



This bulletin, produced by TASB Leadership Team Services, examines research and shares philosophies to inform and promote exceptional governance within school boards across Texas.

The Importance of the Trustee Role

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Explaining the difference

“Trustee” and “delegate” may seem like interchangeable terms to some people, but in reality, they mean different things because they operate in different ways. We know from political conventions that a delegate is selected to vote as they are told. Much differently, a trustee is selected to exercise sound judgement and act in the best interest of those they serve. So what does that mean for school board members, and which role should they prioritize?

Shifting the mindset

The longer one serves as a public school board member, the more likely they are to think of themselves as a trustee instead of a delegate. Research shows that when school board members think of themselves as trustees there is better teamwork within the board, more cooperation with the superintendent, and a stronger focus on student achievement.

In 2013, I surveyed school board members in Washington state. This was part of a larger study exploring the factors and sources school board members consider when evaluat-

ing a superintendent. The research showed that the longer one serves on a school board, the more likely they think of their role as a trustee.

Embracing the trustee role

A trustee mindset is very important when it comes to effective school governance. School boards are entrusted with a community’s two most precious resources—its children and its money. Public school governance is not exceptional when decisions are made based on majority public opinion. Majority public opinion rarely represents the best interest of all children, it tends to relate more to our past than our children’s future, and usually serves some students, but doesn’t account for all.

School board members committed to the best outcomes for each and every child recognize the path to fulfilling that vision requires a commitment to a trustee mindset, decisions, and actions. This is not groupthink or unanimity on every decision. It is okay to disagree in the boardroom. When operating effectively in trustee mode, board

members contribute their individual thinking while maintaining a radical commitment to the goals of the whole board.

My research suggested that board members who think of themselves as trustees are not only more likely to support recommendations of superintendents but also more likely to hold the superintendent accountable for student achievement. These are actions related to eXceptional Governance that improve outcomes for students. Exceptional school boards function as trustees, at least most of the time. There may be times they choose to function as delegates, but that is an intentional action to accomplish the goals of the board of trustees.

Interested in learning more about eXceptional Governance? Be sure to check out the strand of XG sessions being offered at this year’s SLI.