

# State of the District for Board Members

Aligned to the IASB Standards for Effective School Boards



## New school board members face a steep learning curve. This guide can help.

This guide is designed to support a local orientation process to help new school board members learn about the practices of their board, review key documents and district data, and have discussions with the superintendent and other board members to more deeply understand major priorities.

### Our organizing framework: Standards for Effective School Boards

We've organized the orientation process around the IASB Standards for Effective School Boards. These standards are based on research and best practices for the most important roles and responsibilities of high-performing school boards. Tying these roles to specific information about your school district will help new board members learn how to work as an effective board member, as well as introduce them to the "state of the district."

### Tips to Make the Most of this Guide

- **Make the process your own:** Feel free to adapt this framework. Add additional resources and discussion questions as appropriate to your district.
- **Schedule your local orientation in manageable sessions:** Consider what works best for you. You may choose to schedule a single workshop or use a series of "before the meeting" briefings.
- **Consider involving the whole board:** This information can be helpful to the whole board. Learning together can build a strong team by ensuring equity of information and understanding.
- **Connect each item to the work of the board:** For each document or resource, it helps to establish why this information is important for the board at the board level. Constantly asking, "Why is this information important for board learning and decision-making?" establishes a good habit for board member requests for information.
- **Consider who will lead the local orientation process:** Some of this information may be presented by the superintendent, some by the board president or an experienced board member, some by a curriculum coordinator or a business manager. Whatever method you use, IASB recommends that the superintendent be involved in all discussions to build a strong relationship and communication support for new board members.

### Questions? Need help?

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## Standard 1: Visionary Team

### Effective school boards operate as a visionary governance team in partnership with the superintendent.

**Vision and Planning** – The board develops a shared vision and plans for student achievement that reflects common values and core beliefs of the school community.

**Operating Practices** – The board uses productive practices for its own operations and development.

**Decision-Making** – The board ensures board decisions are based on data and deliberation.

**Board/Superintendent Relations** – The board cultivates a strong relationship and partnership with the superintendent, based on clear expectations and accountability.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- District mission, vision, belief statements and philosophy statements.
- District goals and/or strategic plan.
- Agendas and minutes from last four regular board meetings.
- Board meeting schedule for the year and information about when and how the board materials or packet are distributed.
- List of board members, terms, and map of director district areas if appropriate.
- Existing board goals if available.
- Schedule of board development opportunities (available from IASB).
- List of board committees (if any) and the purpose of each.
- Overview of the superintendent evaluation process, instrument and timelines. List of superintendent's current goals, based on last evaluation.

### Questions to Discuss

- How do the mission, vision and beliefs and/or philosophy statement impact board decision-making?
- What is the board's role in reaching district goals and achieving the strategic plan?
- In which ways do agendas provide evidence the board is working toward the vision, mission and goals and acting on its beliefs?
- How is the agenda created? How can an individual board member get an item on the agenda if they wish? Who and when should board members contact regarding questions about agenda items or to ask for more background information?
- What practices does the board use to ensure effective meetings?
- How do committees report back to the board and why is this structure an asset to board decision making?
- How does the board set goals for and evaluate the superintendent? What are the superintendent's current goals?
- What practices help to ensure a productive relationship between the board and superintendent?

## Standard 2: Student Learning

### Effective school boards provide leadership for quality instruction and high, equitable student learning.

**Clear Expectations** – The board sets and communicates high expectations for student learning with clear goals and a focus on strengthening instruction.

**Conditions for Success** – The board supports conditions for success through board actions and decisions.

**Accountability** – The board holds the system accountable to reach student learning goals.

**Collective Commitment** – The board builds the collective commitment of community and staff to achieve the student learning goals.

**Team Learning** – The board learns together as a whole team to inform decision-making around the student learning goals.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- Comprehensive school improvement plan, highlighting student learning goals.
- List of School Improvement Advisory Committee members and overview of role of the committee.
- High-level student achievement data: information from testing in major goal areas, explanation of how test results led to goal formation, and any evidence of progress toward goals.
- Brief explanation of the major state or local district/school improvement initiatives, such as the Iowa Core, literacy, instructional initiatives, etc.

### Questions to Discuss

- How were student learning goals formed and what is the role of the board in understanding and approving goals and improvement efforts?
- How does big picture student achievement data relate to major learning goals and initiatives in the district? (Do not attempt to cover all existing student achievement data; focus on data that has impacted district action and goals and impacted board's work.)
- What major efforts are underway to improve outcomes for students? What process was used to select those efforts?
- When does the board receive progress reports on efforts to improve instruction and student learning?

## Standard 3: District Culture

**Effective school boards foster a culture that enables excellence and innovation.**

**High Quality Staff** – The board empowers the superintendent in hiring and developing the best employees available to meet the district’s goals.

