

Introduction

A Hanover Research (Hanover) member district is seeking to orient and develop new board members using a combination of in-person and digital communication with the goals of establishing positive working relationships and maintaining high board performance. To support this effort, Hanover has prepared the following collection of resources examining attributes and actions of high-performing boards, drawing on publications from both the corporate and education sectors.

Overview

These resources are designed to be shared with board members through email. District leaders can copy and paste one or more of the summaries into standalone emails or include the summaries as part of a larger newsletter. By including both the link and the key findings, board members can choose to review high-level takeaways or click through to read the entire source.

Resources are listed in no specific order by theme:

- Roles and Responsibilities;
- Communication and Relationships; and
- Board Effectiveness.

Recommended Resources

Roles and Responsibilities

["About School Board and Local Governance." National School Boards Association.](#)

This resource outlines the importance of board governance to education, identifying the following six reasons why local governance is the best governance method for public education:¹

- Education is not a line item in a school board's budget—it is the only item.
- The school board represents the community's voice in public education, providing citizen governance and knowledge of the community's resources and needs, and board members are the policy-makers closest to the student.
- The school board sets the standard for achievement in the school district, incorporating the community's view of what students should know and be able to accomplish at each grade level.
- The school board is accessible to everyone in the community and is accountable for the performance of the schools in the district.
- It is the community member's right as a voter to select new board members who will work diligently to provide an opportunity for students to receive a high-quality education, which will enable them to succeed in their career, college, and life.
- The school board is the community's education watchdog, ensuring that taxpayers get the most for their tax dollars.

[Griswold, J. and W. Jarvis. "Strive for the Best: Building and Maintaining an Excellent Board." Commonfund Institute. May, 2014.](#)

This report analyzes the role of nonprofit boards in relation to the concept of fiduciary duty, boards' responsibility to act as responsible representatives of the community. The authors identify three core fiduciary duties of board members:²

- Duty of Care: Board members have a duty to take their role seriously, including familiarizing themselves with relevant facts and using their best judgment in deliberations and decision-making.
- Duty of Loyalty: Board members have a duty to prioritize the organization's interests over personal interests and avoid or neutralize conflicts of interest, including recusing themselves from decisions in which they have a conflict of interest.
- Duty of Responsibility: Board members have a duty to ensure that the organization complies with its own by-laws and policies and with relevant laws and regulations.

[Curry, K. et al. "School Board Governance in Changing Times: A School's Transition to Policy Governance." *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 8:1, 2018.](#)

This article examines the implementation of Policy Governance at an anonymous independent school in the Midwest, drawing on interviews with board members and administrators. Interviewees reported that, although implementing Policy Governance was challenging, Policy Governance increased professionalism and creativity in the district and enabled district leaders to implement distributed leadership.

[Carver, J. and M. Carver. "Carver's Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations." *Policy Governance*. 2001.](#)

This article details the use of the Policy Governance model, one of the most widely used board governance models, in nonprofit and governmental organizations. In this model, the board represents the 'owners' of an organization, the community in the case of a nonprofit organization or government agency. Although the board has authority over and accountability for the organization, the board delegates most of this authority to executive leadership. The Policy Governance model distinguishes between ends, the results an organization is expected to achieve for the community, and means, the strategies by which the organization will achieve its ends. In the case of a school district, ends include "which students should acquire what knowledge at what cost," while means include decisions about the most effective ways to reach those ends, such as "the choice of reading program, teachers' credentials, and classroom management." Effective boards hold executives accountable for ends while avoiding excessive interference in means policies. The board is accountable for both means and ends, but Policy Governance distinguishes the types of policies boards set to govern ends and means. Policy Governance includes four policy types:³

- Ends Policies establish the organization's ends. These policies are prescriptive and positive, informing the CEO of the goals they are expected to reach.
- Governance Process Policies govern the board's internal work. Like Ends Policies, Governance Process Policies are prescriptive and positive, informing board members how they are expected to fulfill their roles.
- Board-Staff Linkage Policies govern the board's relationship with organizational leadership. Both Board-Staff Linkage Policies and Governance Process Policies are considered means policies because they inform board members how to accomplish board goals rather than what these goals are.
- Executive Limitations Policies are means policies that set limits on executives' discretion to accomplish ends, reflecting standards for ethical and prudent behavior. These policies are negative rather than positive, informing the CEO what means they are not allowed to use.

["Principles of Corporate Governance." *Business Roundtable*. 2016.](#)

This document developed by the Business Roundtable, an advocacy organization for publicly traded corporations, describes the role of boards and management in corporate governance, including recommendations for board committee structures and succession planning for senior management. The board's role includes:⁴

- Selecting the organizational CEO,
- Establishing and modeling an organizational commitment to ethical and legal behavior,
- Approving the strategic plan and monitoring its implementation
- Understanding risks to the organization and overseeing a risk management process,
- Reviewing plans for business resiliency such as cybersecurity and crisis management,
- Ensuring accurate and comprehensive financial reporting,
- Overseeing the allocation of resources and reviewing annual operating plans and budgets, and
- Overseeing a legal and ethical compliance program.

