

Atlanta Public Schools Governance Pre-Reading

The “Why” Of School Systems & School Boards

School systems exist to improve student outcomes. That is the only reason for which school systems exist. School systems do not exist to have great buildings, have happy parents, have balanced budgets, have satisfied teachers, provide student lunches, provide employment in the county/city, or anything else. Those are all means -- and incredibly important and valuable means at that -- but none of them are the ends; none of those are why we have school systems. They are all inputs, not outcomes. None of those are measures of what students know or are able to do. ***School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes.***

An immediate challenge is that throughout the community there are many ideas about which student outcomes -- which measures of what students know and are able to do -- should be focused on (I refer to this as the community's “vision”) and which means to accomplish the vision should/shouldn't be used (I refer to this as the community's “values”). A school system can't be effective if it's trying to pursue a myriad of incoherent visions while implementing a cacophony of conflicting values. So the decision was made to select a group of individuals who would collectively represent the community's vision and values. We refer to this group as a school board. ***The school board exists to represent the vision and values of the community.***

The “How” Of Effective School Board Governance

This leads to a simple axiom: ***student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change.*** Or said differently when placed in the context of governing, patterns of behavior that are exhibited in the boardroom can reasonably be expected to be found paralleled in the classroom. This concept, which offers a summation of the current literature and research on school board behaviors and their relationship to improving student outcomes, is as elegant as it can be confounding.

Because the school board exists to represent the vision and values of the community, any effective system of governance must support the board at adhering closely to the community's vision and values — otherwise it's unreasonable to expect that staff will also do so. But even though the school board has far fewer members than the community as a whole — typically around 5 to 9 members — the school board members may still disagree on what the community's vision and values truly are. If school boards aren't intentional, they can start focusing on the wants and wishes of individual community members rather than the vision and value of the community as a whole. To resolve this and to create a way of holding the school system accountable, the school board as a whole adopts two special types of policy. It adopts **Goals** that reflect the community's vision. And it adopts **Guardrails** that describe the community values that must be protected while in pursuit of the Goals.

Goals & Guardrails

Because the intention of Goals is to reveal the community's vision for its students' outcomes, Goals are only about student outcomes -- what the community wants its students to know and be able to do. Ideal Goals will be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound), will describe what the community wants its students to know and/or be able to do, and will number between one and five (we generally recommend three). Goals describe what the school system is trying to accomplish. Examples of Goals include:

- The percentage of kindergarten students who will enter kindergarten school-ready on a

- multidimensional assessment will increase from 21% on August 1, 2019 to 65% by August 1, 2024
- The percentage of graduates who are persisting in the second year of their post-secondary program will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of free and reduced lunch-eligible students in kindergarten through 2nd grade who are reading/writing on or above grade level on the district's summative assessment will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of students at underperforming schools who meet or exceed the state standard will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z
- The percentage of males of color who graduate with an associate's degree will increase from W% on X to Y% by Z

The community will also have other things it values beyond the vision. These other items relate to what the adults are doing to cause the Goals to happen -- they are the inputs, not the outcomes. They are about the means, not the ends. We refer to the written version of these values as Guardrails. Ideally a school board will adopt one to five such overarching statements (we generally recommend three). Guardrails describe how the school system will behave as it seeks to accomplish the Goals. Examples of Guardrails include:

- The Superintendent will not allow underperforming campuses to have principals or teachers who rank in the bottom two quartiles of principal or teacher district-wide performance
- The Superintendent will not propose major decisions to the Board without first having engaged students, parents, community, and staff
- The Superintendent will not allow the number or percentage of students at underperforming campuses to remain the same or increase
- The Superintendent will not allow the inequitable treatment of students

Once a school board has adopted Goals and Guardrails, the school board now has a tool for evaluating any recommendations brought before the school board.

- Should we adopt the budget proposed by the superintendent? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent has demonstrated that it prioritizes accomplishment of the Goals and adherence to the Guardrails.
- Should we proceed with placing an item on the ballot for consideration? Yes, if (and only if) the superintendent's implementation plan clearly shows how use of those funds will help accomplish the Goals while honoring the Guardrails.
- How will we evaluate the superintendent's performance? That's determined by the extent to which she made sufficient progress toward the Goals while operating within the Guardrails.

While the school board exists to *represent* the vision and values of the community, the ***superintendent exists to implement the vision and values of the community*** as described to her by the school board.

This arrangement creates clarity for the board regarding how to monitor progress and it creates freedom for the superintendent to innovate and take risks knowing that the board has pre-agreed to support whichever path she leads the school system so long as she can demonstrate that it prioritizes making progress toward the Goals/vision while honoring the Guardrails/values.

Monitoring

Once the school board has clarified what the priorities are -- Goals and Guardrails -- the superintendent determines how best to implement them. From that point on, the work of the school board shifts to monitoring progress to ensure that reality increasingly matches the Goals and Guardrails.

Goals and Guardrails, however, often reference performance data that only gets updated once per year. So to monitor progress, more frequently available data is needed. For this, the board tasks the superintendent with developing a set of progress measures for each goal and guardrail. These Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails are based on formative data that is regularly updated and that allow the board to know whether or

not the district is getting closer to being able to accomplish the Goals and Guardrails throughout the year — rather than having to wait until the end of the school year and to find out if things are on track.

To be useful as progress measures, Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails must be SMART, must update multiple times during the school year, must be predictive of their respective Goals/Guardrails, and must be things that the administration can influence. The superintendent will select between one and three of these progress measures per Goal/Guardrail.

Having clarity about the community's vision and values (Goals & Guardrails) and progress measures for tracking performance (Interim Goals & Interim Guardrails), the Board can now create a monitoring calendar and then begin receiving monitoring reports each month.

The school board behavior most strongly correlated with improvements in student outcomes is working collaboratively with the community and the superintendent to identify the vision and values and then adopting them into a set of Goals and Guardrails.

Once Goals, Guardrails, Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails have been adopted, the next behavior of school boards that most correlates with improvements in student outcomes is monitoring progress toward the board's adopted Goals and Guardrails. School boards that truly desire to create the conditions for improvements in student outcomes invest at least 50% of their time each month into monitoring progress toward their Goals for student outcomes.

Continuous Improvement

Effective governance is not easy; changing adult behaviors requires effort to overcome institutional inertia. But with a framework, training, and coaching, school boards can change their adult behaviors in ways that most correlate with improvements in student outcomes.

To best serve Atlanta's students, the APS board routinely engages in governance best practices such as board self evaluations, time use evaluations, agenda evaluations, ongoing training for board members, and providing training for members of the community. This is what it means to be intensely focused on improving student outcomes. This is what it means to engage in student outcomes focused governance.

Resources

[Student Outcomes Focused Governance Manual](#)

[Progress Monitoring Guide](#)

[Additional Reading About Governance](#)