

Identifying Effective and Ineffective District Leadership

2026 NMSBA Leadership Retreat
Meagan R. Muñoz, Esq.

ORTIZ & ZAMORA
Attorneys at Law, LLC



Agenda



Introduction



Revisiting
Research



Common
Pitfalls



Hypotheticals
& Discussion



Takeaways

Introduction

School board effectiveness is something that affects the entire school district and its function. The same is true for other district leadership. During this session, we will think through some scenarios and discuss strategies to work through conflict effectively at varying levels of education leadership.

The information I am discussing with you are based on true stories. Sometimes there is legal guidance to point to as the right answer, but a lot of times there are several “right” answers and several “wrong” answers. Let’s discuss both.



Goals

- Identify effective and ineffective strategies for education leaders.
- Review conduct expectations for board meetings, superintendent and board relations, and the board president's duties to members.
- Foster discussion for conducting crucial conversations among district leaders.
- Pinpoint strategies that you can practice in order to make meaningful contributions to your board.



Research

2002

Local School Boards
Under Review

American Educational
Research Association

(Land)

2011

Eight Characteristics of
Effective School Boards

(Dervarics)

2013

The Impact of School
Board Governance on
Academic Achievement
in Diverse States

(Ford)

2005

The effective school
board: do whatever it
takes to get your board
to understand its role
and to communicate
civilly with each other

(Crane)

2013

Effective board
leadership: factors
associated with
student achievement

(Johnson)

Research

2014

Does School Board
Leadership Matter?

(Shober)

2018

The association between
local public school board
member beliefs and
behaviors and student
academic achievement

(Vishanoff)

2023

Strategies to Enhance
Effectiveness of School
Boards in Governance

(Gersich)

2014

Are School Boards
Aware of the
Educational Quality of
Their Schools?

(Hooge)

2023

Great on Their Behalf

(Crabill)

Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards

High Achieving Districts

- Adopt specific goals, informed by data, with policies to support
- Positive talk; Focus on achievement rather than administrative issues
- Strong communication; Willingness to discuss unfavorable data without blame
- Support professional development even in financial uncertainty
- Stay in role; Trust superintendent to lead; Stay informed

Low Achieving Districts

- Slow to define vision; Blame external factors for student achievement
- Negative talk; Micromanagement; Confusion of roles; Interpersonal conflict
- Disregard for processes and chain of command
- Not all information shared equally; No consideration of data
- No set plan for professional development; No joint problem solving

Identifying Failures

Knowledge-Based

- Failure to focus on outcomes
- Trained to fail
- Expected to fail
- Designed to fail

Skill-Based

- **Not focused** when goal setting
- **Not focused** on board's time
- **Not monitoring** progress

Mindset-Based

- "This is the way we've always done it"
- "Great on my behalf"
- "Effort and intent equals results and impact"

Common Pitfalls



“Swerving”

Acting outside of your statutory authority; circumventing processes;
Example: “Boards don’t investigate”



“Tattle-Tale Phone”

Listening to every community members grievance; “60-second rule”; Example: Grocery store cornering after a rumor starts



“Writing Mouth Checks”

Making promises that are impossible to keep; knowledge of process/chain of command; Example: “I will make sure of it!”



“Know When to Hold ‘Em”

Meetings that last late into the night are not helpful for anyone; Board norms;
Example: “All meetings will end by 9pm.”



