

**PSBA COMMISSION
ON
EFFECTIVE SCHOOL GOVERNANCE**

Report to the PSBA Executive Board

July 2005



Introduction

When school directors strive toward ideal conditions for effective school board service to their communities, in a spirit of teamwork and devotion to public education, it is the greatest instrument for preserving and perpetuating our representative democracy. School directors shoulder much of the responsibility for producing citizens with the intellectual, social and ethical skills necessary to contribute successfully to the advancement of a free society. To achieve that aim, schools must be governed effectively. When board members commit to the highest ideals of excellence in school governance, they will improve substantially the overall operation of their school districts and elevate the role public education plays in developing future citizens.

In an era of significant change for public education, with expectations for student achievement rising, requirements for school districts growing and resources increasingly restricted, the work of school boards never has been more challenging – or critical to the success of the important institution of public education. In fact, how well schools are governed in such demanding times is inextricably linked to school and student performance.

Studies have shown that if the school management team is working together well, it is likely that the school system is, too. The result is higher student achievement. There is no more important work for a school boards association than helping to ensure that happens.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association, in its 110th year, has advocated for school boards and public education since its inception, assuming a leadership role to ensure that board members are prepared and well informed. Through extensive training programs, a variety of informational resources, as well as on-site consultation and services provided by PSBA, school boards do not face the challenge alone.

The association regularly assesses the needs of local school officials, through periodic focus group discussions, surveys and informal interactions with local school leaders. As a result of a comprehensive strategic planning process, the PSBA Executive Board in January 2004 adopted a new Mission Statement and Goals to guide the organization. These reflected extensive input from school directors and administrators across the state. Ethical leadership and effective governance emerged as key issues for the association to address.

The PSBA Mission Statement reads:

“The mission of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association
is to
promote excellence in school board governance
through leadership, service and advocacy for public education.”

Goal #3 of the Strategic Plan is to “Support the role of school board members as effective, ethical leaders”, with the following specific objectives and action plans:

- Promote ethical school governance.
- Revise PSBA’s Code of Ethics for school boards.
- Provide information, resources and services to support members in enhancing their effectiveness and promoting their leadership role.
- Educate the community about the roles and responsibilities of school boards.
- Adopt and promote standards for effective school governance.
- Promote the value of school board training.

As a result of this clear mandate in the Strategic Plan, the PSBA Executive Board authorized the appointment of a Commission on Effective School Governance, with a charge to draft standards that embody best practices and high expectations for school boards. In addition, the commission was tasked with reviewing the “Code of Ethics for School Board Members” that the PSBA board adopted decades ago and has been reprinted annually since then, but which has not been carefully reviewed or updated for many years.

The association wanted to hear the viewpoints of various stakeholders as well as to have the work of the commission reflect a broad perspective and, hopefully, to be well accepted by all who have an interest in effective governance of the state’s public schools. As a result, membership of the commission included not only school board members, but also superintendents, a school business administrator, a school board secretary, and representatives of parents, the business community and higher education. (See Appendix A.)

The Research Process

A PSBA staff work group, crossing several departments, was formed to support the work of the commission. (See Appendix B.) The first task of the work group was to thoroughly review publications, studies and other literature concerning governance issues, interview appropriate people germane to the subject, and prepare a report and materials for the commission’s review prior to its first meeting.

The work group began this process in October 2004 with an overview of NSBA’s Key Work of School Boards. In addition, each member of the work group researched information from:

- National School Boards Association
- Other state school boards associations
- Other nonprofit organizations
- Business/corporate models
- Printed material (books and magazines)
- Internet (more than 300,000 hits available)
- Individuals’ sources and experience
- Interviews

Based on this independent research, each participating PSBA staff member selected resource materials for consideration, review and discussion by the full work group. Consensus was reached on resources to be included for the commission's review and a framework for presentation of the materials to the commission was developed.

Commission members were sent, prior to the first meeting, a workbook containing the current Code of Ethics, copies of resource materials, a listing of suggested standards and best practices discovered during the research process, and highlights from other studies, including the Iowa Lighthouse Study. In addition, the *EPLC Report on K-12 Governance – Strengthening the Work of School Boards in Pennsylvania*; NSBA's *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook*, and *Targeting Student Learning Workbook – The School Board's Role as Policymaker*; and PSBA's *Guide for a School Board President* were sent to the commission's members for review before the first meeting.

Work of the Commission

The commission's activities included a review of materials assembled by the staff work group; four meetings at PSBA headquarters to receive additional information, and to deliberate and formulate the final recommendations to the PSBA Executive Board; networking and continuing exchange of ideas through e-mail; and participating in PSBA regional meetings, which served as focus groups to generate more feedback from the membership on issues relating to effective school governance and ethics.

