¹⁰

Appointed Boards – such as the Transitional School Board for St. Louis with appointments by the governor, the mayor, and the president of the board of aldermen – have increased since the 1990’s in response to state, gubernatorial, and mayoral concern for higher standards for student learning to help attract businesses and jobs.¹¹ There are now more than 1 million students in mayor run districts,¹² and 19 states have taken over 49 districts.¹³

There is no single one-size-fits-all governance structure for effective school leadership. Success hinges on implementing the best practices outlined in section one.

The appointing authorities are most often mayors and governors. There is a growing belief that they are able to recruit highly qualified candidates for whom the rigors and costs of campaigning might be significant deterrents to service. Appointees may be less likely to be influenced by special interest groups and are held accountable to the elected governing body. However, with appointments by mayors or governors, local constituents may perceive a loss of direct means to influence local education policy.¹⁴ Gubernatorial or mayoral control certainly is not a cure-all for education.

Several examples of the transition from an elected to an appointed school board governance structure exist nationwide. The Chicago Public Schools is one of those examples that has been successful at implementing governance best practices resulting in increasing student achievement over time.

In 1995, Chicago's mayor was empowered to appoint a five-member Reform Board of Trustees to halt the educational system's crisis. The mayor created the position of CEO of the Chicago Public Schools to operate under his control. He restored the title of Chicago Board of Education and expanded the board to seven members, reinstating the position of Board Vice President. Chicago still retains the Central Administration and individual school committees and councils. Chicago Public Schools exemplifies a team approach to district leadership with both non-educators and their education professional partners tailoring individual roles to capitalize on their strengths to focus on policy, accountability and student achievement. The board was given the responsibility to address the district's financial issues, establish accountability measures for students and schools, align resources in academic support, and partner with families and communities to promote academic achievement. Their accomplishments include a balanced budget for the last six years, improved bond ratings, and \$3.1 billion invested in building infrastructure.¹⁵ In addition, March 2007 test scores showed that Chicago Public Schools had marked the largest one-year jump in scores since 1995 and that the five-year data show a trend toward closing the achievement gap between Chicago and the rest of the state.¹⁶

Hybrids of Elected & Appointed Boards are increasingly evident as mayors and governors become more involved with education, while the electorate remains unwilling to turn over the selection of all school board members to the appointing authorities.

The District of Columbia Board of Education formed in 2002 as a blend of elected and appointed members. Four members are appointed by the mayor, four members are elected in specific geographical boundaries, the President is elected at large and there are two student members. Any change in the structure requires approval from the 13-member D.C. Council and Congress. The board establishes policies and employs a superintendent as CEO of daily operations who reports to the school board, the mayor, the D.C. Council and Congress. Currently, the mayor is proposing to take more direct control, with the board overseeing policy on standardized testing and teacher certification, but with the superintendent reporting directly to the mayor who would also control the budget. To inform their actions, the mayor is visiting districts such as Miami and New York City to try and find out how to emulate some of their recent success in school systems – whether their boards are appointed or elected – and to learn more about their best practices. The mayor, the current superintendent, as well as both the elected and appointed board members, support general tenets of the proposal to reconfigure the failing school system, but predict that reducing the authority of the elected board will be a contentious issue. Planners have interviewed stakeholders in D.C. public schools, including educators and parents, and intend to hold public hearings and seek public input on the proposal.¹⁷ As this example of a hybrid governance structure and its efforts to implement best practices in governance continues to develop and over time, valuable lessons will be learned.

These and other examples from across America highlight the opportunities and challenges for each of the three school board governance structures – elected, appointed, or a hybrid of both. There is no single one-size-fits-all governance structure for effective school leadership and success hinges on implementing the best practices outlined in section one. Revitalizing a school system is a process that requires an understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in a district's governance structure coupled with persistent effort by all stakeholders to implement governance best practices over a sustained period.

what are the common characteristics of effective school board members?

Our third question looks at common characteristics among effective school board members that support the implementation of governance best practices and support district success in ensuring quality education for all of its students.

The New England School Development Council and the Wallace Foundation, The Center for Reform of School Systems, Minnesota School Board Association and the Iowa Association of School Boards have researched high performance school systems with strong student achievement and consistent community support. Their findings on common characteristics of effective school board members are summarized below and display a logical overlap with governance best practices.

Advocate for the Achievement of all Students

Continually maintains a focus on student achievement with a thorough understanding of the public education systems, local educational policies, as well as national trends and issues in education.

Commitment to Effective Board Service

Is committed to investing the time and energy needed for board activity. Contributes to board meetings in professional manner and understands the distinction between their role of policy oversight without micromanaging the superintendent and staff. Acts with professionalism and integrity, is respectful of others, listens well and proceeds with fairness and consistency in words and action.

