

School Boards – Are the Key to Raising Academics

By Blaine Helwig

Although I am ‘officially’ retired, I continue to regularly watch the televised local school board meetings. The experience can be both fascinating and perplexing simultaneously when Board Trustees continue to approve senior management recommendations with surface analysis and no program evaluation. This process continues even after the previous multitudes of multi-million-dollar, curricular programming has not been effective over the last half century. Undeniably, there exists no entertainment value in observing the continued trustee acquiescence to senior management’s ideological curricular programming and initiatives when so many needy at-risk children are adversely affected, and large sums of taxpayer monies are not wisely spent. Of course, have no doubt that senior management possesses good intentions. However, senior administrators in the public school system across this country continue with impunity and permit ideological beliefs to eclipse the pragmatic reality of students’ social and academic needs. Unfortunately, after a long career as a classroom teacher, an administrator, and nearly a decade of consulting work, I have learned that this situation is the norm and not the exception.



However, school board trustees’ continued rubber stamping of these initiatives without associated performance begs the following question to be answered. *Why is this waste of taxpayer funds continuing school year after school year?*

Three Entities that CAN Press Real Change in the Public Schools

There are three governing ‘powers that be’ that can influence traditional school districts: state education agencies, state legislatures and local school boards. Yet, it is the local school board that has the most influence and impact in raising academics in small or large school districts – far more than the other two entities! *Why?*

- **First**, school districts are classified as **independent** entities in the United States. In fact, in legal terms, they are specifically referred to as a ‘Local Education Agency’ or LEA. *An LEA means a public board of education that provides administrative control and direction for public elementary and secondary schools. LEAs can be traditional public-school districts, intermediate units or charter public schools.*

Now, **state legislatures** can pass laws that affect LEAs, but most of them are easily sidestepped by a school district since they do not pertain directly to instructional and classroom operations. Additionally, the school district monitors the implementation and quality controls of any legislative edict. Nevertheless, the state legislature invariably allows LEAs to maintain their traditional **independent** status despite chronically low achievement rates school year after school year – mainly for political and historical reasons.



Surprisingly, a **state’s education agency** also has limited control. State education agencies release student learning standards (CCSS and TEKS) as well as accountability campus and district ratings, but the latter can be practically viewed as a paper tiger. For one, the campus accountability rating standards are an incredibly low bar, and the LEAs have time on their side – up to five years or more – with their struggling

academic campuses. Moreover, LEA's can usually by-pass most of the state agency's accountability since the state's educational entity does not possess the personnel, transformative knowledge, or funding to effectively take over a small rural district or heaven forbid, a large urban school district – like Houston Independent School District (HISD). Urban school districts are enormous from a geographical, personnel, student enrollment perspective with years of status quo operations and culture firmly in place. At the end of the day, state agencies do **not** possess the bandwidth to significantly change curricular operations to make a difference – it is essentially business as usual with the same teachers and administrative personnel in place throughout the district. I believe this will be the case for Houston ISD as well, in the long-run.

- **Second**, the school board (usually consisting of 7 to 9 members) has only one employee – the superintendent. This situation gives them real power, influence, and authority to directly and immediately change things at any school district in a given school year, if they so choose. ****Ironically, the school board does NOT need to know what to change to accelerate student performance. That is NOT their job.**** Their job is to hold their one employee accountable to do so! That responsibility to raise academic achievement falls on the head of the superintendent. At least that is one of the major reasons or implicit beliefs that superintendents and senior administrators are paid an exorbitant annual salary in comparison to classroom teachers of any experience level.

Why Don't School Boards Hold Their One Employee Accountable for Academic Performance?

That is an interesting question. Why do school board members **NOT** do their one real job – the one job they were elected to do? As candidates during the election cycle, many prospective board members state that their primary focus as an elected Trustee will be to improve student social and academic outcomes. However, once elected and on the school board dais, they do not. It is not an overwhelming management task since they have only one employee – so management scope of personnel is not an issue!

Then, why don't they do it? The answer is a little complicated, but let's list the primary reasons why elected school board trustees 'seemingly' shirk this important management responsibility of their ONE employee.

