1.1 Indicators of an Effective School Board

This study and other investigations found that an effective board:

- Addresses most of its time and energy to education and educational outcomes
- Believes that advocacy for all students is its primary responsibility
- Concentrates on goals and uses strategic planning to accomplish them
- Works to ensure an adequate flow of resources and equity in their distribution
- Uses the strengths of diversity represented on the school board and in the community to obtain the enunciated goals for the system and fosters both assertiveness and cooperation
- Deals with controversy openly
- Leads the community in setting goals for education and encourages many forms of community participation
- Exercises continuing oversight of education programs, acquiring the background and knowledge to ask the right questions
- Works out the division of responsibilities with the superintendent
- Determines the mission and agenda of board committees, if they are used, and makes sure they coordinate with policy and oversight functions
- Establishes policy to govern its own policy making and oversight responsibilities
- Collaborates with other school board leadership to influence state policy-making and funding
- Understands the role of the media and develops procedures for media contacts that do not manipulate media attention for personal gain

Twelve Behaviors That Indicate Effectiveness

1. Deep commitment to public education
2. Establish educational priorities
3. Knowledgeable
4. Make efforts to demystify the bureaucracy
5. Inspire cooperation with people
6. Invite wide participation
7. Foster concept of employee responsibility
8. Great listener skills
9. Foster parent/educator partnerships
10. Accentuates the positive while working on the problems
11. Perceptive as opposed to judgemental
12. Compassionate
1.2 Obstacles to school board effectiveness

IEL's study of school boards identified a number of common obstacles to school board effectiveness.

- Public apathy
- Lack of public understanding of the policy-making role of the board
- Poor or sporadic relationships with state policy makers
- The need to improve teaching within the framework of collective bargaining
- Lack of time and an operating structure for focusing on education issues
- Discrepancy between time boards invest and their satisfaction with their accomplishments and ability to determine their priorities
- Difficulty in developing a "collection" of individuals into a policy-making board
- Reactive rather than proactive behavior
- Lack of strong links to other community sectors and government entities

1.3 Qualifications for board leaders.

- Commitment to the ownership and to the specific mission area
- Propensity to think in terms of systems and context
- Ability and eagerness to deal with values, vision, and the long term
- Ability to participate assertively in deliberation
- Willingness to delegate, to allow others to make decisions
2.1 The Changing Role of School Boards

Experts and school board members noted elements about current school district operation and the politics of the election process that influence school board effectiveness and the need for school board development.

- It's increasingly difficult to get community leaders to run for the school board.
- The role of the board in education reform is not clear.
- Board members often are supported by a specific constituent subgroup of the community.

2.2 Issues Confronting School Boards

Program issues mentioned most frequently were the need to:
- provide more flexibility for the diverse requirements and learning styles of an increasingly pluralistic student population
- improve the high school completion rate
- improve the transition to employment
- improve the academic achievement of at-risk students
- maintain a balanced curriculum in which an appropriate mix of traditional academic and job-related instruction is provided.
- increase early childhood programs of that the schools' focus can be on prevention rather than remediation
- pursue equity while maintaining high academic standards

Teacher and administrator concerns were:
- the challenge to ensure high teacher quality, with the demographics working against such an effort
- the need for stronger building-level input and leadership in the development of educational programs
- the need to improve staff development
- an impending teacher shortage
- competency testing for teachers to screen out ineffective individuals
- Career ladders and merit pay as a way to make education financially attractive and more competitive with business and industry

Leadership and management issues which concern boards included:
- the impact of state student and teacher testing programs
- the potential effect of inter-district comparisons of student achievement
- political status and influence of school boards
- the need for independent sources information
- financial crunches from unexpected pressures, such as higher insurance rates
- negative perceptions of the board stemming from open conflicts and constituent

2.3 The call for governance reform

The call for governance reform is not emanating from a monolithic group of national reformers. Indeed, there are major disagreements among advocates of governance reform, but there is agreement that the evidence of problems cannot be ignored. The critics agree that all too commonly:

- boards are not providing far-reaching or politically risk-taking leadership for education reform
- boards have become another level of administration, often micro-managing the school district
- boards, particularly in diverse communities, are so splintered by their attempts to represent special interests or board members' individual political needs that the boards cannot govern
- boards have broad goals but lack the capacity for strong goal setting and planning to give direction to school systems
- boards are not spending adequate time on educating themselves about the issues or on educational policy making
- boards have not provided leadership with other agencies and organizations necessary to meet the human and social needs of students
- boards do not exercise adequate policy oversight, nor do they have adequate accountability processes and processes for communicating about schools and the school system with the public
- boards' actions are less impressive than their rhetoric in devolving decision making to schools
- boards exhibit little capacity to develop positive and productive lasting relationships with their superintendents
- boards pay little or no attention to their governance performance and to their needs for ongoing development of their capacity to govern
- boards in conflicted communities tend to make decisions in response to the "issue of the day" while boards in more stable communities tend to govern to maintain the status quo.

3.1 Why do some boards manage more than govern?

- Boards are sometimes legally required to act on managerial issues such as the acceptance of gifts; signature authorizations; and leases, contracts, and easements.

- Some board responsibilities, such as recruiting and evaluating the chief executive or approving hiring decisions unavoidably involve board members in operational activities that blur the distinctions between governance and management.

- As a board's confidence in the chief executive wanes, board members become more intimately involved with day-to-day operations, both to stabilize the organization and to better determine whether to make a change at the top.

- In periods of crisis, whether due to turbulence in the external environment or disruptive conflict within the organization, boards are likely to intercede in an effort to restore normality.

- Management, more than governance, creates an immediate sense of accomplishment and gratification, in part because managerial issues are frequently more amenable to decisions and actions. Matters of strategy and policy, by comparison, often require extended discussions, in-depth analyses, and a considerable knowledge of the organization's context — conditions not easily fulfilled by a committee or board that meets intermittently and relatively briefly.

3.2 What is the board’s role in governance?

- Create clear expectations for the board.
- Create clear expectations for the chief executive.
- Structure meetings to direct the board’s attention to matters of policy and strategy.
- Collect feedback on the board’s performance.

3.3 What is the superintendent’s role in governance?

- Articulate an institutional strategy for careful, periodic review by the board.
- Structure board materials to direct board members’ attention to issues of policy and strategy.
- Structure board meetings to direct board members' attention to issues of policy and strategy.
- Equip board members with the capacity to monitor organizational performance and progress.

Board Decision-Making

Consensus must be reached on the answers to the following questions:

1. What is our present situation?

2. What forces have created our present situation?

3. What do we want to change about our present situation?

4. What forces will likely have a major impact on our future situations?

5. What do we ultimately want to accomplish during the next year?

6. How can we reasonably and legitimately accomplish these results?
Your roles and responsibilities as a board member

While many important tasks and decisions in every school district are delegated to the superintendent and the district staff, your board is ultimately responsible for all district concerns. Some of these it cannot delegate; others it must delegate to the school administration.

Your state statutes will define the legal powers and responsibilities of school boards in your state. Your state board of education might assign additional powers to local boards. The powers and duties of school boards are defined somewhat differently in each state. Some statutes are very general, while others are specific. Some outline only what a board "shall" do (mandatory duties), while others include what a board "may" do (discretionary duties). As an individual board member, you have no legal powers. You can exercise your powers as a board member only through board action.

Your responsibilities defined

Basically, the responsibilities of all school boards fall into the following categories:

Policy making. A board's major function is to develop and adopt district policy governing many facets of school operations, including employment of staff personnel, administration of pupil services, educational programs, instructional material, school facilities, equipment, finance, and support services. A board can adopt policy upon the recommendation of the superintendent, but the final decisions on policy cannot be delegated. A board delegates the implementation of policies to the superintendent of schools. It evaluates the execution and effect of policy through observations, special oversight studies, and periodic reports by administrative officers.

Designating the chief executive. A board is responsible for recruiting, hiring, and evaluating the performance of the superintendent of schools who will carry out its policy. This task cannot be delegated. Unless otherwise specified in state statutes or board policy, a board exercises daily supervision and control primarily through its chief administrator and does not deal directly with individual staff members employed to assist the superintendent in implementing board directives.

