The secret to being a successful school board is no secret in Pewaukee, Wisconsin. You establish a clear vision for your school district, demand accountability, focus on policy, engage your public, and build a strong working relationship among district leaders.

In other words, you focus on the five tenets of school governance outlined in the *Key Work of School Boards*. For example, the *Key Work* states that setting a vision for your school district—and translating that vision into reality—is a fundamental task for any school board seeking to be effective.

The Pewaukee school board has done that, articulating its vision through a strategic plan developed with the help of the community, says board President Jim Huismann. In turn, to bring that vision to fruition, board members consistently turn to the strategic plan to guide their deliberations and the policies put in place.

“Our district is really focused on our strategic plan, and everything we do flows from that.”

Many school board members have heard of the *Key Work* at conferences and training sessions. Originally developed in 2000 by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) with the help of state association leaders and experts in board training, the *Key Work* is a summary of the core skills of school board governance.

It also offers a framework to better understand the best practices that will help a school board become more effective as a governing body. Also, it serves as a guide on how school boards can use their governance authority to improve student learning and the academic performance of their schools.

This last point is particularly valuable in this era of rising public expectations for student academic progress, says Kanisha Williams-Jones, who as NSBA’s director of leadership services helped facilitate development of an updated version of the *Key Work* last year.

“It’s never been more important for school boards to focus on the *Key Work* areas to become more effective leaders and keep student outcomes at the heart of their work,” she says.

Research supports the contention that the *Key Work* can be helpful. A study of Wisconsin school board members by the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for example, has found a positive link between the *Key Work* and academic outcomes.

“School boards that are adhering to the concepts of the *Key Work* are outperforming school boards that are not … and by a statistically significant margin,” says Michael Ford, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and co-author of the study, “Do School Board Governance Practices Improve District Performance? Testing the *Key Work of School Boards* in Wisconsin.”

The study also validates earlier research, such as the Iowa Association of School Board’s Lighthouse Study, which identified key characteristics of school boards that appeared to be working effectively and represented districts with rising student performance.
IMPACT THROUGH POLICY

The latest revision of the Key Work organizes the work of effective school boards into five critical components of governance: vision, accountability, policy, community leadership, and board and superintendent relations.

For each area, the Key Work defines the board’s role, its importance, and steps that a board must pursue to be effective. Tips, questions, assessment tools, and checklists offer board members additional direction in how to move forward.

A quick read of the 60-page guidebook on the Key Work provides board members with a clear understanding of what their school board must do to become more effective education leaders.

Consider the area of policy: “Policy is a leadership tool with no equal in helping the district achieve academic excellence for students,” the Key Work states. “A board dedicated to strong organizational policies understands that it is not responsible for managing, but fully embraces the responsibility to govern.”

The Pewaukee school board has been highly successful in using policy to achieve its goals to improve student success, says Superintendent JoAnn Sternke. As a result, graduation rates are among the highest in the state, the percentage of graduates attending college is up, and test scores have risen for the district’s economically disadvantaged students.

One example of the board’s impact through policymaking was its response to data revealing a sizable academic gap among students in the district’s special education program, she says.

The board articulated the goal of closing this academic gap, and it adopted policies to direct the administration to mainstream more students and allocate resources to these students’ needs.

BOARD TEAM WORK

Understanding the different roles of school board and superintendent also is key if a district leadership team is to work effectively, states the Key Work. Richard Lewis, executive director of the Ohio School Boards Association and a contributor in the Key Work’s development, agrees.

“A school board that uses policy to direct its administration and put resources where needed is more likely to induce significant change in a district than a board that gets distracted in minutiae and micromanagement,” he says.

Many state association leaders and board training professionals have raised this point in recent years, and their feedback was included in the 2015 revision that lists board and superintendent relationships as one of the five key components in a board’s success, Williams-Jones says.

That makes perfect sense to Kathryn Blumsack, director of board development for the Maryland Association of Boards of Education. Serving on a school board requires a new way of thinking, she says, with board members having to accept that they have no individual authority—that only by working as a team can they bring effective leadership to the school district.

“No one ever says, ‘It’s a bad school board but for so-and-so;’ or ‘It’s a great board if they only got rid of so-and-so,’” she says. “You may be selected as an individual to serve on your board, but you serve as part of a team. And you can’t fix anything by yourself, because you need the team.”

PRINCIPLES TO LIVE BY

The Pewaukee school board has worked hard to embrace each of these components of the Key Work into its daily activities, Sternke says. “What makes our board highly functional is that their beliefs aren’t just words on a page, they are principles that the board lives by.”

But, at least in Pewaukee, no one suggests that the Key Work provides all the answers. Board members have taken full advantage of the training opportunities provided by their state school boards association. In 2013, Pewaukee was awarded the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, a prestigious honor recognizing organizational excellence.

Not everyone may embark on such an ambitious effort to achieve excellence, but Pewaukee board clerk Larry Dux says that a school board wanting to be effective must dedicate itself to improvement at every opportunity. And the Key Work is a good place to start.

“We are mindful and intentional about the process that supports the five areas of the Key Work,” he says. “But our board also is mindful and intentional about getting better.”

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For more information about the Key Work of School Boards, go to www.nsba.org/keywork.