At the first meeting of the commission, the staff work group made a presentation highlighting and summarizing the extensive literature review it had conducted. In addition, Donna Cooper, secretary for planning and policy for Gov. Rendell, addressed the commission. Following these remarks was a general discussion on school governance. Common themes and best practices began to take shape, and a process for transforming these into standards emerged. The need to be able to measure how well a school board comports with the standards became apparent, and the staff work group was instructed to assemble a list of indicators for evaluating best practices. The PSBA staff facilitated an e-mail exchange of information and suggestions based on the first meeting.

At the next meeting, Ronald Cowell, president of the Education Policy and Leadership Center addressed the commission on the highlights of his organization's report, *Strengthening the Work of School Boards in Pennsylvania*, and the recommendations it contained. The commission also reviewed the results of the Effective School Governance Survey that PSBA had sent to the membership via the *School Leader News*.

The key points of the survey results are:

1. The board's primary role is to govern and enhance student achievement.
2. Board members should receive training and participate in professional development.
3. The five most important qualities of an effective board are:
 - Ethics – honesty and integrity in conducting board business.
 - Developing an effective relationship with superintendent.
 - Accountability – for staff, administration and board.
 - Efficiency – conducting district business in an organized manner.
 - Fulfilling roles and responsibilities.

These survey results also were reported and discussed at all PSBA regional meetings, attended by 350 members. Feedback from these sessions, which generally confirmed the survey results, was given to the commission.

Based on all resource materials, presentations and discussions, the commission began to draft standards for effective school governance. In recognition of the emphasis on student achievement, the opening line, "To promote student growth and achievement, an effective school board..." was added, followed by a list of standards with best practices or indicators under each.

Once this first draft of standards was complete, the commission began deliberations on what should constitute a Code of Ethics. The drafts of the standards and code were e-mailed to all commission members, soliciting additional ideas and suggestions for change and refinement. As these ideas were submitted, they were incorporated into the documents and returned to all commission members for review. This exchange continued until the next meeting.

The third meeting of the commission began with a review of the additional input from the regional meetings, where attendees had been given index cards and asked to list ideas for standards for effective boards. More than 100 suggestions were received, falling into the following categories:

- Board relations/behaviors
- Board development and core competencies
- Board/superintendent relationship
- Issues related to students
- Community engagement

Discussions at the regional meetings overwhelmingly supported the goals of the commission, emphasizing that standards and best practices are necessary and essential for effective school governance. The commission then discussed the ideas and suggestions through e-mail, and further refined the standards and Code of Ethics. It was determined that the Code of Ethics should be rewritten and renamed. There was some concern that "ethics" could be misconstrued, given the legal connotation of the Public Officials and Employees Ethics Law, which deals

primarily with financial disclosure. The commission wanted the code to address actions and behaviors of school directors, so it was renamed “Code of Conduct for Members of Pennsylvania School Boards.”

Following this meeting, the exchange of input among commission members continued in an effort to further refine the two documents. At the fourth and final meeting, the commission agreed on the wording of both standards and a Code of Conduct that it believes reflects what was gleaned from the literature review as well as the opinions and recommendations of local school officials across the state. The commission is pleased to recommend these for adoption by the PSBA Executive Board.

Recommended Standards for Effective School Governance

To promote student growth and achievement, an effective school board . . .

1. Advocates for a thorough and efficient system of public education by:

- a. Promoting public education as a keystone of democracy.
- b. Engaging and promoting community support by seeking input, building support networks and generating action.
- c. Allocating resources in a manner designed to facilitate student achievement consistent with school district goals and plans.
- d. Maintaining legislative awareness and communicating with members of local, state and federal legislative bodies.
- e. Ensuring strong management of the school system by hiring, setting goals with and evaluating the superintendent.
- f. Employing qualified staff to meet student and program needs.

2. Models responsible governance and leadership by:

- a. Staying current with changing needs and requirements by reviewing educational literature, attending professional development opportunities prior to board service and continuously during board service, and preparing to make informed decisions.
- b. Leading with respect and taking full responsibility for board activity and behavior.
- c. Adopting and acting in accordance with the PSBA Code of Conduct.
- d. Engaging all community stakeholders.
- e. Complying with board policy and all applicable local, state and federal laws and regulations.
- f. Operating as a collective board in making decisions.
- g. Participating in annual board retreats.