Planning, goal setting, and appraisal. This vital leadership role of a board cannot be delegated. Each board must establish the current and long-range educational plans and programs for its district. It is responsible for obtaining from the administration and other sources reliable information on which to make the best possible decisions about the scope and nature of all school programs. The board is ultimately responsible for appraisal of the results of these programs, a task which is frequently delegated to the administration.

Financial resources. In consultation with the superintendent, a board is responsible for approval and adoption of an annual budget that will provide the financial basis for the buildings, furnishings, staff, materials, and equipment needed to carry out educational programs. In most states, other financial responsibilities include:

- Authorizing the administration to make the necessary expenditures budgeted and appropriated by the board.
- Making decisions on the time, size, and sale of bonds and the investment of bond proceeds.
- Adopting policies for the purchase, disposal, and distribution of supplies, property, and equipment.

(NSBA's Becoming a Better Board Member)
• Approving and adopting an insurance program for the district.
• Authorizing the administration to invest and borrow funds within the limitations of state law.

*Staffing and appraisal.* In most districts, the board delegates the tasks of recruiting, hiring, evaluating, promoting, and disciplining staff (in accordance with board policy) to the superintendent. The board is responsible for establishing policy governing salaries and salary schedules, terms and conditions of employment, fringe benefits, leave, and in-service training. The board must ratify all collective bargaining contracts.

*Instruction.* Working closely with the school administration, a board must set general goals and adopt policies upon which instructional programs will be based, all of which must be in accordance with state law and regulations promulgated by the state department of education. A board has the power to accept, modify, or reject its superintendent’s recommendations on the scope and nature of educational offerings, as well as on which textbooks will be used.

*School facilities.* A board is responsible for determining school housing needs; communicating those needs to the community; purchasing, disposing of, or leasing school sites; and for approving building plans that will support and enhance educational programs. Upon the recommendation of the superintendent, a board will employ architects, hire building contractors, and contract for operational and maintenance services.

*Students.* Although the board does not deal directly with students and solve student-related problems, it does set policies which guide the actions of administration and other school staff. A board can accept, modify, or reject policies recommended by the superintendent regarding school admissions, placement, promotion, attendance, expulsion, suspension, graduation, conduct, discipline, safety, health services, food services, and transportation services. All such policies must be viewed in light of their effect on all students’ equal access to educational opportunities in accordance with state and federal guidelines.

*Public relations.* To be an effective board member, you will want to maintain ongoing personal communication with school staff, students, and members of the community. Your board must see to it that there are adequate and direct means for keeping the local citizenry informed and for keeping itself informed about the wishes of the public. All formal means of district communication (surveys, newsletters, and the like) should be established in board policy and delegated to the administration.

*Adjudication and investigation.* From time to time, a board may have to hear appeals from school staff members or students on issues which involve board policy implementation. It may also conduct legislative oversight hearings and investigations on board policy implementation issues and school system operations.

*General.* Other board activities include:

• Establishing procedures for the operation of the board.
• Electing board officers.
• Approving the annual school calendar.
• Hiring board staff assistants.
• Determining who will be on the district negotiating team (if there is one) and employing a chief negotiator for collective bargaining.
• Establishing attendance zones for the school district.

*NSBA’s Becoming a Better Board Member*
• Retaining an attorney or law firm for the school district.
• Setting strategy and coordinating litigation decisions when the school district is involved in a lawsuit.
• Establishing and maintaining effective board-superintendent relations.
• Periodically reviewing and evaluating board operations and performance.
• Working with (as well as authorizing the administration to work with) city, county, and other government and non-government officials and agencies.

Ethics for effective board members

Ethics. Effectiveness. These are two different things, but they go hand-in-hand. Your ethics form the basis for the code by which you conduct yourself. If your actions are guided by a sound, ethical code of conduct, chances are good that you will be effective as a board member. You will be capable of producing results.

Begin with a commitment

A sound code of conduct for school board members begins with a genuine commitment to striving for high quality public education that supports the full development of all children, and the present and future welfare of their local community and country. You must be committed to doing this, and you must be committed to working effectively with others to do this.