The School Board **DOES** **NOT** need to know what to change in the schools to accelerate and heighten student academic performance. That is **NOT** their job! The responsibility and accountability to raise student achievement falls on the head of the superintendent.

- A.) School board interviews of incoming superintendents is, at best, superficial when discussing the mechanics to raise student achievement. Commonly during superintendent interviews, school board members are influenced more by personality or charisma or other qualitative factors than the candidates' history of proven academic success as a previous campus or district administrator. In a sentence, they do not know what questions to ask the candidate to pin them down on their 'plan' to elevate student outcomes **before** hiring them.
- B.) Frequently, school board members lack first-hand knowledge of how public schools operate in either district/campus management and/or curriculum. Since they possess little fundamental understanding of the paramount social and academic issues – especially the endemic environment of Title 1 schools, trustees do not comprehend the merry-go-round curricular regurgitation process that occurs every decade or so. Realistically, they are elected volunteers trying to do their level best, and they simply do not grasp the chronic academic constancy of rubber-stamping non-accountable curricular and equity program proposals. In a sentence, trustees do not know what questions to ask superintendents and their central office

administrators to hold them accountable on their program initiatives and curricular programming **after** hiring the superintendent.

C.) School board members rarely grasp a superintendent's short-term personal financial goal, and due to that goal, they must have specific accountability goals beginning in year one after hiring a new superintendent. The retirement benefits of campus and district administrators in this country is nothing short of extraordinary. An administrator can retire with full benefits with a very large retirement salary and health care as early as 52 years of age in many states. The larger the administrator's annual average salary over a 3-to-5-year vesting period leads to a higher annual retirement salary for the rest of their life. For example, if an urban superintendent is making a ballpark \$300,000 yearly salary, they will receive approximately 210,000 dollars per year upon retirement for the rest of their life – plus health care. But it gets better! They can retire and earn more money plus their annual pension at a university or an education related job. Thus, their personal financial goal is to vest that annual salary over the 3 to 5 years required time – regardless of the academic achievement during their tenure. Hence, time is on the superintendent's side – not the trustees. A savvy superintendent can delay and sidestep board members for years until they are in a vested financial position that few Americans dream possible in their retirement years. Currently, these large retirement salaries/pensions are paid to the mass of school and district administrators without dramatically altering the academic plight of a campus or campuses in those professional capacities. They are only required to 'hang out' and put their time-in an administrative capacity for the required length of time. Thus, there is never an incentive to raise district or campus academics – the only incentive was to vest their retirement benefits. Rarely do trustees fully grasp the personal financial situation of superintendents and administrators at any level, or they would place more professional accountability on them.

D.) After the new superintendent is hired, he or she will cater to and attempt to befriend school board trustees. A superintendent of any experience level is acutely aware that the 7 to 9 school board officials have the power to terminate. It is harder to terminate an employee when a strong personal relationship exists, and it is human nature for trustees to want to believe the 30,000 feet 'positive and ambiguous educationese' argot that is constantly disseminated – despite chronically low campus academic performance every school year. Additionally, trustees perpetually fail to require a timeline for expected performance results on any new initiatives proposed by a new or existing superintendent. Trustees invariably require no program evaluation or accountability measures on senior or district administrative personnel at all levels. Accountability is difficult when performance outcomes were never stated or linked to any administrator in the first place. Generally, this situation is the most common mistake trustees make during their tenure on a school board. If a school board term is 2 to 4 years, the superintendent can be assured that new and inexperienced board members are elected while they are superintendent – and the pseudo-relationship game begins anew.



E.) Politics and hidden agendas of school board members may also play a role during their tenures. It is not common, but some school board members desire to use a school board seat as a steppingstone to higher public office at the city council, state house or congress. In these cases, they approach their role as a school board trustee with added caution, so events in their term do not negatively impact their own political future. As expected, they refuse to hold superintendents accountable to the degree that they normally would.

What are the Questions that the Trustees should ask the Superintendent and District Administrators?

