We’ll Take Responsibility, Part Two

By Orin Moore, Board Consultant

In part one of “We’ll Take Responsibility,” we analyzed a board’s bold expectation that the superintendent let the board take ultimate responsibility for the district’s performance. In this final segment of the two-part series, we’ll look at the superintendent’s response to the board’s expectation.

When I visit districts, I make it a point to ask superintendents what compelled them to pursue a career in education. Without fail, a passion for learning and helping students succeed always tops the list. Our superintendents want students to succeed. Period.

Because superintendents want students to succeed, you can bet that they will be investing all the energy and resources they have into addressing hurdles that stand between students and success. When a board is willing to take ultimate responsibility for district success, that board is committing itself to understanding and overcoming those hurdles.

So, who is uniquely and deliberately positioned to educate the board on those hurdles and challenges? The superintendent is. Whether it’s the superintendent directly or one of his or her employees, the superintendent bears the responsibility to educate the board on critical district matters that threaten success. Boards need superintendents to educate them on critical matters; boards don’t need superintendents to educate them on matters the board simply wants to hear or prefers to hear. Boards need to hear the truth. When a board has committed itself to learning about what’s critical in a district, the superintendent is able to respond optimistically and enthusiastically. He or she knows the board acknowledges and shares the burden for addressing hurdles to district success.

This was exactly the case in the session we’ve been reviewing. When the superintendent heard the board’s desire to take ultimate responsibility for district success, the superintendent began to talk about his willingness to provide the board with assessments of district systems. He asked them what kinds of questions they had about systems and performance. He mentioned that there will be a lot going on, but that he would prioritize getting them answers to important questions they had regarding assessments and progress. In short, it was clear that the superintendent was eager to provide the board with whatever information it needed because the board was sincerely concerned with the kinds of issues that kept the superintendent and his team awake at night. Can you think of a board that would not want a superintendent to be that transparent and supportive in helping the board practice informed oversight?

Our bonus scenario involves another superintendent who responded enthusiastically when his board committed to owning and tackling the district’s greatest challenges. After reviewing performance data with the board, he encouraged the board to adopt very specific goals and targets for the district. Missing the mark on a specific target would be painfully obvious in comparison to missing a safer, fluffier target that lacked specificity. Nonetheless, the superintendent confidently set specific targets having a board that was both fully aligned with district challenges and committed to taking responsibility for the district’s success.

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Truly embracing responsibility for district performance might require superintendents and trustees to thoughtfully review their expectations. If it has been a while since your team had such a review, consider setting aside time to do so soon!

Winter Governance and Legal Seminar To-Do List

Planning for the 21st annual Winter Governance and Legal Seminar (WGLS) is officially under way. Scheduled for March 1–3 in Galveston, WGLS offers focused training for both new and experienced board members and a strand of sessions specifically designed to address the needs of small and rural districts. Student Voices take center stage at WGLS, so you won’t want to miss the student panel and presentations made by students across the state. Take note of the following important dates leading up to the event:

- October 1: Program applications accepted
- January 9: Housing opens at 9 a.m.
- January 24: Registration opens

Visit [tasb.org/wgls](http://tasb.org/wgls) for more information and to see highlights from last year’s seminar. Watch for the WGLS brochure in next month’s newsletter packet.

On the Road Again (a special edition by Lockhart ISD)

*By Brenda Spillmann, Board President; Susan K. Bohn, Superintendent, Lockhart ISD*

Hearing that board leadership really does impact student performance piqued our interest. The open-mindedness and willingness of each trustee to come together with the goal of improving student achievement, above everything else, made it happen.

While board trainings at conferences are certainly valuable and necessary, we were interested in training that the entire board could do together, alongside administrators, at home. Given some prior difficulties and instability in governance in the district, we saw the value in ongoing team-building over a period of months that coalesced the board behind a focus on student performance and actually produced measurable results.

We started our XG Board Development journey with TASB consultants helping us to understand the research that shows that the behavior of a school board has an effect on how students achieve. Working through the program has been paramount to understanding and exploring what is at stake and what is possible. We spent a significant amount of time analyzing our student data. We discussed in depth the learning and teaching initiatives in the district that are designed to improve student performance so that trustees would know, specifically, how we will attack our challenges.

For our district, it was time to shift to a true focus on student outcomes rather than on simply completing activities. We now have clear and concise goals for student performance for the 2017–18 school year. We are finishing up our XG sessions in the next two months with an eye toward understanding, agreeing on, and committing to what the work of the superintendent-board team must be doing during the school year and beyond so that we reach the student performance expectations we have established. All that we do will be focused on our student targets.

As the school year lies in front of us, our XG work has helped us, in a collaborative and positive environment, create a roadmap that focuses our work as a team on students, and on the future. We believe that this work has provided our trustees a true understanding of their role in student learning, and better connects their work to the work of our staff.