



EFFECTIVENESS DEFINED

DISTRICTS EARN TASB'S GOOD GOVERNANCE MATTERS RECOGNITION

BY ROGER WHITE

In today's era of increased scrutiny directed toward public education—with watchwords such as “accountability” and “assessment” driving reform discussion, with increased mandates and decreased funding for schools apparently the legislative status quo, with recruitment and retention of quality teachers a frustrating puzzle for district budgets already pushed to their limits, and more—establishing and maintaining an effective district leadership team are essential to ensuring high standards of student performance.

In an effort to identify and highlight boards that are working hard to meet the challenge of leadership in difficult times, the TASB Board of Directors has established a new program—Good Governance Matters. The program will recognize several boards each year that have demonstrated a desire to “keep the main thing the main thing,” as Commissioner of Education Shirley Neeley often says, and have followed through on that desire in substantive ways.

This year, the TASB Board recognizes five districts whose board-superintendent teams met the challenge: Big Spring, Castleberry, Northside, Richardson, and Weatherford ISDs.

The five districts met the challenge by meeting the essential criteria for Good Governance Matters recognition: Undertaking the *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit* and notifying TASB that the district intends to incorporate all 24 audit practices into its routine practices, including:

1. Certifying to TASB that the board meets the criteria for incorporating all 24 practices
2. Being rated “acceptable” or higher in the Texas accountability system at least two out of the four most recent years
3. Having level or rising assessment participation, according to the Academic Excellence Indicator System
4. Achieving an “acceptable” or higher rating on the Fiscal Integrity Rating System for the 2002-03 school year

5. Demonstrating that all board members have met board training requirements

The *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit* was created in 2001 as a guide to effectiveness for board-superintendent teams and a document to help boards identify areas for growth and plan for reaching a higher standard of governance.

The introduction to the *Audit*, published in 2001, notes that “Every school board wants first and foremost to ensure that students in the district succeed at the highest levels possible. Every decision the board makes and all the resources it marshals for the district are ultimately intended to promote this end. To be successful over the long haul in promoting increased student achievement, the board must govern with vision, knowledge, and consistency.”

Over the next year, TASB will highlight these five examples of effective board-superintendent leadership in articles and through their periodic participation in

TASB presentations. The five districts have something to offer all districts, as board-superintendent teams struggle to keep focus to their leadership in a constantly changing and demanding time.

Two Prime Examples

How did these five districts hit the target? Although specific circumstances differ with each leadership team milieu, one factor remained constant—each member worked toward the team goal of measurable effectiveness, using the *Board Effectiveness Audit* as the guide.

In this story, we'll highlight the leadership teams in Castleberry ISD and Northside ISD. Look for profiles of the other districts cited by the Good Governance Matters Recognition Program in upcoming editions of *Texas Lone Star*.

The Calendar in Castleberry

In Castleberry ISD, finding a means to ensure the leadership team stayed on course to maintain its strategic goals proved the key to success. The board and superintendent had a clear vision of what they needed to accomplish, but ensuring they kept on track was a team priority.

The answer: a calendar.

"We started the process in October 2001," said Castleberry ISD Superintendent Gary Jones. "It took three years, and we tried to hit the things we could all agree on. We had to make several changes to what we were doing. It was a growth process, and growth is difficult. The thing that really crystallized us the most was the annual calendar we developed. It modified what we were doing extensively. We made it a point to tie policy and goals to everything that goes on that calendar."

"An ongoing feature of our board is giving attention to the way we do business," said Castleberry ISD Board member David Holder. "Along with monitoring various facets of the district, we also evaluate and monitor ourselves, looking for better methods and more efficient procedures. We have employed several methods to do this, including the *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit* and composing our own Board Operating Procedures manual. These evaluation tools have helped us focus on our mission, goals, and strategies as we worked to align all dimensions of the school district to them."

Aside from developing an annual activities calendar and creating a Board Operating Procedures manual, team discussions sparked by the *Audit* led the Castleberry team into areas not previously explored.

"The *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit* led our board to evaluate and discuss corners of our district's systems that may otherwise have received little or no attention," Holder explained. "At points along the way in applying the *Audit*, we came to items we could not check off. This identified areas needing attention and often modification. We then worked together to address these areas."

HOW DID THESE FIVE DISTRICTS HIT THE TARGET? ALTHOUGH SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES DIFFER WITH EACH LEADERSHIP TEAM MILIEU, ONE FACTOR REMAINED CONSTANT—EACH MEMBER WORKED TOWARD THE TEAM GOAL OF MEASURABLE EFFECTIVENESS, USING THE BOARD EFFECTIVENESS AUDIT AS THE GUIDE.

For district leadership teams attempting to monitor those hard-to-quantify areas of oversight, Holder suggests delving into the *Audit*.

"I recommend the *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit* as a tool to identifying areas of board operations and relations that need attention," he said. "After completing the *Audit* initially, our board is periodically reviewing the sections again to ensure that we are still on track. The *Audit* prompted healthy discussions about our operating procedures that led us to streamline our procedures, focus our attention, and be a more productive board. Periodically discussing our procedures and more precisely defining our purpose mean we get more business done in less time and with a sharper focus."

Jones agreed; periodic review is key. "We review the annual calendar quarterly. Also, after we finish the *Audit*, we go back each year and review to see if we are really doing what we said we were going to do."