[Larcker, D. and B. Tayan. "Board of Directors: Duties and Liabilities." *Corporate Governance Research Initiative at Stanford Graduate School of Business*. 2020.](#)

This presentation provides a general overview of the role of boards of directors in a corporate setting. The presentation notes that boards have both an advisory and oversight mandate. In the advisory role, the board provides management with guidance regarding the organization's strategic direction and consults on operational issues. In the oversight role, the board holds management accountable for implementing policies and the efficient use of resources.

[“The Key Work of School Boards: Guidebook.” National School Boards Association. 2015.](#)

This document provides an overview of the essential responsibilities of school boards, with tools and guiding questions for boards to self-assess their effectiveness in the areas of vision, accountability, policy, community leadership, and relationships. The National School Boards Association recommends that boards develop mission and vision statements in collaboration with the community to build consensus around the district’s priorities and values. Mission and vision statements inform a strategic plan that operationalizes the district’s strategy to achieve priority goals and an accountability plan to monitor progress toward strategic plan goals.

[Maloney, R. “Four ‘Big Ideas’ of Board Governance.” National School Boards Association. June 1, 2020.](#)

This resource identifies four primary responsibilities of school boards:⁵

- The board advocates for the community’s priorities for education to district staff and policymakers at the state and federal levels.
- The board provides district leaders with operational guidance for managing the district effectively.
- The board ensures that the district is accountable to the public for achieving strategic goals in a manner that is acceptable to the community.
- The board orients itself to its role and responsibilities and organizes its work to ensure strategic governance.

Relationships and Communication

[“Communicating During the Board Meeting.” Oregon School Boards Association.](#)

This article provides suggestions for effective communication during board meetings. Recommendations focus on creating a welcoming environment for meeting attendees and using meetings to highlight the accomplishments of students and staff members. Recommendations also include engaging respectfully and professionally with meeting attendees and ensuring that discussions address issues rather than personalities.

[“Building and Maintaining Relationships in Your Community.” Colorado Association of School Boards.](#)

This article presents best practices for maintaining positive relationships between the school board and the community. The article recommends that boards adopt policies governing members’ communication with one another, district staff, and the public. The article further recommends that boards develop a strategic public relations plan that ensures two-way communication between boards and the community members. An effective public relations strategy helps the board align district goals with community expectations and demonstrates accountability to the community.

[“Course Materials: Building and Sustaining the Board/Executive Relationship.” California State Association of Counties Institute for Excellence in County Government.](#)

This course provides locally elected board members with guidance on building effective relationships with staff members. The course notes that both elected officials and professional staff play an important role in decision-making. Elected officials reflect the values and goals of their constituents while professional staff possess expertise in their field and the organization’s daily operations that can inform effective decisions. This course conceptualizes elected officials’ role as a bridge between the public and organizational staff. The organization’s chief executive serves a bridging role between elected officials and other staff members. In general, elected officials are primarily responsible for decisions about mission and policy, leveraging advice and recommendations from organizational staff. Staff are primarily responsible for administration and management, with elected officials providing oversight and suggesting changes.

[Hasson, R. “How to Resolve Board Disputes More Effectively.” MIT Sloan Management Review, October 1, 2006.](#)

This article reviews strategies for conflict resolution for boards in the corporate sector. The author recommends that boards take a preventative approach to dispute resolution, working with board members and executive leadership to identify challenges and disputes early and collaboratively addressing these challenges before they become severe. Boards can recruit an independent board ombudsperson who serves as a neutral and objective peer to resolve disagreements among board members and monitors trends within the board to identify potential challenges.

[Hill, M. "How to Build a Meaningful Relationship with Your School Board." ASCD. January 4, 2020.](#)

This article presents recommendations for district superintendents to foster positive relationships with board members. Recommendations include regularly attending board meetings and inviting board members to attend school events and participate in school activities. School boards can formalize engagement and support board development by creating a school board advisory unit (SBAU) composed of students, staff, administrators, and community members to provide their perspectives on issues before the board.

["Boardroom Disputes: How to Manage the Good, Weather the Bad, and Prevent the Ugly." International Finance Corporation and Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution, 2015.](#)

This guide provides best practices for managing conflict among board members in the corporate sector. It emphasizes that some level of disagreement is inevitable and healthy for an organization. Boards with no disagreement are likely failing to fulfill their oversight functions; however, disagreement becomes harmful when it prevents decision-making or leads to conflict and factionalism within the board. Boards facilitate effective dispute resolution by implementing general best practices for board governance, such as clarifying the roles of management and the board overall, establishing orderly internal processes, ensuring the proper flow of information, and developing formal dispute resolution processes. Individual board members can support positive conflict resolution by getting to know their colleagues personally and by developing the interpersonal skills needed for effective conflict resolution. When all board members develop skills such as managing strong emotions and disagreeing constructively, communication within the board improves, and a collegial and respectful culture emerges. This culture facilitates the positive and productive resolution of disputes and disagreements that arise in the board's work.