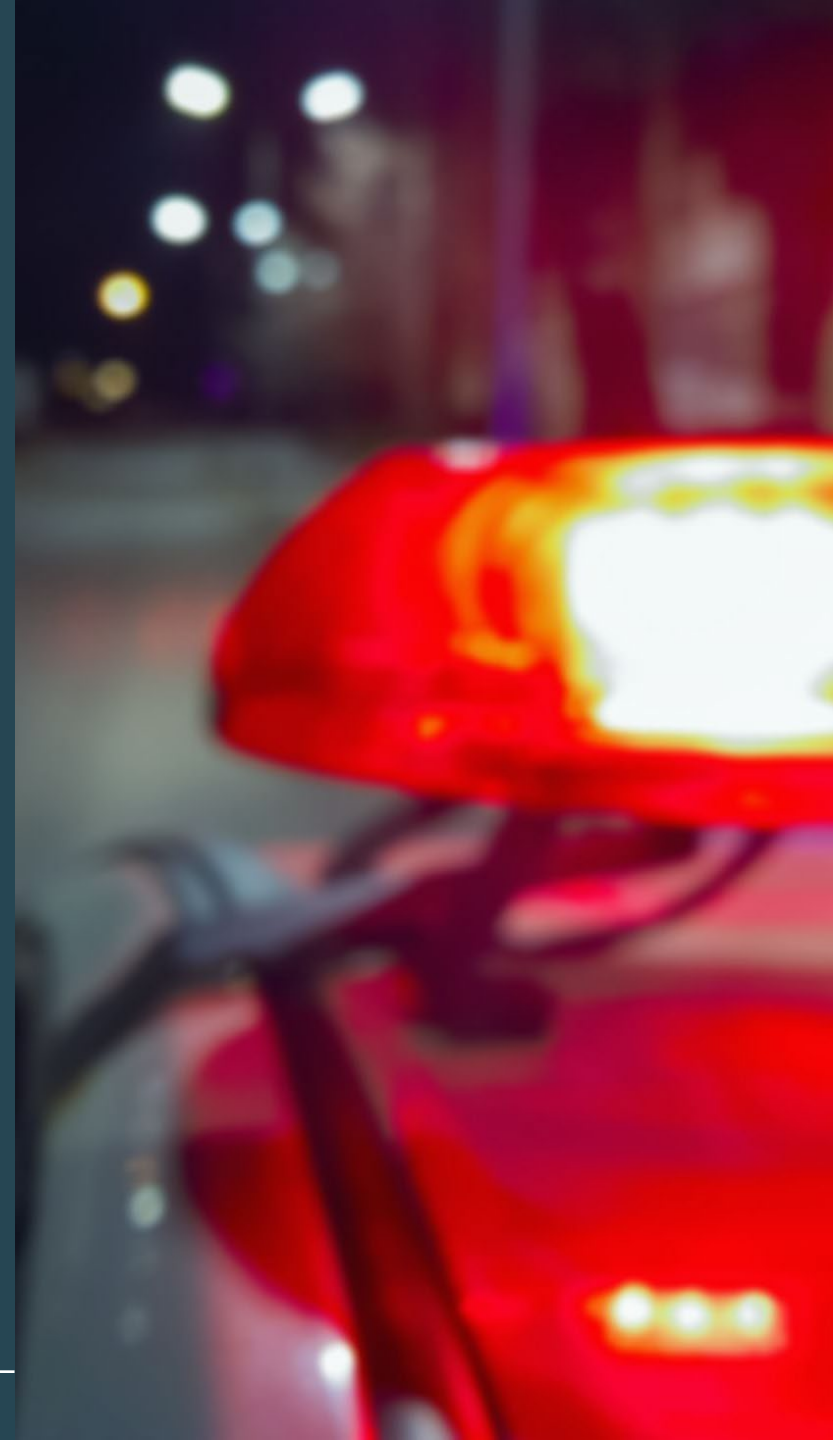
“Ego Suitcase”

Not utilizing the power of five; Personal differences carrying over and snow-balling into more issues down the road; Example: “They did this, so I will do that.”

Emergency Meeting Hypo

During the school day, there is a rumor swirling that a student brought a gun to school. The Superintendent is dealing with contacting law enforcement and communicating with the community as word gets out. As Board President, you call an emergency meeting to gather your board that same day and get a briefing from local law enforcement. You then call the Superintendent and inform them that there is an emergency meeting scheduled for 4pm that day.

What is effective or ineffective about this scenario?



“

School boards should
work to minimize conflict
and maximize
cooperation.

Michael Ford

“The Impact of School Board Governance on Academic Achievement in Diverse States”

”

Board Contact Hypos

Texting Board Members

A community member has been contacting every board member about a personnel decision that the superintendent made. Some board members respond redirecting the community member to the superintendent. However, one board member engages with the community member and gets the scoop on what happened. That board member then comes to the board asking other board members if they were aware of the incident and continues to text some board members after the meeting with details. Two weeks later, the District receives an IPRA request for all communication by board members about the personnel decision. What now?

Emailing the Board

After a board meeting one evening, a board member decides that there are opinions expressed on the board that were shared at the meeting that the board member feels cannot go unaddressed. That night, the board member decides to write an email to the entire board and grieve the conversation that took place at the board meeting.

The email is a five-page essay reiterating the position that the board member expressed at the meeting.

How would you handle this as board president versus a board member?

“

A clear relationship exists between time spent on certain board behaviors and student academic achievement.

Brenda D. Vishanoff

“The Association Between Local Public School Board Member Beliefs and Behaviors and Student Achievement”

”



Superintendent Evaluation Hypo

Your superintendent is in their first year with the district. Since taking the position, they have worked to repair community trust and build better relationships with families.

The board is set to evaluate the superintendent in March-April. In February, the board starts to receive emails from concerned staff stating the superintendent is not doing what they need to be doing for the district.

The board calls a special meeting to discuss the emails.

How can you be effective during this special meeting?

“ “ Avoiding failure is important but it only prevents failure; it doesn't cause effectiveness. To be effective, school board members must engage in a never-ending continuous improvement process.

Airick Journey Crabill
"Great on Their Behalf"

” ”

How we get there

Vision

Clearly define goals of board without overwhelming your efforts.

Collaborate with Superintendent on shared vision.

Commitment to vision; revisit often; Utilize resources.

Where does the board want the District to go?

Accountability

Goal setting with monitoring.

Use of data may be helpful to inform progress or reversion.

Show up for your district by participating in training and development and by staying in your lane.

Who is responsible for certain student outcomes?

Continuous Improvement

What will you do when a board member falls short of group expectations?

What will you use to evaluate progress?

Has the board made informed decisions to keep outcomes moving in the right direction of the vision?



