

Audubon Center of the North Woods
***The Sounding Board* – Promoting Quality Charter School Governance**

TOPIC: Board Purpose and Training

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“It never ceases to amaze me how many governance teams have confused success with compliance.”
– Tim Quinn, 2010

I recently spent a year with the Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW) Charter School Division (CSD) as part of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) Innovation in Education Fellowship. The fellowship, which was created in partnership with the University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Affairs, is designed to introduce emerging public policy leaders to charter school authorizing. Over the course of the year, I have been attending board meetings, reviewing board meeting minutes, and helping to write performance reports. I have done site visits to schools, attended trainings, and worked side-by-side with people who have taught me much about charter schools and governance. This installment of *The Sounding Board* was born from these experiences and focuses on what I have learned about the purpose of charter school boards and the training of those boards.

In order to more adequately understand board members' perceptions of their role on the board and the training that they are receiving, ACNW designed a survey and sent it to the over 200 board members at all 34 ACNW authorized schools. The survey had 28 questions and was broken into two sections: in the first section respondents filled out information regarding their opinion on the purpose of board training and any training opportunities they have had; in the second part of the survey, respondents answered questions regarding what they believed their purpose was and if they were fulfilling their role as board members. We received over 60 responses, which helped frame this issue of *The Sounding Board*.

It is often said that the role of a board member is a balancing act, as they must prepare for a sustainable future by adopting governance and financial management policies, as well as make sure the school uses resources in a way that advances its mission. This seemingly daunting task is often made easier by participating in ongoing training. Additionally, training creates a culture of continuous learning at the head of an organization and helps to set a tone of commitment to self-initiated, continuous learning for all members of the school community, from board members to directors to teachers to students. Moreover, additional training provides the opportunity for board members to explore and bring to the table ideas and issues that might not have been previously considered or discussed. Lastly, training beyond the minimum required by statute sets a tone of striving towards continuous improvement, and it gives boards the tools they need to carry out their purpose and ultimately their mission. In this paper, I will be discussing the role of charter school boards and how the training that boards engage in will help to guide that purpose.

Since defining your purpose in an organization is the first step to deciding which actions will allow you to realize the organization's broader mission, it is important that all board members be able to articulate their purpose. When asked, "What would you say is the purpose of your board?" school board members responded to ACNW's survey with comments from "deciding on important policies, plans, and outcomes" to one-word answers like "governance." While these are all important, they are not the reason that the board exists. According to Brian Carpenter in his book, *Charter School Board University*, the purpose of a charter school board is to "represent the taxpayers' interests."

While it is important that school board members ensure that public dollars are being invested wisely, I would suggest that the purpose of your school board must also relate to student achievement and outcomes. In addition to this, school board members must understand that they are the representatives of the taxpayers, which Carpenter says includes having “established avenues for regular, meaningful dialogue with the community regarding district directions.”

In order to fulfill the purpose of your board, Charter Board Partners (a nonprofit committed to strengthening the governance and quality of charters) states that you must adhere to the six standards of effective governance:

1. Focus relentlessly on student achievement.
 - a. Govern to fulfill the mission of the school and the promises of the charter.
 - b. Know whether students are on track for high-level achievement.
2. Ensure exceptional school leadership.
 - a. Hire and support a strong school leader.
 - b. Evaluate and hold the school leader accountable.
3. Commit to exemplary governance.
 - a. Build and maintain a high-functioning and engaged board.
 - b. Implement best governance practices.
4. Act strategically.
 - a. Determine the strategic direction for the school.
 - b. Respect the balance between oversight and management.
5. Raise and use resources wisely.
 - a. Manage resources responsibly.
 - b. Expand awareness and raise funds.
6. Maintain legal and regulatory compliance.
 - a. Minimize risks.
 - b. Meet expectations.

In addition to adhering to the standards of effective governance, the board must also consider how meetings are conducted, as this relates to a board’s purpose as well. Even before the actual board meeting occurs, members should make sure that meetings are conducted in a space that’s accessible to the public, are advertised adequately, and occur at a time when most people are able to attend. There should also be at least one complete board packet available for public inspection. Board meetings should not be seen as a compliance checklist or onerous meetings filled only with director updates, but rather should be a time where the board engages in strategic planning as well as governance. This is because board meetings, in the words of John Carver, “are not about running an organization but about what the organization should be running toward.”

Another theme that I would like to highlight is whether or not the board questions administrative proposals and requires the school director or other leadership to defend recommendations. From both the survey feedback and the written feedback, many board members communicated that they feel they are simply rubber-stamping administrative proposals and not pushing back. One board member commented, “The board is set up to simply act on what has been put in place and offer[s] no opportunity for the board to be creative or innovative in servicing [the school].” Another said, “I feel like a ‘yes’ man. We just approve everything because [our director] recommends it, so it must be good.” Tim Quinn states that, while at times difficult, “finding the right interdependence balance involves a combination of factors, including the competence and experience of the [director], the competence and experience of the board [...] and the commitment that the [director] and the board chair have made to the continuing growth and development of fellow team members.” And while

delegating work to the Executive Director is encouraged, it is the board's role to grapple with and discuss issues related to student achievement, finance, governance, strategic direction (including growth, expansion, mission, vision), complaints, and responses to authorizer notices or inquiries. Additional training opportunities can help in this regard as training not only provides information on new topics, but also allows board members to gain confidence and develop skills.

