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Focusing on Teaching and Learning

Teaching is at the heart of leading. In fact, it is through teaching that leaders lead others. . . . teaching is how ideas and values get transmitted. Therefore, in order to be a leader at all levels of an organization, a person must be a teacher. Simply put, if you aren't teaching, you aren't leading.

(Tichy, 1997, p. 71)

School districts have a single focus: teaching and learning. District goals, strategies, policies, and major activities must encourage, promote, and support excellence in teaching and learning throughout the district and in every school, every classroom, and while not often thought of, in every school board meeting. Absent this relentless focus, the message is that the district is not really serious about powerful teaching and learning. The energies and talents of staff are wasted, and student learning suffers.

The premise of this book is that the meeting of the school board is one of several mission-critical activities that occur in a school district. We believe an effective board meeting directly contributes to the achievement of the district's teaching and learning mission. An ineffective board meeting may take the district in a wrong direction and cause people inside and

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outside the organization to question the match between the board's actions and its statements. Inconsistency or insincerity on the part of those in leadership positions contributes to the public perception that leaders make excuses for their lack of commitment to achievement of the critical mission.

The concept of mission deserves further amplification. We will do so by examining "mission" and "mission-critical work," using examples to highlight the leadership challenge facing superintendents and school boards as they work to improve student achievement by creating the conditions that support powerful teaching and learning.

In the movie *Twelve O'Clock High*, two Central Command leaders, one a general and the other a commander, discuss possible reasons for the high casualty rates and bombing-mission failures being experienced by one of the bomber squadrons. "It's all about mission," one of them remarks. He goes on to point out how critical decisions by the base commander no longer seem to reflect fidelity to mission. In a setting familiar to other organizations, especially those highly sensitive to human relations, he states his belief that the base commander's decisions were founded on something other than the mission—in this case, the emotional well-being of one of his men. The base commander was losing sight of the squadron's mission—to destroy enemy targets (King, 1949).

The particular circumstances involved a young navigator who miscalculated the timing of a turn on the way to the target. The bombers arrived late and encountered enemy fighters. Several planes were shot down, resulting in many deaths. The base commander, however, refused to remove the navigator whose error had contributed to the mission's failure and ultimately an unnecessary loss of life. The general realized the commander was more concerned about the psyche of the navigator than about the achievement of the mission and immediately removed the base commander from his assignment.

Okay, we readily agree that school districts are not bomber squadrons even on those days when objects seem to drop down on us from nowhere. So what is the connection to teaching and learning and board meetings? We believe that school district leaders share something in common with the leaders at Central Command: mission.

Like bomber squadrons, hospitals, businesses, cities, and other organizations, school districts have a mission. We think a district's mission in its simplest form is teaching and learning. More specifically, it is to create the learning experiences that enable all students to meet high standards. Said another way, it is to give as many students as possible as many choices as possible about their lives and careers when they graduate from high school. It is our job as education leaders to make that happen.

In our research for this book, we have observed a school board that spent time at numerous meetings squabbling with each other, looking for villains to blame for low student achievement and budget problems,

and allowing public board meetings to disintegrate into forums for angry citizens to attack the district and public education in general. The district had lost its focus on mission-critical work: teaching and learning. An examination of their agendas for the past year revealed that the board spent the majority of its time on political and personal agendas, scattered reports from ad hoc groups, and business issues. There was little discussion about student achievement, curriculum, or student or staff learning. Although the district's mission is posted in several places in the boardroom, the alignment of its work to this mission is absent. The words ring hollow to those attending the meeting and to staff throughout the district.

On the other hand, we have observed board meetings in districts both very large and small, where the vision, mission, and goals of the district were squarely about teaching and learning, and students were the focus of every discussion and action. Focused meetings did not mean easier meetings, for the superintendent, board, and staff took on issues that mattered, and many of them were extremely difficult. However, observers left the meetings exhilarated and hopeful because they saw people who were serious about their work and who cared about their students—*all* of their students—as well as the staff and the broader community.

MISSION IS DIFFERENT FROM VISION

Mission is not the same as vision. It is much more specific. In a sense, mission states what we do as an organization to make our vision become a reality. For example, if our vision is that of a district in which all students, except for those with the most severe disabilities, meet rigorous expectations for learning in order to become productive citizens, our mission might be to create learning paths and experiences to make that possible.

Mission defines the work we do to achieve the vision. It focuses on what we do to bring about an end result. Although we often see it cast as such, producing “productive citizens” is not a mission. The mission is what we actually do to help our students *become* productive citizens. Since it is the responsibility of everyone in the school district to contribute to the achievement of the mission, boards and superintendents must be sure that they attend to what is important and that what they do is focused on this mission. In other words, mission applies to board meetings as much as it does to classrooms and schools.

