

The Governance Conundrum

As school and community leaders, school board members face a complex challenge even under the best of circumstances

Having written the first chapter of my newest book for Rowman and Littlefield, *Building a High-Impact Board-Superintendent Strategic Governing Team*, I was pondering how to obtain high-level practitioner input on the book's key concepts before doing any more writing. I realized that state K-12 associations might be a great resource.

Rick Lewis, head of the Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA), and Bruce Caughey, head of the

Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), agreed to host teleconferences with their member superintendents and board members to provide me with input.

The two teleconferences validated that there is a tremendous need for practical guidance on building the kind of close, positive, and productive board-superintendent partnerships that are critical for effective governing.

Participants in the teleconferences agreed that my first chapter was gen-

erally on point in outlining some of the most important factors that make governing K-12 systems a uniquely difficult challenge, and that, consequently, make a rock-solid school board-superintendent governing partnership even more critical.

By the way, a few participants in the teleconferences questioned my characterizing students as both the "customer" and the ultimate "product" of the K-12 educational process.

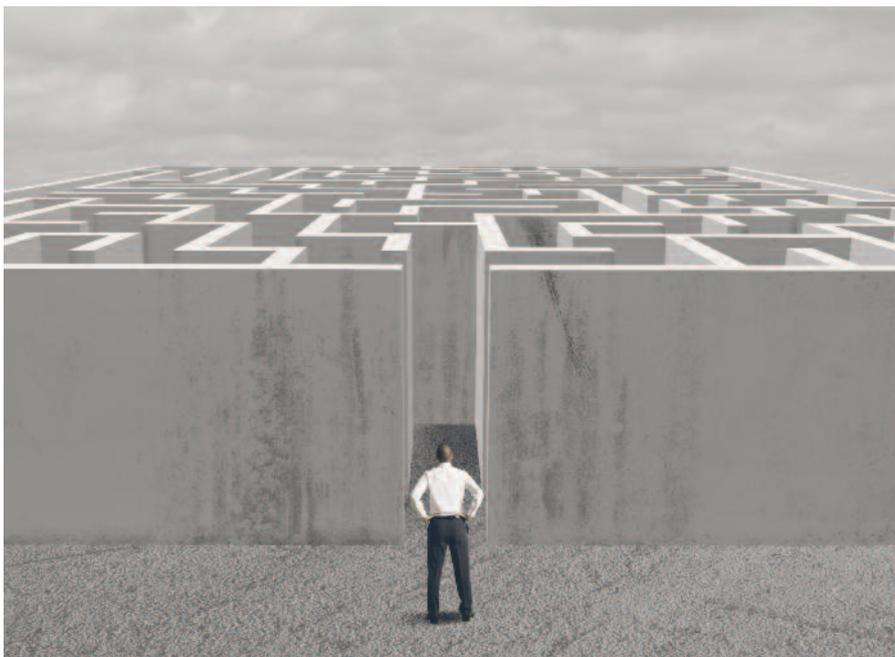
While I understand their concern about this unconventional and perhaps even provocative view of students, I think that this bifocal nature of K-12 students is one of the serious challenges that deserves mentioning in my first chapter. I welcome hearing from readers relative to this point and any other challenges they think I should add to the list, in addition to those described in the following excerpt.

Boards with a tough row to hoe

"You've been working with all kinds of nonprofit and public boards, Doug, for at least a couple of decades. Would you say there are particular kinds of boards that have an especially tough row to hoe—certain organizations that are really hard to govern?"

I'm paraphrasing the question a young woman asked a few weeks ago at a governance workshop I was presenting in Chicago.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard the question, so I wasn't caught totally off-guard. I definitely thought it was a good question that deserved a serious response. I began by pointing out that doing a good job of governing any nonprofit or public organization—



whether in education, health care, social services, or another sector—was a tremendous challenge even under the most favorable circumstances, requiring lots of thinking and planning.

I'd learned early in my career that getting a well-intentioned, dedicated, bright, and energetic group of volunteers together in the boardroom wasn't close to half the battle.

Good governing wouldn't automatically happen, no matter how qualified the cast of characters sitting at the board table. That said, I told my workshop participants that near the top of my list of difficult-to-govern organizations would be public school districts.

School districts aren't alone in being a tough nut to crack where governing is concerned, of course. Based on my experience, public transportation authorities and national trade associations also are high on the scale of governance difficulty.

But the governing challenges public school systems face appear uniquely daunting to me. For one thing, I can't imagine being accountable for carrying out a more complex, high-stakes mission than the one guiding our public schools. To start with, our public schools' primary "customer"—the student—is also the primary "product."

Of course, districts have plenty of indirect customers, including parents and taxpayers, but the core customer sits in the classroom and—over the course of, hopefully, 12 years—becomes a significantly different person, at least in terms of knowledge and intellectual skills.

And what a customer: not only incredibly diverse and becoming more so by the day, but also in many cases a reluctant and sometimes even unwilling customer who would rather be anywhere else than in the classroom. And the ultimate "product" our public school districts are expected to produce—a well-educated student—couldn't be more complex and diffi-

cult to measure.

Even with the accountability thrust in recent years and the growing reliance on standardized tests to measure educational performance and student achievement, the K-12 "production process" is still as much art as science.

Yes, school districts these days, responding to federal and state government directions, do a pretty good job of measuring basic math and English competence at particular points in their students' academic journeys. However, few would disagree that focusing on the so-called "basics" doesn't come close to accomplishing the full educational mission of a public school district.

Measuring outcomes

What about such notoriously difficult-to-measure outcomes of the educational process as preparing our student customers to thrive in a rapidly changing and challenging world? What about transforming our students into good citizens with solid values who care deeply about the welfare of the communities they live and work in? What about fostering the creative capacity of our students?

When we go beyond the barebones educational basics, what should be measured is just as thorny a question as how to go about measuring it.

By contrast, public transportation authority boards I've worked with over the years can be confident about the objective, measurable outcomes they're accountable for producing, such as ridership and on-time performance.

Trade association performance metrics are standard: membership numbers, attendance at the annual meeting and educational programs, and the like.

As if governing a public educational enterprise with such a complex, multi-faceted mission weren't challenging enough, political, cultural, and

market-related factors make the work of governing K-12 systems even more difficult in today's world.

For one thing, school districts typically loom large in their communities, often making the Top 10 in terms of capital assets, employment, and operating budgets. Being one of the big community kahunas definitely has its advantages—for example, entitling your district to a seat at the communitywide decision-making table in areas like economic development planning.

But in these times of widespread and apparently growing skepticism and distrust of large institutions, looming large on the community landscape can come at a stiff price.

Unremitting, and all-too-often negative, public scrutiny can force districts to divert precious attention and other resources to aggressive public relations strategies and make fundraising (whether passing a tax increase or building an endowment to fund innovation) extremely difficult.

Despite the steadily growing skepticism and suspicion about the motives and effectiveness of large public institutions, it doesn't appear that parents and other community residents expect less from their local school districts.

On the contrary, the steady increase in two-career families means that we expect schools to handle a growing part of the traditional parental burden of character building.

The educational "marketplace," as everyone knows, has become much more competitive in recent years, expanding school choice and forcing districts to demonstrate their effectiveness and pay close attention to public relations and marketing—or risk enrollment decline and diminished revenues. ■

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