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**Building High-Impact  
Board-Superintendent Leadership**

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**Building a High-Impact School Board:  
4 Questions You Need to Answer**

**A VSBA Webinar  
April 8, 2020**

— BUILDING A —

# HIGH-IMPACT

# BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT PARTNERSHIP

11

*Critical Questions  
You Need to Answer*

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# Check Out Our Board-Savvy Superintendent Blog

[www.Boardsavvysuperintendent.com](http://www.Boardsavvysuperintendent.com)

(25-some superintendents and other educational leaders from around the nation serve on the blog Strategic Advisory Committee, including VSBA Executive Director Gina Patterson.)

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# Question #1

## What is the Nuts and Bolts Work of Governing a School District?



# Significant Developments in the Rapidly Changing Field of K-12 Governance

# K-12 Governance Is Still Frontier Territory – Not Yet a Fully Developed Field

- No universally accepted set of core principles or best practices
- Heated debate about principles and practices
- In flux/rapidly evolving
- Many “insidious foes” of the board-superintendent partnership to detect and avoid

# Beware of Dangerous Insidious Foes!



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# Insidious Foes

- Erroneous assumptions about the nature of governing that sound plausible and are often recommended by self-styled “governing gurus” – but can damage the board-superintendent partnership
- Some common Insidious Foes:
  - Stellar district and/or superintendent performance will keep the board-superintendent relationship healthy.
  - There’s a firewall between the board’s “policy making” role and the district administrative function that must be preserved: the twain can’t be allowed to meet.
  - Fashioning governing policies (rules of the governing game) will ensure effective governing decisions and judgments (known as the “policy governance” approach).
  - Board members aren’t interested in building their board’s self-management capacity (including managing their governing performance).

# Emerging Facts of Life in K-12 Governance

- Changing board member expectations: **to be actively engaged in making high-impact decisions that make a real difference** (and not merely an audience for finished staff work!)
- View of the board's governing work as much more complex than the traditional notion of "policy making" – involving **carefully designed decision-making processes**
- New view of governing as a "team sport" involving the board, superintendent and senior administrators working as a **Strategic Governing Team**
- Growing recognition that board members who are **satisfied owners** of their governing work feel a stronger commitment to governing and make more reliable partners for the superintendent
- Growing recognition that inappropriate board member involvement in administrative matters ("micro-management") is usually the result of an **under-developed board without a clear governing role, well-designed structure, or effective processes for engaging board members**

# Truly High-Impact School Boards

1. Are supported by – and work closely with – a really **board-savvy superintendent**
2. Understand their governing role and functions inside-out and focus on doing high-impact governing work that makes a significant difference in the affairs of their district, avoiding getting bogged down in the “weeds” of micro-management
3. Rigorously manage themselves as governing bodies
4. Employ well-designed board standing committees as high-powered “governing engines.”
5. Employ well-designed processes to ensure active engagement in making governing decisions and judgments
6. Meticulously manage the board-superintendent working relationship

# The Nature of Governing Work

# Governing At The Highest Level

To play the leading role – in partnership with the superintendent and senior administrators – in answering 3 critical questions:

1. Where should our district be headed/what should we become over the long run, in terms of educational programs, student achievement, facilities, financing?
2. What should our district be now and in the near-term (mission, programs, budget)?
3. How well are we performing - educationally, financially, managerially?

# **Your Board's Detailed Governing Work Consists Of Much More Than Just "Policy (Rule) Making"**

**Governing is making decisions about concrete governing "products" and judgments based on concrete governing documentation – flowing along 3 broad streams:**

**Strategic and operational planning/budget development**

**Performance Oversight/Monitoring**

**External/Stakeholder Relations**

# Questions To Think About

1. What return on your investment of time and energy in governing should you expect – for your district and for you individually?
2. What are the most important strengths and weaknesses of your board as your district's governing body?
3. What do you find most/least satisfying about your governing work?
4. What have been your board's (not your district's) most notable governing accomplishments over the past year or so?
5. What governing issues is your board currently facing?

## Question #2

How Can We Strengthen Management of Our Board  
as a Governing Body?



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# Helping Your Board Develop Its Self-Management Capacity Will Pay Handsome Dividends In Terms Of

**More effective board governing decisions and judgments**

**Greater board accountability for – and commitment to – its governing work**

**Heightened board member self-esteem and esprit de corps**

**Greater public respect for the board and the district governing function**

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# Board Self-Management Involves Both

**Developing your  
board's members**

**Managing your  
board's governing  
performance**

# Successful Board Self-Management Depends On An Accountable Board Committee

- Typically known as the Governance or Board Operations Committee
- Headed by the board president/chair and consisting of other committee chairs and the superintendent
- Accountable for developing the people on the board, for overseeing Board governing performance and communication/interaction with the superintendent and executive team, and for coordinating board operations

## 2 Critical Elements Of Board Human Resource Development

- Enriching your board's composition by sharing a profile of the ideal board in terms of desirable board member attributes and qualifications with the general public and district stakeholders
- Developing board members' governing skills and knowledge
  - ❖ A well-designed orientation program for new board members focusing on the board's role, functions, structure, and governing processes
  - ❖ A formal, budgeted ongoing board member governing education and training program

# Managing Board Governing Performance Involves

- Setting board member performance targets/standards and monitoring performance (both governing performance targets and non-governing targets, such as attending graduation ceremonies and speaking on behalf of your district)
- Periodically assessing how the board as a whole is performing as a governing body
- Taking corrective action as appropriate

# Questions To Think About

1. What are some critical board member attributes and qualifications that are likely to strengthen your board's governing effectiveness?
2. What are key elements of an effective orientation program for incoming board members?
3. What are some board member governing (and non-governing) performance targets that you can reasonably expect board members to achieve?
4. What steps might you realistically take to deal with a board member's underperformance?