As Peter Drucker (1992) states in *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, “What matters is the leader's mission. Therefore, the first job of the leader is to think through and define the mission of the institution” (p. 3). His words are applied directly to boards in the excellent study, *The Dynamic Board: Lessons from High-Performing Nonprofits*. The study notes, “Effective boards build their common understanding of mission and vision into most

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discussions.” (Cvsa, Jansen, & Kilpatrick, 2003, p. 7). If vision sets direction, mission drives it. Mission focuses the district. It defines the work each person is expected to do that is mission-critical. If that work is not done well, the person should change or leave. That is true for teachers and staff, and it is true for boards and superintendents.

Given our teaching and learning mission, everything we do in a school district, including the board meeting itself, must flow from that mission. Drucker and the study mentioned above on high-performing nonprofit boards by McKinsey and Company offer some instructive thoughts on how our board agendas might become more mission focused. Drucker (1992) believes leadership must stay focused on the mission, rethink the mission as time and circumstances change, and secure resources to help the organization achieve its mission.

McKinsey (as quoted in Cvsa et al., 2003) concludes that “dynamic boards” shape direction through mission, strategy, and key policies. They make sure the organization has the resources necessary to achieve the mission and vision. They regularly reaffirm the mission, ensure decisions are consistent with the mission, hold annual workshops to reaffirm/modify the mission, and select a CEO that will move the district in the right direction. These perspectives should be at the forefront of all agenda planning.

THE RIGHT MISSION

School districts that lose focus on their mission often flounder. They undertake multiple projects and responsibilities; they take on the latest reform without ever seeking evidence as to whether that change will contribute to better teaching and learning; and they do not take on the tough accountability jobs that sometimes require a confrontation with forces that promote self interest to the detriment of student success. One indicator that the board is off course and not doing mission-critical work is when adults are fussing with adults on adult issues, rather than focusing on student learning and achievement.

Having a mission statement is not enough. Many organizations are pretty good at identifying a mission. In fact, it is hard to find a school district or school without some sort of mission statement on the wall or its Web site. The problem is that too often mission statements were developed by committees, where frustrated people finally threw in the towel and included phrases and clauses to satisfy everyone on the committee. This becomes painfully clear when people ask themselves after reading an elongated mission statement, “Now what is it exactly I’m supposed to do?” Of course, the answer is not simple or clear. Drucker (1992) confirms this when he says a mission statement should not be a “hero sandwich of good intentions . . . but a simple and clear statement” of what the organization is supposed to do (p. 5).

But it is not enough for a mission statement to have a clear focus and provide direction that mobilizes the organization around a common sense of purpose. It must also be the “right” mission. What good is a mission if it takes people in a direction they ought not go?

An excellent example of this is Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, who exhibits so many aspects of good leadership—vision, motivation, personal example, team building—and takes all but one of his crew to their death because the fundamental mission was flawed in the first place. Captain Ahab was blinded by his total focus on getting Moby Dick. Or there is the British colonel in *Bridge on the River Kwai* whose mission becomes the construction of the perfect bridge, rather than winning the war. His efforts to build that bridge, an act that protects his troops from their captors, but gives access to the enemy, thereby potentially costs thousands of British troops their lives while it needlessly prolongs the war (Spiegel, 1983).

When leaders are focused on the right mission, they create an energy and enthusiasm throughout the organization that motivates and inspires people. When the mission is clearly stated, people are able to decide which of all the things they do are the ones that should receive the most attention. The right mission statement, one that is clear and focused, guides the setting of goals and the establishment of priorities.

MISSION-CRITICAL WORK

However, focusing on the right mission and making it clear is not enough. It is also important to identify which work done throughout the organization is most likely to support accomplishment of the mission. We describe such work as “mission-critical”—a term with which we first became familiar when a business acquaintance in a new company described something he was doing as “mission-critical.” When asked what that meant, he said very simply and clearly, “If I don’t do this work well, I won’t be working here.” We got the point.

A few years ago, a study of the crash of ValuJet 594 (Langewiesche, 1998), in Florida demonstrated how important it is for every person in an organization to understand which pieces of work they do are mission critical. Safety was clearly a primary mission for the airline. But, somewhere in the process of loading equipment known to be unsafe (oxygen generators) on the plane, any number of people did not perform their tasks well. Some people assumed others would take care of any potential problems. All along the way, people chose not to assume personal responsibility for their actions. Others did not see their work as significant and critical to the successful flight of this ValuJet. What could loading equipment on a conveyor belt possibly have to do with safety?

These actions, along with a series of other mistakes, contributed to the tragic loss of 186 lives. Had each person in the process realized that what

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he or she was doing, no matter how seemingly trivial, contributed directly to the accomplishment of the company's safety mission, the tragedy would have been averted.