Takeaways

1. Conflict is inevitable on a board with five or more people trying to agree, and even more inevitable when serving a community.
2. There are ineffective and effective ways to address and resolve conflict and identifying them in the moment is important.
3. Focus and board norms should always point to the benefit of our students.
4. Knowing when to step away from conflict or a topic can save you precious time and energy.

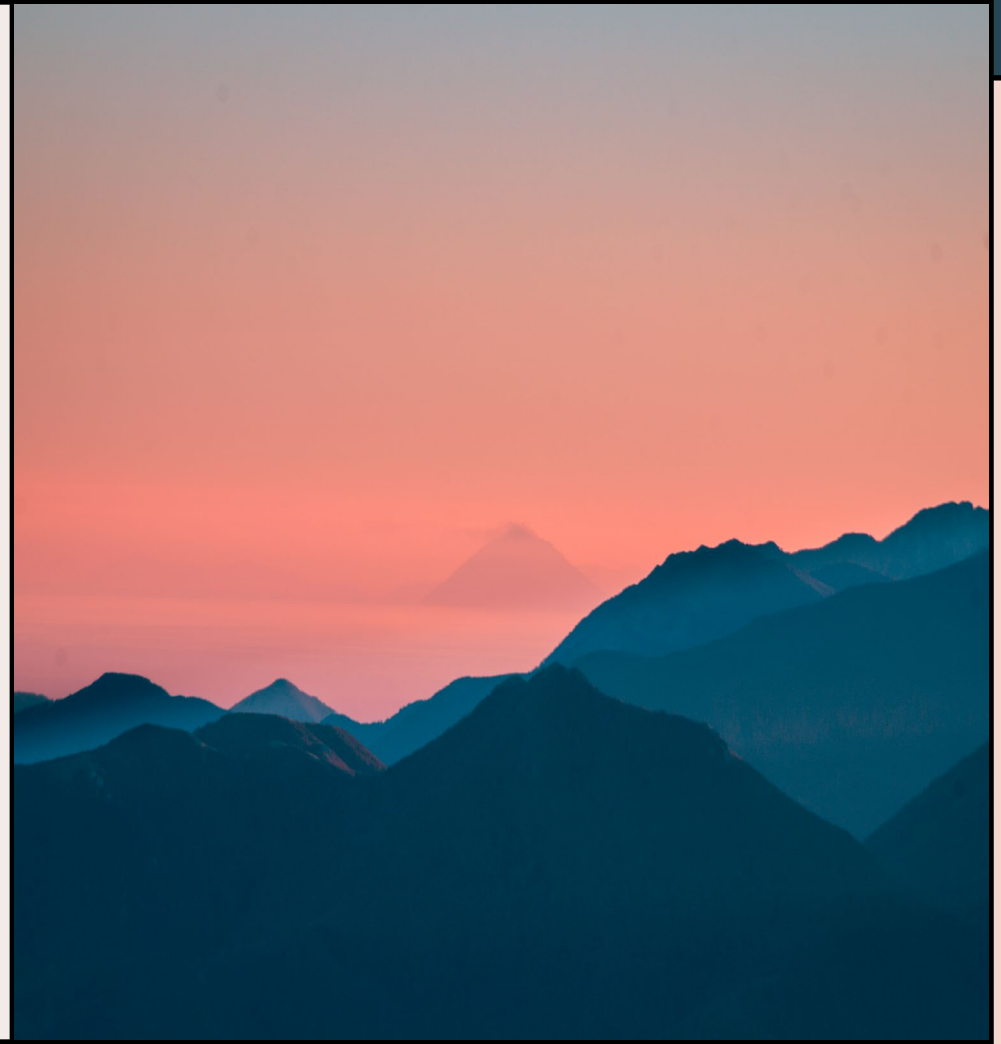
Thank you!

Meagan R. Muñoz, Esq.

meagan@ortiz-zamora.com

(505) 986-2900

ORTIZ & ZAMORA
Attorneys at Law, LLC



Resources

1. Crabill, A. J. (2023). Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective. John Catt from Hodder Education.
 2. Dervarics, C (2011). Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards. Center for Public Education.
 3. Hooge, E (2014). Are School Boards Aware of the Educational Quality of Their Schools? Educational Management Administration & Leadership.
 4. Shoer, A. F. (2014). Does School Board Leadership Matter? Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
 5. Land, D (2002). Local School Boards under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement. American Educational Research Association.
 6. Vishanoff, B. D. (2018). The association between local public school board member beliefs and behaviors and student academic achievement. Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations (Northern Illinois University). 5325.
 7. Ford, M. (2013). The Impact of School Board Governance on Academic Achievement in Diverse States. Theses & Dissertations (University of Wisconsin Milwaukee). 329.
 8. Crane, E. (2005). The Effective School Board: Do whatever it takes to get your board to understand its role and to communicate civilly with each other. District Administration.
 9. Johnson, P. (2013). Effective Board Leadership: Factors Associated with Student Achievement. Journal of School Leadership. Vol. 23.
 10. Gersich, B. (2023). Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness of School Boards in Governance (Dissertation, Concordia University, St. Paul). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/edd/48>.
-