Let's provide some basic questions that should be asked of superintendents – some before and some after they hire the top administration official in a traditional school district.

When district administrators propose specific academic curriculum programs to address equity or the achievement gap between the high and low elementary socioeconomic settings, a systematic evaluation process should be established that ensures that the proposed curricular program is adequately vetted prior to approval. To aid in this evaluation process, I believe several helpful questions board members may consider asking are as follows:

- 1.) *What (qualitatively) is this curricular program or initiative trying to accomplish with regard to academic achievement this school year and the next two?* It is important to define the objective AND only provide a three-year window (maximum) with intermediate benchmarks to determine if the reformation process is on schedule.
- 2.) *Why is this curricular program or initiative being selected or promoted? What current evidence is there that it has raised student outcomes in the past?* The answers to these questions must be specific to avoid the curriculum model ‘merry-go-round’ that regurgitates every decade without ever producing increases in student outcomes.
- 3.) *What will be the academic outcome of this curricular program, or what level of outcomes are expected?* There must be a measurable program evaluation – district wide at both low-income and medium to high-income campuses.
- 4.) *Who is the responsible party that has accountability for the curricular initiative? Who else’s job is on the line beginning with the superintendent on this proposal? If senior district administrators are not held accountable, then what is the point of their high salaries and job titles? It is also important that if senior district administrators are NOT held accountable by the Board, it is an absolute certainty that campus administrators will NOT be monitored closely on implementation and fidelity. High annual salaries of the administrators are guaranteed, but there is absolutely no fear of failure.*
- 5.) *When a new superintendent is proposing replacing existing senior management with his choices, the trustees should ask, “What are these 6 figures plus salaried administrators bringing to the academic table in their employment capacity (besides being loyal to you)?”*

These are basic questions that any professional should be asked in any capacity, but especially if they are well compensated in annual salary, retirement benefits and a major influence on children’s future educational and economic lives. The specific answers to these questions should be concrete ‘at ground zero’ – highly specific steps and timelines – without ambiguity by both the superintendent and district administrators.



It is important to emphasize that the school board must press senior management to create formative evaluations during the school year, so a late April or May standard assessment is not a final performance “autopsy” of that school year that is surprising, disappointing, and affords no time for adjustment. It is also strongly recommended to **NOT** permit senior management to use their own evaluation tool in isolation without standardized assessment data directly comparing student outcomes. **Why?** Standardized assessments are an evaluation metric of district-level implemented curricular initiatives or programs, allowing campuses of all socioeconomic levels to be analyzed objectively and comparatively since all students are assessed with the same metric at the same time. In doing so, equity outcomes can be more reasonably and objectively assessed.

Lots of Taxpayer Dollars Spent and Never any Results!



Historically, LEAs high level of independence and local control was much less of an issue when I was beginning my professional career over forty years ago than it is currently. In the 1970's and 80's, multitudes of our workforce could still earn decent wages in various manufacturing industries, and high school graduates (or drop-outs) could earn a standard of living that pragmatically created a middle-class income status. However, over the last 3 decades, workforce skills that earn competitive salaries are highly STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) related jobs. These positions require skill sets that are no longer assembly level work.

But the school districts continue to press program thinking as if the American physical plant manufacturing work environment still exists at the same levels as it did 3 to 4 decades ago. Moreover, the LEAs hidebound philosophical idolatry threaten more than just the adults they did not educate when they were students in their classrooms. Our public schools' graduate students at 18 years of age who are woefully unprepared in skill sets in a STEM workforce and a strong US dollar that negatively affects exports that has significantly eliminated or decimated domestic manufacturing work. Now, it is a problem – a big problem socially, economically and politically. The economic gap between American workers has widened to a much larger degree between the economic 'haves' and the 'have-nots' than it was only 3 to 4 decades ago. The cost of allowing ideological idealism and no accountability in our school system comes at a high cost when the workforce dynamics change.