[Kakabadse, A. et al. "Conflict and Tension in the Boardroom: How Managing Disagreement Improves Board Dynamics." The Chartered Governance Institute of the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2017.](#)

This study draws on a database of interviews with members of around 5,500 international corporate boards to examine strategies used by boards to address conflict and tension among board members. Interviewees report that conflict within boards often involves issues of organizational purpose and competitive advantage. Board members distinguish between disagreement, which may be uncomfortable but is effectively addressed through debate and negotiation, and unproductive conflict. Disagreement can become disruptive when it remains unresolved and results in personality conflicts between board members. Board members manage disagreement by discussing areas of disagreement during board meetings and explicitly separating disagreements from personalities.

[Ondrovich, P. "'Hold Them, Fold Them, or Walk Away': Twelve Cardinal Rules for Dealing with School Board Conflict." American Association of School Administrators.](#)

This article discusses strategies for superintendents to manage conflict with board members. The author emphasizes the importance of engaging with the board as a whole rather than focusing on individual members and allowing board members to resolve internal conflicts. The author notes that an effective strategic plan helps focus the board's attention on strategic goals and supports data-driven policymaking.

["Six Tips for Smart School Boards." National School Public Relations Association. March, 2008.](#)

This article discusses the role of school boards in communicating with community members. The article presents the following suggestions for effective communication:⁶

- Hold yourselves responsible for communicating with and engaging your community.
- Recognize communication as an important management function and hold your administration accountable.
- Develop a strategic communication plan tied to your district's mission, goals, and objectives.
- Speak with one clear voice on behalf of your students and schools.
- Establish a culture of effective, two-way communication and engagement with all stakeholders.
- Demonstrate accountability through effective school governance standards supported by effective communication

Board Effectiveness

[Dervarics, C. and E. O'Brien. "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards." National School Boards Association Center for Public Education. 2019.](#)

This article reviews the empirical literature examining characteristics of school boards in high-achieving districts. The authors identify the following eight characteristics of effective boards:⁷

- Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
- Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
- Effective school boards are accountability-driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
- Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
- Effective boards are data-savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
- Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
- Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
- Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts.

[Smith, C. "Assessing Board Effectiveness: Resources for Boards of Trustees Self-Evaluation." Community College League of California. June, 2015.](#)

This document, prepared for boards of community colleges in California, provides resources to support the board self-evaluation process. The document recommends that boards adopt a self-evaluation policy with defined procedures for the annual evaluation process. As part of this process, boards should identify goals and priorities with defined benchmarks for annual progress toward goals at the beginning of each year. Boards can incorporate surveys into their self-evaluations to solicit feedback from multiple stakeholders.

[Sonnenfeld, J. "What Makes Great Boards Great." Harvard Business Review. September 1, 2002.](#)

This article contrasts effective and ineffective boards of directors in the corporate sector. The author concludes that board governance is effective when the board culture encourages honesty and open debate about strategic direction and the board possesses a relationship of mutual trust with executive leadership. Board effectiveness is hindered by groupthink or factional division that prevent board members from candidly debating strategic decisions. The author recommends that boards engage in an annual performance evaluation process to self-monitor their effectiveness.

[Sucher, S. and S. Gupta. "What Corporate Boards Can Learn from Boeing's Mistakes." Harvard Business Review. June 2, 2021.](#)

This article draws on a recent scandal affecting the aircraft manufacturer Boeing to identify lessons for effective board governance. The authors recommend that boards establish committees aligned with industry-specific needs, such as safety oversight in the case of aircraft manufacturers, and develop formal processes to identify major threats to the organization and estimate their potential costs using a worst-case scenario mindset. The authors also recommend that board members encourage candor and an honest assessment of risks and challenges from staff members while holding executive leadership accountable for wrongdoing or mismanagement.

Endnotes

¹ Bulleted text taken verbatim from: "About School Board and Local Governance." National School Boards Association. <https://www.nsba.org:443/About/About-School-Board-and-Local-Governance>

² Bulleted text adapted from: Griswold, J.S. and W.F. Jarvis. "Strive for the Best: Building and Maintaining an Excellent Board." Commonfund Institute, May 2014. p. 2. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=board+best+practices&ft=on&id=ED559278>

³ Bulleted text adapted from: Carver, J. and M. Carver. "Carver's Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations." Policy Governance, 2001. <https://www.carvergovernance.com/pg-np.htm>

⁴ Bulleted text adapted from: "Principles of Corporate Governance." Business Roundtable, 2016. pp. 7-8. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/brt.org/Principles-of-Corporate-Governance-2016.pdf>

⁵ Bulleted text adapted from: Maloney, R. "Four 'Big Ideas' of Board Governance." National School Boards Association, June 1, 2020. <https://www.nsba.org:443/ASBJ/2020/June/four-big-ideas>

⁶ Bulleted text taken verbatim from: "Six Tips for Smart School Boards." National School Public Relations Association, March 2008. <https://www.nspr.org/files/docs/sixtipsforsmartschoolboards.pdf>

⁷ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Dervarics, C. and E. O'Brien. "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards." National School Boards Association Center for Public Education, 2019. <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards-report-december-2019.pdf>