Don't forget the work ethic

Saying you're committed to serving public education and your district's percentage of the nation's school children isn't enough. You've got to do something about your commitment. You've got to work for what you believe in. This means.
• Doing your homework before board meetings.
• Keeping abreast of current educational issues within your own school system, throughout the state, and across the nation.
• Making every attempt to attend all board meetings.
• Becoming well versed in parliamentary procedure.
• Learning how to get and present facts, not merely interpretations of them.
• Devoting sufficient time, thought, and study to proposed actions.
• Considering alternative solutions to problems.
• Encouraging ideas and opinions from students, staff, and citizens of the district, and endeavoring to incorporate their views in your deliberations and decisions.
• Working with the rest of your board to establish effective board policies by which the superintendent can administer the schools.
• Establishing fair and equitable terms and conditions of employment and evaluation for all school employees.
• Selecting sound instructional strategies and materials, and submitting them to regular and impartial evaluations.

Adopt these principles

No code, of course, is complete without the more orthodox ethics such as honesty, trust, fairness, and integrity. Not using your office for personal or partisan gain, or for the benefit of your family, friends, church, or special interest groups is another standard which should be a part of your operating code.

(NSBA's Becoming a Better Board Member)
Recognizing the limits of your authority as a board member is vital. As one board member said: "You must remember at all times that individual board members have no authority apart from the official actions of the board, and you should conduct your relationships with the school staff, the local citizenry, and all media on the basis of this fact. Making promises to citizens that you don't have the authority to make is unethical."

The following are some standards that experienced board members agree are key elements of effective board service:

- Base your decisions on the available facts and your independent judgment, and refuse to surrender that judgment to individuals or special interest groups.
- Take no private action that will compromise the school system, the board, or the administration, and avoid being placed in a position of conflict of interest.
- Support and protect the civil and human rights of all members of the school community.
- Respect the confidentiality of information that is privileged.
- Keep an open mind so that you can accept and evaluate new concepts.
- Listen objectively to constructive criticism.
- Know the difference between personal influence and factual persuasion.
- Maintain a sense of humor.
- Learn and practice the art of compromise.
- Don't avoid confrontation merely to improve your chances for reelection.
- Share the responsibility for all board decisions, regardless of how you voted.
- Strive for teamwork.
- Do not undermine the authority of the superintendent or intrude into the spheres of responsibility that properly belong to the school administration.

Suggestion

If your school district's written policies don't include a code of conduct for board members, check with your state school boards association or the National School Boards Association for guidance in developing one.
What do school boards do?

In general terms, as stated previously, the "job" of a school board in Ohio is to make "ample" provision for the education of all children. More specifically, there are four major areas of responsibility, which can be classified as providing for:

1. A quality instructional program, within the limits of the resources;
2. Management and direction of the school system;
3. Continued guidance through policy development and adoption; and
4. Communication between the district and the community.

Instruction --- While school board members should utilize the expertise of the professional staff in the development and administration of the instructional program, the board has an important leadership role. State law makes it clear that the board's involvement is far more than philosophical approval. Learning objectives must be established. There must be periodic assessment of personnel, materials and methods. There must be input from and communication to the community.

Management --- Board members are management team partners, together with the superintendent and administrative staff. Although a board typically does not participate in the school's day-to-day operation, there are management decisions which legally can be made only by the board. These include: budget review and adoption, hiring and other personnel matters, approval of textbooks and other instructional materials, negotiation parameters and agreements, school construction and maintenance, bond and levy proposals, payrolls, purchasing and many others.

Policies are the "legislative" actions of the school board. They may be compared to city ordinances or state laws. Policies are written to meet the needs of a given district, within the general framework of state and federal statutes and regulations. It is only within the past few years that most districts have had comprehensive policy manuals. Precise written policies today are a must for several reasons, including compliance with complex laws and clarifying understandings with employees and patrons. OSBA provides assistance to boards in policy development.

Communicating with the community and with the staff is an increasingly important function of school management. In Ohio several state laws specifically authorize the board to report to the people. Communicating with employees, on a continuing basis, helps to build mutual trust and understanding. There are many ways to communicate, including newsletters, press releases and speeches. Regardless of the form, it is essential that any message from "the District" truly represents the viewpoint and wishes of the board.