In school districts, as in any other organization, every person does mission-critical work. After reading the ValuJet study, a staff member in the payroll department in one district said to everyone in a district team-building workshop, that she realized for the first time how her work contributed to achievement of the district's teaching and learning mission. As she put it, "If I don't do my job well, people's paychecks could be shorted." "That," she said, "does not produce happy people, and unhappy people shouldn't be working with our children."

For teachers, an example of mission-critical work is the preparation of a lesson designed to engage all students in a learning activity to help them meet a particular standard. For a principal, it might be an agenda for a staff meeting—an agenda that includes an opportunity for professional growth. The agenda and meeting should model the kind of teaching and learning the principal wants to see in every classroom. For a playground aide, it is providing a safe and fun environment so anger and hostility do not enter the classroom after the recess. Playing background classical music in a classroom only goes so far in cooling the tempers of youngsters who've been involved in a fight.

For superintendents and board members, a prime example of mission-critical work is the board meeting. This meeting presents a unique opportunity for the governance team to take actions that support powerful teaching and learning. In fact, it is probably a good idea for superintendents and board members to ask themselves after every board meeting, "What did we do at this meeting to help our district achieve its educational mission?" More often than not, however, we hear a sense of frustration from superintendents and board members that board meetings are about everything *but* teaching and learning, and in fact detract from rather than support teaching and learning. It does not have to be that way!

In a discussion between leaders in two large urban school districts, one group talked with despair about the lack of support from their school board, the confusion about what they were expected to accomplish, and the toxic culture of their district. In contrast, the other district's leaders spoke of a board and superintendent who had limited the district to two goals: focus on the neediest students and examine how our teaching needs to change to help those students. These leaders knew what they were supposed to do, they felt supported, and they loved their work. The contrast between the two districts illustrates the point—make sure every person in the district knows the mission and sticks to it.

People pay attention to those in leadership positions. Knowing this is probably a good first step to creating board meetings that support teaching and learning. Why? Not because we have some exalted view of the role of the superintendent and board members, but because students closely observe their teachers' behavior in the classroom. They quickly note when

teachers' actions are contrary to the very rules and guidelines they have established for student behavior. The message students receive is that the teacher is not really serious about the rules. "Do as I say, not as I do" rarely flies. Similarly, the way a principal or superintendent behaves in a potentially negative or hostile situation can make that situation much better or much worse. The same is true for board members—their behavior as well as the words they use during a board meeting speak volumes about what they truly value. For example, comments promoting self over team send a clear message that is contradictory to collaboration.

The fact of the matter is that superintendents and board members, like teachers and principals, are leaders. The work they do causes certain things to happen—or not happen, as the case may be. People are always watching what they do and comparing it to what they say. Superintendents and boards may say they believe all children can learn, but then they undo that belief by adopting a policy restricting access to rigorous classes for some students. The superintendent-board leadership team may want staff to treat students with respect, but if they do not treat each other or the public with respect, they send a clear message that "respect" simply is not a high value.

Position—that is, the title the leader holds—is important, and so are the leaders' abilities and skills that result in effective education leadership. That leadership is exhibited by teachers who lead and guide students, principals who set their schools moving in the right direction, superintendents who engage in systemic improvement efforts, and boards of education who set policies that give framework and structure to the education of children. But the superintendent-board leadership team sets the tone. How they do their work sets an example and influences people throughout the organization.

If the superintendent-board leadership team establishes a shared vision of excellence, stays focused on the right mission, builds people's capacity to do mission-critical work well, and reinforces cultural norms and core values that support high levels of achievement for all, so will the other people in the district. If the superintendent-board leadership team demonstrates that character and ethics are important, so will others. If the superintendent-board leadership team promotes continuous improvement, establishes good lines of communication, finds creative solutions to complex and enduring problems, practices collaboration, and models a culture of caring, then so will others who share responsibility for the education of children. Effective leaders make this a team sport, not an individual pursuit.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Effective superintendents know a great deal about what promotes powerful teaching and learning. As an effective superintendent, you take

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advantage of every opportunity to demonstrate powerful teaching and learning. That includes board meetings and other interactions with the board, staff, students, and community. If you do so, you model the behavior you expect and you encourage principals and others to do the same. This is one of the essential leadership challenges in education: to build consistency in policy and practice throughout the district to promote and reinforce what we know to be the most likely to produce powerful teaching and learning experiences for children of all sizes, shapes, and colors.

That is why we believe board meetings present a unique opportunity for education leaders to come together to meet the leadership challenge. These board meetings are well covered by the media, discussed by staff and community, and are frequently the subject of editorials. In many communities, more attention is focused on the board meeting than any other single educational activity.

