

School Board Roles and Responsibilities *Avoiding the Pitfalls of Micromanagement*

When it comes to successful charter schools, those achieving their mission and improving student achievement, there are two elements present in every example: a high performing board and an effective school leader. There is a direct correlation between the school's success and the board and school leader's effectiveness.

Legally, the board is responsible for ensuring that the school is operating within the parameters of applicable laws and the charter contract. This means meeting all authorizer, state and federal compliance requirements. This is no small task and requires that the board is practicing effective governance and paying attention to fulfilling its legal obligations. Boards should closely monitor the school's financial health, student achievement, resource needs and allocation, and the general direction that the school is headed. Board members know their strategic priorities and are able to manage themselves to most effectively position the institution for success. Additionally, the board is responsible for selecting and managing the school leader.

In order for both the board and the school leader to have a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, the board must approach its work from a strategic perspective. This means being able to delineate between "board work and staff work". In managing the school leader (the board's "only" employee) it's critical that the board develops confidence and trust in the school leader's capabilities. Ultimately the board is responsible for ensuring that the school leader is doing his/her job and that resources (financial, instructional and operational) are available to achieve and sustain the mission of the organization. In the perfect school board world, this is how boards should behave. The reality, however, is often quite different.

A common concern expressed by charter school leaders is that their board's micromanage their work. Although well intentioned, boards often interject themselves into issues and decisions that undermine the school leader's effectiveness, which can also compromise the board's ability to make objective and informed decisions. Often, this is done without board members realizing the impact of their actions. They see themselves as being helpful in resolving an issue and assisting the school leader. Problems occur when they don't have the background to be fully informed, or when they are not aware of the work staff has done to address the concern or what actions may have already been taken. By becoming involved, their good intentions complicate the matter and create more work for the staff and board in resolving the issue.

Although this can occur in any school, it is particularly prevalent in smaller schools where boards take a more active role in certain operational decisions. They are frequently selected because of expertise in areas such as finance, human resources, real estate, marketing and law. This may result in a greater level of shared responsibilities between the board and school leader. It can also empower board members to assume that they have more authority in overall decision-making. What may also complicate the situation is when board members have personal relationships with parents and teachers and feel the need to listen to concerns and attempt to resolve the issues at hand. This is where their efforts escalate into micromanagement. They begin assuming responsibilities that should be addressed by staff (the school leader or a

teacher) and it invariably leads to problems. Here are some examples of how this may occur:

- Meeting with other board members and discussing operational issues without including the school leader;
- Strongly suggesting how to handle an operational decision that is clearly the responsibility of the school leader;
- Telling a school leader how to respond to a parent's request/demand that may compromise school policies and procedures;
- Offering unsought perspectives regarding staff or faculty performance and attempting to influence evaluations. They may go so far as to tell the school leader who should be hired and fired;
- Engaging parents, faculty or staff in discussing concerns/complaints rather than referring them back to the school leader and/or teacher;
- Regularly expressing issues from their personal opinion;
- Individually critiquing the school leader's or board's decisions and performance and making disparaging comments publicly;
- Making decisions that are clearly the responsibility of the school leader;
- Making demands of staff that support their personal agenda or in an effort to do a favor for friends;
- Failing to recognize that their role as a board member represents only a fraction (depending on the size of the board) of the "will of the board."

To avoid these costly pitfalls, boards and school leaders have to be very clear about each other's work. The first step in accomplishing this is for the board and the school leader to have clearly defined job descriptions. These should be reviewed annually and revisions made as needs and priorities change. In those cases where a board member's expertise results in him/her becoming responsible for an important need (i.e. negotiating leases and contracts, developing a public relations plan, drafting legal responses for the school, developing the budget process, etc.), the board and school leader have to be very clear that this is an area of shared responsibility. Second, the board must be diligent in monitoring its actions and policing itself to avoid becoming involved in management issues. The board must monitor the performance of the school leader and provide him/her with very clear direction and evaluate the school leader's effectiveness. They should be monitoring individual board member performance as well. Last, when the board recognizes that its collective or individual actions are micromanaging the school leader, it has to identify the reason and resolve the issue. If the board has lost trust in its school leader and questions the leader's ability, then the board has to make a change.

Boards are critically important to the success of every charter school. If the board has developed its strategic priorities and adopted a governance model that allows it to focus on end results, then it is well positioned to avoid incidents of micromanagement. Be sure that you have the right person leading the school and support that person in his/her professional development. Develop mutual trust and be willing to have candid and honest discussions about the results you're achieving. Be clear in knowing your responsibilities and keep your actions aligned with the board's mission and vision. And when in doubt, refer your concern to either the board president or school leader.

No one likes to have their boss looking over their shoulder and second-guessing or questioning their actions. It always leads to unnecessary challenges and hard feelings.

Be clear of what you have to do as a board to set the school up for success. Focus on your mission and vision. Monitor the school's financial health and comply with all legal requirements. Manage and guide your school leader and create a symbiotic partnership that results in exceptional performance. The most successful organizations in every industry rely on strong direction from their board and leadership from their CEO. Be sure that your school has these leadership elements in place and you've set the stage for success.

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