What a school board member is --- and isn't

For decades there has been a commonly accepted cliche: "School boards establish policy but the superintendent and staff manage the schools." At the very least, that statement bears examination in light of the responsibilities that have been thrust upon the board. Hiring employees and setting their salaries could be called management decisions. Approving the budget, authorizing expenditures, determining the curriculum -- all go beyond the mere adoption of policies. Today, school boards in our state are accountable by statute for what happens, or doesn't happen, in the classroom. Establishing policy? Yes, and a whole lot more.

*Paper by former Washington State Representative Dennis Heck*
On the other hand there are administrative functions which should be left to the superintendent and other administrators. A board member's authority does not include administering the school program -- even giving well-intentioned directives. It's an important distinction, and the school board member who has it clearly in mind from the very first day can avoid serious problems later.

Politics ...
Statesmanship ...
Boardmanship

By definition, a school board member is a politician -- that is, "...a person holding or seeking a public office." Webster acknowledges that the word "politics" has come into disrepute among many Americans, but reminds that it is an appropriate term to describe conducting or participating in affairs of government. And a school district is a branch of government.

It is the very essence of our nation's heritage that we choose from among our peers -- in open and free elections -- those we want to lead us in the conduct of public affairs. To be elected to serve on a school board is to become part of what have been described as two of the greatest experiments in history; representative democracy and free education for all.

Motivation -- A knowledgeable legislative leader advises newly elected school board members to analyze candidly why they ran for the office. For some it may be a sense of civic responsibility; others may have strong feelings about a certain issue. Still others may hope to gain prestige or indirect benefits to their business or career.

"Knowing what it is within your self that motivates you to be involved will help you be more successful in your involvement." Unless you are sure of where you want to go, this authority warns, you may not get there.

Kind of Representation -- The same legislative leader suggests also that the board member consider whether he or she is responding to voters' concerns in a delegate role, at one end of the spectrum, or representing the people as trustee of an overriding responsibility. The "trustee" office holder, as John Kennedy said may "lead, inform, correct or even ignore constituent opinion."

Constituent Groups -- There are many different interests that have a stake in school board decisions. Some groups are organized; others are not. The list is different for every community. The relative influence and involvement of each group also varies.

In addition to parents, students and staff, the list might include such groups as businesses, builders, civic organizations, clergy, industry, professionals, labor, senior citizens and taxpayer associations -- not to mention the press.

Knowing the importance of each group or interest and how best to work with them is important to the board member. Each is a potential source of support or opposition.

The group of most immediate importance, of course is the board itself. An individual board member has no authority per se. "Remember" counsels the authority, "that a single viewpoint can be forged from five different viewpoints only when three possess some skill in the art of compromise."

Paper by former Washington State Representative Dennis Heck
Learning -- Newly elected board members, like all novice officials, go through a period of orientation and learning. After the experience of a budget cycle, employee negotiations and legislative enactments the new school board members may feel confident about assuming a more active role.

The Legislature -- The relationship between school boards and the State Legislature is especially significant in Ohio. This is a practical fact of which the board member should become aware early. The Legislature appropriates (and can control) the predominant portion of the district's budget. Hundreds of school bills are introduced every legislative session. Obviously, school boards have an important stake in the outcome.

Directors who maintain rapport with legislators on a continuing basis -- particularly those representing their own district -- can develop the kind of credibility that influences votes. School boards can give helpful assistance to legislators -- providing data on school operation, for example, and information about citizens' desires.

It's work -- The experienced politician advises that an effective office holder, whether a legislator or school board member, is one who is willing to work. This involves the time, effort and study needed for an understanding of every issue, before decisions are made. Also, the well prepared board member can effectively communicate with others -- parents, staff, community and colleagues on the board.

Politics or Boardmanship? -- From an objective standpoint, politics isn't a bad word; but for the board member who may find the connotation objectionable there are others, such as "statesmanship." For school board members another has been coined: "Boardmanship."

Regardless of the terminology, it all boils down to the importance of working effectively with other people as you do your best to carry out the responsibilities for which you were elected.