3. Governs through policy by:

- a. Seeking input from stakeholders and following an established procedure for consideration.
- b. Regularly reviewing and, as necessary, revising and adopting board policy.
- c. Delegating to the superintendent responsibility for implementation of board policy.
- d. Ensuring public access to adopted board policy.
- e. Purposefully linking its actions to applicable board policies.

4. Ensures that effective planning occurs by:

- a. Adopting and implementing a collaborative strategic planning process, including regular reviews.
- b. Setting annual goals that are aligned with the strategic plan.
- c. Linking board actions to the strategic plan.
- d. Adopting a financial plan that considers short-term and long-term needs.
- e. Adopting professional development plans for board and staff.
- f. Adopting a plan to ensure evaluation of student growth and achievement using relevant data.
- g. Adopting a master facilities plan conducive to teaching and learning.
- h. Adopting a plan for curriculum review and development.

5. Monitors results by:

- a. Using data appropriately to make informed decisions.
- b. Ensuring effective practices for evaluation of staff, programs, plans and services.
- c. Evaluating its own performance.
- d. Assessing student growth and achievement.
- e. Evaluating the effectiveness of the strategic plan.

6. Communicates with and engages the community by:

- a. Distributing relevant information about the district.
- b. Providing methods of communication to the board and appropriate staff.
- c. Seeking input through a variety of methods.
- d. Including stakeholders in all communications.

Recommended Code of Conduct for Members of Pennsylvania School Boards

Preamble

We, as members of our local board of education, representing all the residents of our school district, believe that:

- The future welfare of this community, commonwealth and nation depends upon the quality of education we provide in the public schools.
- In order to maintain a free and strong country, our civic obligation to the community, commonwealth and nation is to maintain free and strong public schools in the United States of America, without surrendering our responsibilities to any other person, group or organization.
- Boards of school directors share responsibility for ensuring a “thorough and efficient system of public education” as required by the Pennsylvania Constitution.
- Our fellow residents have entrusted us with the advocacy for and stewardship of the education of the youth of this community.
- The public expects that our first and greatest priority is to provide equitable educational opportunities for all youth.
- Striving toward ideal conditions for effective school board service to our community, in a spirit of teamwork and devotion to public education, is the greatest instrument for preserving and perpetuating our representative democracy.

Accordingly,

- The community should be provided with information about its schools and be engaged by the board and staff to encourage input and support for the school system.

- Devoting time, thought and study to our duties and responsibilities as school board members are critical for rendering effective and credible service.
- Board members should work together in a spirit of harmony, respect and cooperation, despite differences of opinion.
- Personal decisions should be based upon all sufficient facts, we should vote our honest conviction without partisan bias, and we will abide by and uphold the majority decision of the board.
- Individuals have no legal authority outside the meetings of the board, and should conduct their relationships with all stakeholders and media on this basis.
- We will not use our positions as school directors to benefit ourselves or any individual or agency.
- School boards must balance their responsibility to provide educational programs with the need to be effective stewards of public resources.
- We should recognize that the primary responsibility of the board is to adopt policies by which the schools are to be administered.
- We should respect that the superintendent of schools and his or her staff are responsible and accountable for the delivery of the educational programs and the conduct of school operations.
- Communication with all stakeholders and the media should be conducted in accordance with board policy.
- We should support and use the resources of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the National School Boards Association.

PSBA Commission on Effective School Governance

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Timeline for the Commission on Effective School Governance

The PSBA Executive Board adopted the following schedule and deadlines to guide the work of the commission.

<i>October – December 2004</i>	Staff working group reviews literature and best practices concerning effective school governance and board service. This research is compiled and will be presented along with recommendations to the Commission on Effective School Governance.
<i>January 2005</i>	Executive director recommends persons to serve on the commission, including some from within the membership as well as other stakeholders. The 2004 and 2005 presidents collaborate to appoint members to the commission.
<i>February – June 2005</i>	The commission meets several times during this period, reviewing research, receiving input and formulating recommendations.
<i>March – May 2005</i>	PSBA regional meetings serve as focus group discussions to receive member suggestions on the issue.
<i>June 2005</i>	Commission prepares its report, including recommended Standards for Effective School Governance and Code of Ethics.
<i>July 2005</i>	Executive Board reviews the draft standards and code, commenting on areas of needed revision (if any).
<i>August 2005</i>	Revisions to the standards are made as necessary.
<i>September 2005</i>	The PSBA Executive Board formally adopts the Standards of Effective School Governance and Code of Ethics.
<i>October 2005</i>	The standards and code are unveiled at the PSBA annual conference in Hershey.
<i>Ongoing</i>	The standards and code are featured in PSBA’s board development training, publications, Web site and elsewhere.