To further support this, many board members see training and team building as important strategies to improve board effectiveness. Our survey data showed the majority of responses to the question "How can your board's performance be improved in the next year?" focused on increasing training and improving board dynamics. One respondent stated, "board[s] need to come together and be a team away from simply attending meeting and/or training. In every team-building [exercise], cohesiveness must be considered for it to be effective." In contrast to this, two-thirds of respondents stated that "[their] board participates in training primarily for the purpose of fulfilling statutory training requirements," and almost 30% of respondents do not believe that board training opportunities are regularly provided to improve board members' skills and knowledge.

In order to fully engage with the six standards listed above, board members need to engage in training that is not limited to statutory requirements, but also includes reflection on board processes, their own professional development, and setting board norms/expectations that are put into policies. MN Statute 124E.07 only states that board members "shall attend annual training" and "new board members shall attend initial training on the board's role and responsibilities, employment policies and practices, and financial management." These are very broad requirements and have been left up to interpretation by boards. Therefore, it is suggested that school boards create a board development plan focused on their own members' professional learning and growth. As Tim Quinn states, "this can range from attending state or national conferences to committing to regular book study discussion as a group, or to bringing in experts on various aspects of governance during quarterly retreats." (It is important to note that a school should have a policy related to reimbursements for board travel and training expenses.) The school director can also make a point to regularly include journal articles or other "learning pieces" for discussion in the monthly board packets.

Board training begins at the moment a board member is seated (if not before). Onboarding new board members is a critical first step in the training process. While there are statutory requirements that outline required initial training for new board members, which must start within six months and be completed within 12 months of being seated, there are no statutory guidelines surrounding board member orientation. In order to adequately onboard new members and provide reference documents for existing members, the board should consider creating a board binder. Some important things to include in this binder are:

Section 1: Board Member Background

- Board member contact information
- Board member term limits
- Bios of board members
- Board job descriptions, if applicable

Section 2: Meetings

- Agendas and meeting minutes for the past year of board meetings
- Board meeting schedule for the year

Section 3: Board Member Responsibilities & Bylaws

- Board responsibilities
- Current strategic plan
- Current bylaws

Section 4: Financials

- Approved current year's budget
- Monthly financial reports
- Most recent financial audit

Section 5: Board Committees

- Summary description of each committee, and members
- Year-long schedule for committee meetings
- Committee meeting minutes

Section 6: Other School Materials

- Organization mission and vision statements
- Organizational historic timeline/list of accomplishments
- Charter contract
- Authorizer contact information
- Most recent authorizer evaluations
- Current school calendar with all school events
- Summaries of each program, after school, etc.

Section 7: Archives

- Past long-range strategic plans
- Past years' budgets
- Annual reports
- Educational articles on board governance

Being on a school board is a privilege and great responsibility. It is an opportunity for a parent, teacher, or member of the community to have a positive impact on the school and hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. Given this, board members need to understand and embrace an active role that is critical to the school's governance, strategic planning, success and longevity. While school board service is voluntary, your work on the school board is not limited to the monthly one- to two-hour board meetings. When you took the oath of office or accepted your role on the board, you promised the students, the broader community, and taxpayers that you would execute your role with fidelity. Continuous learning and improvement are a way to help fulfill the purpose of the board and school, rather than a way to simply comply with MN statute. If, as a board member, you cannot commit to training that helps you fulfill your responsibility, you should consider your role on the board and the example it sets for all individuals within the school.

I have attended multiple board meetings this past year at multiple ACNW-authorized schools, and I have interviewed and talked with dozens of board members during this time. While I have seen the need and opportunity for increased training to support effective governance, I have also seen countless examples of dedication and commitment to schools and students. The work charter school board members take on is admirable, important, and makes a difference in the lives of hundreds of families. Thank you.

Additional Resources

1. Quinn, Tim, and Michelle E. Keith. *Peak Performing Governance Teams: Creating an Effective Board/ Superintendent Partnership*. Old Mission, Michigan: Quinn and Associates, 2010. Print.
2. Carpenter, Brian L., Phd. *Charter Board University: An Introduction to Effective Charter School Governance*. 2nd ed. National Charter Schools Institute. Print.
3. [http://www.mncharterschools.org/uls/resources/Spring 2016 Board Training Online 3.pdf](http://www.mncharterschools.org/uls/resources/Spring%202016%20Board%20Training%20Online%203.pdf)
4. https://charterboards.org/assets/misc/cbp_standards_1-21-15.pdf
5. http://www.iasb.com/pdf/found_prin.pdf
6. <http://robertsrules.org/indexprint.html>
7. <http://www.boardontrack.com/board-effectiveness-quiz>
8. <https://www.charterschoolcenter.org/webinar/board-governance-101>
9. <https://www.charterschoolcenter.org/webinar/fix-your-board-meetings-strengthen-your-boards>

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