**Shared Leadership** – The board supports structures that develop instructional leadership and collaboration.

**Staff Learning** – The board supports research-based staff professional development aligned with district goals.

**Environment** – The board fosters a safe and secure environment for all students, staff, and visitors.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- Key policies on personnel and staff evaluation.
- Brief summary of priority staff development initiatives and evidence of board support for these initiatives (calendars, funding etc.)
- Overview of district staff mentoring program (in some districts this will be Teacher Leadership and Compensation.)
- Policy on chain of command.
- Data on teacher-pupil ratio and class sizes.
- Outline of the collective bargaining process and timelines.
- Overview of school safety plan and data on safety-related issues.

### Questions to Discuss

- What is the role of the board on personnel-related issues? How does the board support the superintendent in hiring and developing employees?
- How does the board provide support for staff learning and improvement?
- In what way does the policy on chain of command impact board members? Why does it exist and how can board members help ensure it is followed?
- How does the policy on staff evaluation work in this district? Why does it exist? Who is involved? How can the board be assured it is being followed?
- Why does the district participate in collective bargaining? What have trends been in collective bargaining settlements? How do these compare with trends in school funding?
- What safety or climate issues may be impacting the school environment? What steps are underway to address them?

## Standard 4: Policy & Legal

### Effective school boards lead through sound policy, ensuring transparent, ethical, legal operations.

**Policy Leadership** – The board develops sound, written policy to clarify the board's intent for district direction.

**Legal** – The board ensures that board and district actions are in compliance with state and federal laws, appropriately addressing legal issues when they arise.

**Ethics** – The board models ethical and legal behaviors which enable the board to stay focused on district goals.

**Transparency** – The board establishes policies and ensures processes that are open and accountable.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- Access to district policy manual.
- Schedule and practices for policy review.
- Examples of recently updated policies and list of any policies currently in the review process. □ Sample board policies regarding topics that are likely to arise (such as: community, staff or student concerns/complaints, agenda formation, public comments during board meetings, etc.)
- Student handbooks that are relevant to board decision making.
- Local policy on Board Member Code of Ethics or IASB recommended Code of Ethics.
- Overview of Iowa open meetings law.

### Questions to Discuss

- How can board members access the policy manual (electronic access, distribute in print?)
- What practices does the board use for policy development and review?
- What is the impact of 2-3 key selected policies? Discuss how the selected policy expresses the will of the board and why the policy exists. Discuss importance of policy to the role of the board.
- How do student handbooks guarantee the rights of students are protected? Discuss district practice, if applicable, for board approval.
- How does our board ensure it complies with the Iowa Open Meetings Law? What impact has the law had on board conversations? In your discussion note IASB resources such as the new online open meetings course, Convention sessions and Board Member Orientation Workshop. A key reminder is the fact that ignorance of the Open Meetings Law is no excuse for violating it.

## Standard 5: Fiscal Responsibility

### Effective school boards sustain and enhance district resources through planning and fiduciary oversight.

**Financial Health** – The board monitors and evaluates the financial health of the district, ensuring accountability and transparency in board decision making.

**Financial Forecasting** – The board ensures strong financial planning for the district.

**Budgeting** – The board ensures the district budget aligns with district goals and multi-year plans.

**Risk Oversight** – The board ensures sufficient risk management is in place to protect district resources.

**Facilities** – The board ensures school facilities enhance and enrich student and staff learning.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- Data on General Fund Key Financial Indicators for your district (available from IASB).
- Enrollment data/trend for the last 10 years.
- Copy of the district's current budget.
- Copy of the district's most recent audit.
- Example of monthly financial report to the board.
- A list of buildings and enrollments in each building.
- A list of construction projects, both contemplated and in progress.

### Questions to Discuss

- What is the district's current financial condition?
- What do the measures of financial health mean? How do they influence board decision making? When are financial issues discussed at the board table?
- How do enrollment trends impact the budget and what implications does this hold for board decision making?
- What is the board's role in the budget process? When is the board involved and what kinds of questions do they ask?
- Who should a board member contact with questions on financial issues?
- What facility projects are underway or contemplated? What is the board's responsibility regarding facilities, especially in terms of garnering community support on funding or other issues?

## Standard 6: Advocacy

### Effective school boards advocate for public education and the needs of Iowa students.

**Championing Local Governance & Public Education** – The board clearly articulates and advocates for the value of public education and the important role of local school governance.

**Legislative Advocacy** – The board develops and strengthens on-going relationships with policymakers around improving student achievement and the needs of public education.

**Community Engagement** – The board fosters engagement and collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure high and equitable student learning.

### Information That May Help Discussions

- A list of your district's state legislators with contact information.
- A summary of the effects of prior legislative sessions on the district.
- A list of primary talking points developed by the board in the last year, if available.
- A list of opportunities for community interactions by the board, including the board's own meeting.

### Questions to Discuss

- Why is advocacy such an important role for school boards today?
- How can the board work together to contact legislators?
- How do the actions of the Iowa legislature impact children in your school district and why this is important to the board?
- How does the board keep the community informed and involved in local education efforts?
- What practices does the board use to engage the community?
- What practices work best if a patron has a complaint about the district, its programs or personnel?