No Doubts in Northside

Commitment to effective leadership in Northside ISD is practically a given; each member of the district leadership team understands the vital importance of vision, proactive involvement, and consistent maintenance of adherence to district goals—as evidenced by member participation in governance training and professional leadership opportunities.

"One of the first steps that Northside ISD took to improve our district governance was the recognition and agreement by all our trustees and the superintendent that good governance was a critical success factor to achieving the district's vision and goals," said Northside ISD Board President Bobby Blount. "The trustees personally accepted the responsibility to improve themselves, as well as to support the improvement of the whole board.

"Again, we had one hundred percent participation at the TASB/TASA Convention last year. Prior to the Convention, the board identified, discussed, and assigned training sessions that we should attend to improve our governance," Blount added. "Our board has also committed to supporting and learning more about good governance through interactions and leadership roles with other committees and groups. Katie Reed serves as president-elect for TASB; I serve as president of the Bexar County School Board Presidents' Coalition; our superintendent, Dr. John Folks, is a highly visible education leader in Texas. He is sought for his opinion and guidance by the Legislature, coalitions, and professional associations."

The leadership and training opportunities paid dividends, Blount noted, when it came time to address tough issues at home.

"For the past two years, funding has been a high-priority concern of our district, as it has been for most school districts," he said. "Our board acted to be proactive in finding solutions to this issue. We worked as a team to make the difficult decisions to cut costs. Each board member

faced the difficult challenge of knowing that one or more of these reductions impacted a funding area that they did not want to see reduced. However, we all worked together and did what was best for all Northside students. This positive teamwork helped the public and Northside ISD employees understand and support the board's decisions."

Longtime trustee Reed noted that working closer together as a team, with a clear vision in mind, makes an important difference in board effectiveness. "Serving on the Northside ISD Board for 15 years and helping in the development of our first Strategic Plan to being involved with numerous processes over the years, which include the *Audit*, I have seen us reach a better understanding of how to work as a team of eight to ensure that the children in our district are served by board members who are there for the right reasons. Our students always come first, and we are also accountable to our taxpayers."

Superintendent Folks agrees. "The Northside ISD School Board operates like a school board should. Overseeing the direction of this large enterprise (74,000 students and 10,000 employees in 99 schools) is a mammoth responsibility that our trustees take very seriously. The trustees provide a framework for accountability and set policies that always focus on what is best for the children. One word that describes this board is 'team.'"

Taking Time Out for the Big Picture

Aside from using the *Audit* and taking advantage of training, leadership, and networking opportunities, Blount suggested that boards simply take time out to refocus on the big picture.

"All boards should schedule a time to talk about what is good governance and why it is important to them," he said. "The discussion should allow for each individual to discuss or at least think about how they are currently supporting good governance and what they can do to improve."

Look for further examples of board effectiveness from Big Spring, Richardson, and Weatherford ISDs, also cited by the TASB Good Governance Matters Recognition Program, in upcoming editions.★

Roger White is managing editor of Texas Lone Star.

TASB BOARD EFFECTIVENESS AUDIT EXCERPTS

According to the *TASB Board Effectiveness Audit*, "To be successful over the long haul in promoting increased student achievement, the board must govern with vision, knowledge, and consistency."

Following are excerpts from the *Board Effectiveness Audit*, designed to provide district leadership teams a road map to measurable success:

Effective boards are marked by certain characteristics:

1. They have embraced a vision and a set of clearly defined priorities for the district that structure both the board's decision making and the work of the district staff. Vision and goals ensure both the district and the board have a clear focus for their efforts.
2. They have a clear picture of what their work entails. That is, they understand their job relative to the work of others and know the tools at their disposal for performing the job.
3. They have formalized their work. That is, they have developed and follow clearly defined procedures and schedules for doing their work.
4. They foster, through their own practices, the free flow of information within the community. The free flow of information ensures the community is informed about and involved in the district's work.

NATURE OF THE AUDIT

The *Audit* is quite limited in scope. It is divided into three parts. The first two focus on the board's most basic responsibility—the duty to govern and oversee the management of the district. The third focuses on the board's internal operations. All three address practices related to promoting good communication.

1. **Planning and Governance.** The board performs many different tasks in governing the district, from adopting policy to approving a budget to hiring and evaluating a superintendent. The *Audit* focuses exclusively on one aspect of the board's governing responsibility—the establishment and dissemination of a vision and goals for the district. The *Audit* concentrates on these tasks because they provide a framework for all other governing tasks the board performs. If these tasks are not fully defined, systematically fulfilled, and carefully communicated, the board's and the district's effectiveness are compromised. TASB's work with boards in recent years suggests that many boards could benefit from a more fully defined and formalized conception of the vision and goal-setting task.
2. **Oversight of Management.** Oversight of management is a critical board function. However, TASB's work with boards suggests that few boards have developed either a clear picture of what this function entails or clearly defined procedures for carrying it out. The *Audit* offers a picture of this function and a short enumeration of effective practices in overseeing management. This is the area of the *Audit* likely to require the most work by boards and superintendents before they will be able to check off the items.
3. **Board-Superintendent Team Operations.** The third section of the *Audit* focuses not on a board duty but on basic board operations. The items in this section address how fully the board has formalized its work procedures and the process of reviewing its own effectiveness. TASB has found that the more fully the board has formalized and documented certain procedures and the more systematically the board reviews these procedures, the more efficiently the board works.