Experience in Management and Finance

Has the skill set to navigate easily through large and complex urban school budgets from a policy driven perspective. Understands the need for confidentiality on some issues in closed sessions. Uses data to drive policy decisions and empowers the superintendent to implement these decisions.

Being a Team Player

Has a record of working across political, racial and geographic boundaries to build consensus in tough situations.

Embraces the democratic process and accepts the majority will, even if the decision is not to their liking. Interacts well with superintendent and other board members.

Track Record of Relationship Building and Communication Skills

Recognizes the importance of service and helps to build partnerships throughout the community to sustain positive efforts in the school district. The school board alone cannot make change happen. It takes the collaborative efforts and energy from parents, the community, school board, superintendent and district staff.

The Institute for Educational Leadership reports that, by their own admission, many superintendents as well as board members say they do not have the training to handle all the demands placed upon them. They urge that all school districts take a hard look at the quality, qualification and growth of their leaders and not simply assume they will take care of themselves.

Across the country, school board members, superintendents and professional associations promote individualized preparation programs for superintendents and school board members. Those school districts collaborate closely with colleges, universities, associations, state departments of education and other leadership organizations and businesses that provide effective leadership training and support academies for aspiring leaders. They help create systemic change by linking school systems with the private sector and nonprofit education groups. Experienced school board members take it upon themselves to initiate orientation programs to provide new members and superintendents with training customized to developing skills to deal with district-specific issues.

As the community looks for SLPS leaders who have – or who seek to develop – the characteristics that will help them implement the identified governance best practices, training opportunities to develop these characteristics must be available to ensure broad participation in leading our schools. A survey of local, state and national training opportunities that have been identified is available at www.centerforgiving.org.

conclusion

Education Funders' first priority is the children of the City of St. Louis and our obligation as a community to provide them with the education they need. Our first project together has been to ask the question on many people's mind; is it possible to effectively govern an urban public school district?

Through our exploration of governance best practices, various governance structures and the characteristics of effective school board members, we can now answer this question with a resounding yes! Numerous urban school districts nationally have faced this challenging question and answered yes as well. While each community has done it in their own way with a variety of structures, effective governance is being practiced and that governance is yielding, over time, marked improvement in student achievement.

Building a strong and competent governing body that hires and supports a talented and empowered superintendent is a fundamental first step in school reform. It doesn't matter whether that governing body was elected, appointed or some combination of the two. What does matter is whether or not that governing body is committed to implementing the best practices that do determine effectiveness. It is also essential that the members of these governing bodies have an individual commitment to cultivate the personal characteristics that have also been shown to determine effectiveness.

Improving student achievement, restoring the confidence of parents, regaining the respect of educators and engaging the wider community in district governance and decision making all take time and incredible effort. It is only over time and with sincere, transparent effort that any school board can demonstrate its capability to producing tangible and sustainable results that everyone can see.

While Education Funders is heartened by the findings of this report, we are also mindful that school boards lead public institutions. School boards ultimately act on behalf of each of us in our shared responsibility for the quality of public

education. Over time, superintendents and board members come and go. It takes a city to reinvigorate and sustain an urban school district; a committed community of parents, educators, elected officials, community and civic leaders, as well as the general public. Effective school boards bring the wider community together in innovative ways so that we can all understand the challenges our children face and so that we can all work together to see our children succeed.

School boards ultimately act on behalf of each of us in our shared responsibility for the quality of public education. Over time, superintendents and board members come and go. It takes a city to reinvigorate and sustain an urban school district; a committed community of parents, educators, elected officials, community and civic leaders, as well as the general public.

Education Funders' members look forward to having the opportunity to invest grant dollars, the expertise of our staffs, and the strength of our civic networks to support and to sustain effective governance for the SLPS. Education Funders is committed to helping the board, regardless of its structure, make St. Louis' schools work for our children. We welcome the opportunity to be brought together by them into a partnership with the district's many stakeholders to do all we can to help.

Full citations of references for this white paper are available at www.centerforgiving.org or by calling the Gateway Center for Giving at (314) 621-6220.

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About the Gateway Center for Giving

The Gateway Center for Giving (formerly St. Louis Metropolitan Association for Philanthropy) is the regional association of grantmakers serving the St. Louis metropolitan area. With 100 foundation, corporate and individual members, the Center provides services that expand and strengthen philanthropy (the giving of time, wisdom and wealth by groups or individuals for the common good) to improve the St. Louis region. For more information visit www.centerforgiving.org.



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