# Question #3

How Can We Employ Actual or Virtual Committees as Powerful Governing Engines?



# Well-Designed Board Standing Committees: Powerful Governing Engines

**Empower board members:  
actively engaging them in  
shaping governing decisions  
and judgments**

**Serve as reliable vehicles for  
keeping the board's detailed  
governing work updated**

**Beef up board members'  
governing expertise and  
ownership**

**Boost the full board's  
governing productivity,  
making regular board  
business meetings more  
productive**

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# Well-Designed Standing Committees

- Correspond to the major streams of decisions and judgments that make up your board's governing work (form following function)
- Cut across all of your district's operations and functions (not tied to narrow operational and administrative silos such as buildings and grounds, curriculum and instruction, finance, personnel, etc., which invite micro-management)
- Are standing, not ad hoc, committees
- Can be virtual (a monthly work session of the committee of the whole with separate standing committee segments, each chaired by a different board member)

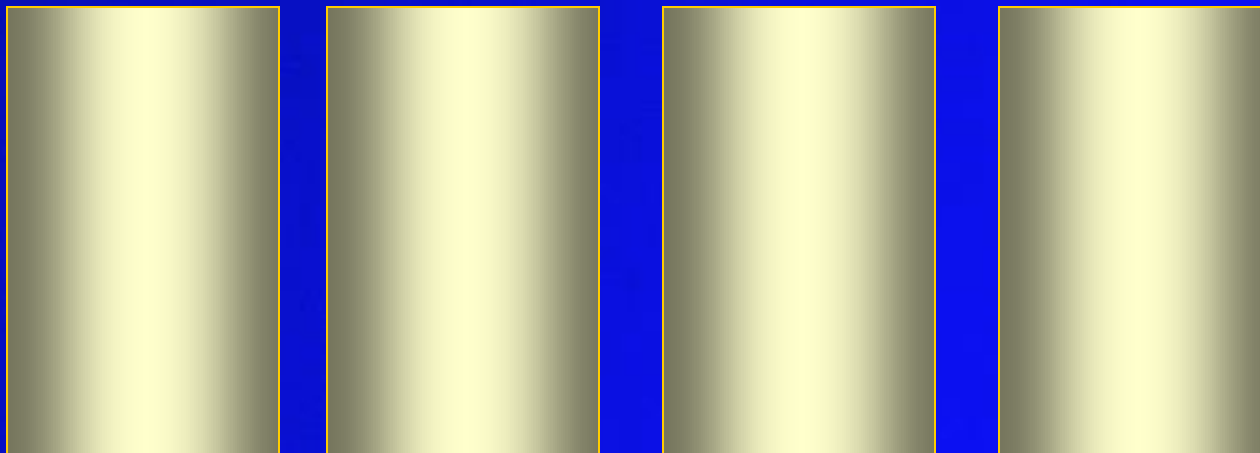
# Form Follows Function

## Board Governing Streams

**Planning Stream**

**Performance Oversight Stream**

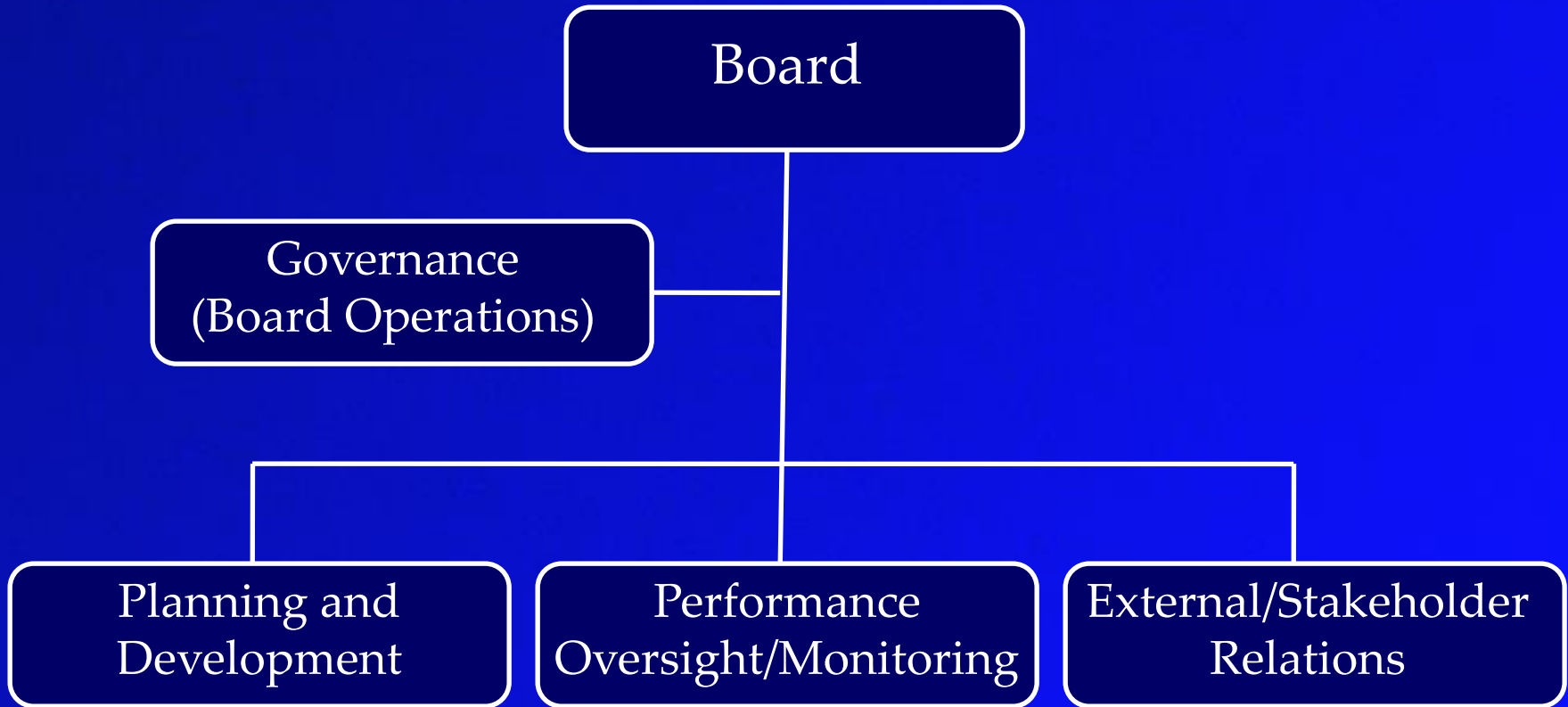
**External/Stakeholder Relations Stream**



**Operations and Functions**

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# Model Committee Structure



# Governance (Board Operations) Committee

- Headed by board chair
- Consists of other standing committee chairs and the superintendent
- Serves as committee on board operations: coordinating committee work, developing the board agenda, managing the board-superintendent partnership, overseeing board performance

# Committees Function Well When

- Every board member serves on 1 and only 1 committee (except committee chairs)
- Committees are the only path to the full board agenda and only committees report in full board meetings (except the superintendent's report)
- Committee chairs and members are regularly rotated among committees
- An executive manager is assigned as Chief Staff Liaison to each committee

# Questions To Think About

1. What political and/or technical barriers to putting a new or updated committee structure (actual or virtual) in place in your district are you likely to encounter?
2. What strategies might you employ to surmount these barriers?
3. What attributes should you consider in identifying potential chairs of newly established committees?