The sad fact is that these board meetings too often seem to operate in a world separate from that of teaching and learning. Little seems connected in some meaningful way to what is going on or should be going on in schools and classrooms. Instead of being seen as a wonderful opportunity to reinforce the district's mission and to support powerful teaching and learning, board meetings are seen as something to be endured, something to be survived, and something far removed from the district's core work. That need not be the case. Some of the successful experiences of superintendents and board members in communities across this country suggest how and why board meetings can connect to teaching and learning. We suggest ways in the following chapters.

Viewing board meetings as part of the larger context of a general and sometimes nebulous topic called "superintendent and board relations" misses the mark. They are instead an essential component of the district's overall effort to support powerful teaching and learning. Fundamentally, board meetings should focus on the question, "What are the practices we would like to see occurring in every classroom every day?" Thus, the leadership challenge for superintendents and board members is to ensure that their meetings encourage, model, support, and reward the kinds of powerful teaching and learning experiences the district wants to be part of every child's educational experience. That is why we believe that, for superintendents, the preparation for, conduct of, and follow-up from board meetings is mission-critical work.

Conversations among superintendents about board meetings, however, rarely convey a sense that these meetings are viewed as mission-critical activities. On the contrary, superintendents often view board meetings with anxiety and even a sense of dread. Most superintendents we know do their best to anticipate questions from board members, prepare for specific public communications—while knowing there may be a surprise or two here—and work with the media. Despite best efforts at preparation, it is almost impossible to control the specific events and circumstances that are likely to unfold.

We have often asked our colleagues in meetings of superintendents to tell us the top 10 signs that a board meeting is not going well. The list they generate includes an unanticipated presence of a large number of union representatives, a closed session called by the board president who then asks the superintendent to wait outside, or an angry citizen with a copy of his tax bill in hand. This activity is often humorous and draws laughs—unless, of course, you are the superintendent who happens to be the main character in the story. No wonder when we ask superintendents what they do to recover from board meetings, we get a list that would produce a great deal of comfort to those holding stocks in beverage or rich foods industries.

But control over what happens is not the only issue. Together, many board members and superintendents express frustration at the apparent disconnect between agendas of board meetings and the essential teaching and learning work of the school district. “What does this have to do with schools or the classroom?” is a common lament. “I wanted to make a difference for children,” said one board member, “but much of what we do at board meetings seems more about adults than it does kids.” The sad fact, of course, is that laments such as these reflect all too closely what actually happens.

Another factor to consider is that the public perception of education quality is shaped in part by its view of the board and superintendent in action. The public may know less about esoteric topics such as board–superintendent relations, but it does know when it sees people behaving badly or when the actions of the board do not seem to relate to education. The media, including television and the Internet in many cases, covers board meetings more than any other educational activity. One can only guess what opinions are formed about educational quality after citizens watch an acrimonious meeting, observe the topics that actually occupy board time and energy, and see people treat each other in ways they would not want their children treated in the classroom.

The public knows board members and superintendents are the education leaders of the community. What those leaders say and do reflects, for better or for worse, the norms and values of the school district. If we are dedicated to keeping citizens in public schools, it is to our advantage to create environments where everyone is supported in doing the right work for the right reasons. We must therefore prevent situations where our work, our employees, and our learners are unfairly challenged or maligned.

In a sense, the agenda for a board meeting is like a lesson plan. A good lesson has clearly stated learning objectives, carefully designed teaching strategies to help students meet the objectives, instructional materials to support teaching and learning, and a means of evaluating the extent to which learning actually occurred. Similarly, a good board meeting has an agenda that clearly articulates expected outcomes, has backup materials providing information needed to achieve the outcomes, has established

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processes that help board members consider input from others and discuss their different points of view, and has a way to evaluate the effectiveness of the meeting itself. As one board member expressed succinctly, "Did we do what we wanted to do and how do we know it?"

To this point, we have argued that the challenge for education leaders, including superintendents and board members, is to keep everyone focused on the right mission—providing all students with the powerful teaching and learning experiences that enable them to meet high standards. We have also stated our belief that effective board meetings are mission-critical; that is, they have the potential of impacting in a significant way the quality of teaching and learning in the school district. We believe we must help boards do their essential work in public and avoid creating a public forum that distracts the board from that work.

The leadership challenge for board members and superintendents is clear: make sure board meetings are driven by the district's teaching and learning mission. In the coming chapters, we will draw on the comments and successful practices of many of our colleagues, our own experiences and research, and some excellent work on governance and superintendent-board relations by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the California Schools Boards Association (CSBA), the Iowa School Boards Association, and a New England governance study, to see what we can do to ensure that board meetings reflect as well as drive the district's teaching and learning mission.