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How school boards shape culture without entering a classroom

Leadership | School Board Policy | Student Success

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School boards rarely describe themselves as the architects of organizational culture. More often, culture is viewed as the responsibility of the superintendent, principals or school leaders who interact daily with employees and students.

While those leaders undoubtedly shape district culture, they do so within the board's governance framework. In reality, every school board decision communicates what the district values.

Through its work—think: vision, policies, funding, public conduct, and relationship with the superintendent—a school board creates the conditions under which organizational culture develops. Governance is not separate from culture; it is one of its primary foundations.

School boards have many legal responsibilities. They set the district's strategic direction, discuss and adopt policies, approve budgets, and hire and evaluate the superintendent, to name a few. Stakeholders see these as typical school board responsibilities, but many don't recognize the significant cultural component.

Every board decision sends a message. A strategic plan communicates what success looks like. Budget decisions reveal organizational priorities. Superintendent evaluations reinforce leadership expectations.

Even board members' conduct during public meetings demonstrates what the organization considers acceptable, respectful, and professional.

Why their work matters

Thanks to Deal and Kennedy and their seminal work, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, organizational culture is often defined as "the way we do things around here." If that is true, governance helps explain why we do those things.

Organizational culture scholar Edgar Schein argued that culture develops through the priorities leaders establish, the behaviors they model, and the systems they create. While his work focused on executive leadership, the principle can apply to school governance. School boards establish the systems and expectations that guide every level of the organization.

Employees may never interact directly with board members, yet they experience the results of effective governance every day. They experience it in many ways: district priorities, how funds are spent or distributed, expectations of principals, or even professional learning opportunities.

These governance decisions shape the environment in which principals lead, teachers teach, and students learn. A school board's influence extends well beyond compliance; effective governance creates the conditions that allow organizational culture to flourish.

One of the board's most important responsibilities is establishing strategic clarity. This is often done through a strategic plan, 5-year plans, or "goals and guardrails." Typically, guiding documents like these set a compelling mission and vision, and should provide more than aspirational statements.

They create a shared purpose that aligns decisions throughout the district. When governance consistently reinforces that purpose, employees understand not only what the district is trying to accomplish but why their work matters.

Culture of professionalism and trust

The relationship between the board and superintendent is equally influential. Hiring and evaluating the superintendent may be the board's most significant cultural responsibility because it establishes leadership expectations for the entire organization.

When a school board empowers a superintendent, they model trust and accountability, and leadership behaviors cascade throughout the district.

Think of it as the "culture cascade": The school board says, "This is the way we do things"—with respect, empowerment, and responsibility. By modeling that strong culture, leaders within the district feel that they, too, can lead with compassion, strength, and unity.

Conversely, boards that blur governance and management responsibilities may unintentionally create uncertainty, diminish trust, and weaken organizational effectiveness.
Culture is shaped not only by decisions but also by behavior.

Board meetings serve as highly visible demonstrations of organizational values. Respectful dialogue, thoughtful deliberation, transparency, and constructive disagreement reinforce a culture of professionalism and trust.

Public conflict, inconsistent messaging, or governance driven by individual agendas can have the opposite effect, influencing how employees and community members perceive the organization.

School boards' lasting influence

The most effective school boards understand that governance extends beyond oversight. Every policy, budget allocation, strategic decision, and public interaction communicates what the district values.

These actions answer questions employees continually ask: Can leadership be trusted? Will priorities remain consistent? Are collaboration and innovation encouraged? Is there a shared commitment to students?

The answers to these questions shape organizational culture long before they are reflected in classrooms.

School board members may never teach a lesson, supervise a campus, or implement instructional initiatives, but they set the stage for success. By viewing governance not simply as compliance or oversight, but as the foundation of organizational culture, boards can better understand the lasting influence of their leadership.

Culture does not exist solely in the classroom; it thrives with a healthy culture rooted in good governance.

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Student success: What school boards need to know before ousting a superintendent

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