4. What steps might you take to ensure that your committee chairs succeed in leading their committee deliberations?

# Question #4

**How Can We Strengthen Board Members' Engagement in Major Governing Processes?**



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## Two Key Roles Of Well-Designed Governing Committees:

- Preparing for board meetings: action recommendations and informational reports
- Working with the superintendent and executive team members in thinking through how board members should be meaningfully engaged in key processes, such as strategic and operational planning, budget development, and performance monitoring – helping to shape governing “products,” rather than just thumbing through them

# Twin Aims Of Governing Process Design

- To generate technically sound governing decisions and judgments.
- To engage board members in a meaningful, proactive fashion so that they are transformed into **satisfied owners** of their governing decisions and judgments (**owners typically being more committed to decisions than audience members for finished staff work**)

# **Your Board's Planning Committee Works With The Superintendent In Determining How Board Members Will Be Involved In, For Example:**

**Updating your district's  
values and vision  
statements**

**Identifying strategic issues  
facing your district**

**Developing your district's  
operating plan and budget**

# **Your Board's Performance Monitoring Committee Works With The Superintendent In Determining How Board Members Will Be Involved In, For Example:**

**Shaping and approving the content and format of performance reports to the board**

**Assessing educational, financial, and administrative performance**

**Updating major policies (e.g., contracting)**

**Your Board's External/Stakeholder Relations  
Committee Works With The Superintendent In  
Determining How Board Members Will Be Involved In,  
For Example:**

**Updating your district's  
desired image**

**Shaping and adopting  
marketing, communication,  
legislative and stakeholder  
relations strategies**

**Representing your district in  
appropriate external forums**

# Questions To Think About

1. Identify practical ways you can engage your board in providing front-end guidance in your district's strategic planning process?
2. Identify practical ways you can engage your board in providing front-end guidance in your district's annual operational planning/budget process?
3. Identify practical ways you can engage board members in district (non-governing) image-building and external relations.

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