So, then, why are superintendents hired, and what are they supposed to do in that administrative capacity, precisely? In short, a public-school district's main function is to prepare its students academically and socially for economic success and viability upon graduation. If a graduating high school senior elects to attend university or immediately enter the workforce, either way, they should be prepared with the academic skill sets to do so. But, if they are not, as many students are today, then there is a disconnect in their education somewhere from elementary to high school. If a school district has chronic student outcomes in math, reading, writing and science at their elementary schools, then it is all but a certainty that the secondary schools will also have depressed performance. This situation is all too common in the traditional school system; consequently, a superintendent candidate must have a specific, detailed plan with intended outcomes to rectify the poor performance. Moreover, their answers must make sense to the interviewing board of trustees and the consultant firm representing the district in the hiring process. If not, the trustees are for all practical purposes hiring an expensive figure head or physical plant manager.

The Problem with Superintendent Hires...

In the last three decades of professional work, I have never met one traditional public-school superintendent who understood specific implementation steps to reform Title 1 elementary school academics. The same is true for charter school founders, but at least charter founders do not bolt to greener pastures after 3 to 5 years. Founders have much more of a vested interest to raise academics, if their egos will allow them to be open to effective academic change, but this is NOT the case in traditional public-school systems. Administrative capacities at all management levels are temp jobs. There is not a long-term professional plan in traditional school districts – 'play the game' and 'kick the can down the road' until the administrator is financially vested at the retirement income, retires or accepts a position at another school district for more money. In reality there

is not one single incentive to raise academics in medium to large school districts. In fact, it has been my professional experience as both an administrator and a consultant that superintendents will fight ‘tooth and nail’ NOT to be held accountable for student outcomes because, quite frankly, they do not know what to do to raise them in the first place – despite annual salaries that range from 150,000 dollars upwards to a half-million dollars. Their job quickly evolves into a physical plant manager and high-priced cheerleader, until they leave for a new position, or they are forced out by a dissatisfied school board.

At that time, the Board begins a search for a new superintendent. Unfortunately, the Board invariably hires a “*New Boss – same as the Old Boss,*” and the same song and dance renews with their new employee for another three to five years. In general, school board members appear incapable of learning from their past hiring mistakes. It is as if the school board members intently, “*Want to get fooled, again!*” **Based on what?** Student outcomes have never dramatically risen regardless of the superintendent hiring in our public schools over the last 60 to 70 years. Between 30 to 50 percent (or more) of the students in those districts’ elementary schools cannot read or do math at grade level before or after the superintendent was hired. The student outcomes are invariably flat over the time period of their employment.



What can be done to Curb the Academic Problems in the Public School System?

First, the legal mechanics of LEAs must be changed despite the political pain in doing so by state legislatures. There has to be effective legislation that provides a State Education Agency the means to replace the school board with at least a minimum number of board members to hold a majority. There must be an established blue print to set in motion a series of steps to hold the superintendent and senior management administrators accountable or they are terminated without references. Although this may sound authoritative and undemocratic, children’s educational and economic lives are at stake here. We cannot in good conscience protect administrators making exorbitant salaries and retirement benefits when they continue to be ineffective at raising academics.

Second, school board members must do their job – no matter how unpleasant it is to them to be the supervisor of their one employee. They must ground their questioning of the superintendent in reality and common sense. For example, trustees cannot believe as gospel obvious mistruths such as students are not on grade-level in language acquisition or mathematics, but they will academically catch-up later when the school data does not support that conclusion. Trustees must show tough love and accountability during their tenure on the Board. The superintendent and their administrator tribe are not your friend, they are employees with a job to do. Make them do it, or let them find a new place to work where both the school board and the administrator will be happier. Children’s social and academic outcomes are the first priority in all ensuing conversations. School board members must do the work or let someone else have the trustee seat on the board that will.

Lastly, state legislatures need to change something that holds district and campus administrators accountable via some mechanism – school boards or not. There are two certitudes that can be stated with one hundred percent probability. One, any transformation of accountability and responsibility within the administrator ranks of the traditional public school system will **NOT** be initiated by a self-policing LEA. Two, administrators at every level should **NOT** be paid multiple times more money than classroom teachers, if they cannot produce results in those management capacities. The ball is in the legislatures’ court!