



Boards Making a Difference

How Beliefs Became Part of the Culture of the Des Moines School Board

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Each board member brings a different lens, a different point of view, a different set of beliefs to the board table. These can differ based on diversities like age, ethnicity, race, gender, political beliefs and more. They can also differ based on an individual’s experiences, background, upbringing and education. With all these potential differences coming into play, how does the board come together as a united governance team and work toward one common direction?

The Des Moines School Board united through the development of a belief statement—shared common beliefs about public education. These beliefs impact decisions at the board table and help guide the direction of both the board and administration.

FINDING DIRECTION

“We have worked hard on becoming a visionary governance team focused around the idea that we desire for every student in our district to be successful. We have a shared understanding that we believe in every child and no matter their circumstance, we will support them at their highest level. Our belief statement tells the why. It gets at the reason we exist—to support every child, to achieve, to involve and be accountable to parents in the community,” says Des Moines School Board Vice President Cindy Elsbernd.

The board didn’t start from scratch—they had previously developed graduate ends statements, clarifying student achievement goals and district culture.

Several years after development, the board engaged the community to reconfirm that they aligned with values, then created student expectations—elements of the graduate ends but in concrete,



measurable terms. While these graduate ends were meaningful, the board and superintendent didn't view them as user friendly. Additionally, they wanted something that truly captured the character of the graduate ends, in relation to district values and how it operated.

Des Moines Public Schools Superintendent Tom Ahart says, "We created a belief statement that was easier to understand and easier to directly apply to our decision-making processes. I can take that statement and talk about it regularly in leadership teamwork. It's pretty easy to take what we're doing and align it to the beliefs in that statement."

The board's belief statement features six beliefs that clarify their focus as a board:

1. We believe in every child and, no matter their circumstance, will support them in achieving at their highest level.
2. We believe all students will have the best staff working to provide and support their education.
3. We believe in the full engagement of our parents and community in the support of our students' education.
4. We believe, as a community, in providing the resources necessary to offer PK-12 education of the highest quality.
5. We believe first-rate facilities are essential to quality education.
6. We believe in a school district that operates with transparency, accountability and efficiency at every level.

Elsbernd says, "Our belief statement consists of the values the board holds and that underlie those student expectations as well as the expectations the board has for itself and for the superintendent. It helps determine the work of the board and superintendent and clarifies priorities."

The board believes in these so strongly that after they developed and adopted the belief statement, they codified it in policy. They also engaged the community in a series of community-wide discussions to ensure support.



“If you’re going to raise something up, say that something is important, put it in writing. Putting it in writing then shows the community that it’s important, something that you can point to. It also requires the board to go through that thought process of evaluating whether something really is important, instead of just swinging from priority to priority or initiative to initiative,” says Des Moines School Board Member Rob Barron.

Beliefs show the community what your board is working toward and how your board is making important decisions. They become part of the culture of the board. “We don’t always agree, but these are the underlying beliefs that are guiding us, so we all know that this is what we’re striving to do. As a board, when you’re faced with public opinions, it can be difficult and challenging for board members to stand up for those convictions. Having this belief statement to fall back on, I think that’s important,” says Elsbernd.

PUTTING BELIEFS INTO ACTION

The board has defended curriculum decisions since adopting the belief statement in 2011. Several years ago, Des Moines Public Schools began to build capacity so more teachers were qualified to teach and offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses. At the time, limited AP courses were offered at all five comprehensive high schools, with an expanded offering at Central Academy. Once this capacity goal was reached, the district expanded AP course offerings at the five high schools and removed the same course offerings at Central Academy, eliminating duplication. The goal was to increase opportunities for students in poverty and students of color to have access to AP courses.

“We were accused of dumbing down the curriculum, lowering the level of rigor. We were accused of removing opportunities. The board belief statement helped defend those positions. If the rationale behind challenging decisions is already articulated before you approach the topic, you’re in a better place to execute,” said Ahart.

The belief statement expresses the board’s shared beliefs and the board says they should be able to tie back every decision they make to the belief statement. Barron says, “It’s the blood that runs through everything we do. A year ago, our board wrote and codified two resolutions in support of undocumented immigrants, who are students or parents or employees of the district. That comes down to those two words in the first item in our belief statement—every child. Showing them that we are there for them, no matter their circumstance.”

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