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# *Foreword*

This book provides specific, practical, feasible, and effective advice for how boards and administrators can perform their multiple roles well. The authors focus the board on the right issues and duties with a major emphasis on teaching and learning. They start with the “right mission” for the board and then demonstrate in detail how to translate this into building a superintendent leadership team. The major focus is on helping superintendents to prepare, conduct, and implement board meetings that flow from the board’s mission and interactions with administrators. The authors provide a detailed road map for all these meeting concepts and procedures.

This book is timely and necessary because in the past two decades, criticism of school boards has intensified. Frequent allegations about inadequate pupil attainment and the collapse of big-city schools have been major media stories. Some big-city mayors have taken over the schools and eliminated the school board. One influential commentator, Chester Finn, President of the Fordham Foundation, labeled boards a “dinosaur left over from the agrarian past” and part of a wasteful middle management system. Frequently, school reforms have focused on the school site and have not addressed the board. NCLB has created a whole new direct policy and oversight system connecting federal and state governments to school site performance, bypassing the central school board.

Part of the challenge for school boards is all the things they must do according to state law and local tradition. Boards must create long-range policies, solve short-term crises, juggle federal and state mandates, discipline students, and oversee expenditures. All of these functions are impacted by shifting coalitions of teachers, community residents, students, state officials, and all kinds of reformers.

The last major change in the structure and roles of urban school boards took place between 1900 and 1920. By 1910, the conventional wisdom had evolved among school people and the leading business and professional men who spearheaded the reforms. The governance structure needed to be revised so that school boards would be small, elected at large, and purged of all connections with political parties and officials of general government, such as mayors and councilmen.

## x A Practical Guide to Effective School Board Meetings

While the turn-of-the-century reformers tried to model the revamped school board on the big corporations, they left the board with a mandate to oversee and become involved in all areas of local school operation. The American school board combines the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government. This role is too expansive and often leads boards to try to do everything by not doing much of anything in depth. This book helps superintendents establish board meetings that deal effectively with challenging multiple board roles.

School boards play a *legislative* role when they adopt budgets, pass regulations, and set policies. Moreover, they provide the constituent-services component of a legislator's district office. Parents will phone board members about fixing showers in locker rooms, relocating school crossing guards, and reclassifying children placed in special education. Many board members believe that an essential part of their role is to "fix" these individual complaints, because failure to respond may mean defeat at the polls.

School boards play an *executive* role when they implement policy. Many school boards approve not only the budget, but also almost every expenditure and contract for services. For example, a half-day consulting fee for a university professor must be approved by the school board. The board performs the same role as the U.S. Department of Education's contracting office and the General Accounting Office. Many boards approve the appointments of principals, vice principals, categorical program administrators, and even teachers.

*Judicial* hearings concerning students' suspensions, expulsions, inter-district transfers, and pupil placements can consume an enormous amount of time. After all administrative remedies are exhausted, the board is the final body for appeal, though citizens may still turn to the courts in some cases. Can any school board composed primarily of part-time lay people perform all these functions well? Often, board meetings are dominated by administration progress reports and parental complaints about very specific needs. Moreover, state "sunshine laws" require boards to conduct all business, including many personnel matters, in the public sessions. Does the essential policymaking role of the board suffer as other roles and functions become more important?

Superintendents and school boards who utilize this book will come a long way toward fulfilling their complex and multiple goals. They will have a much better way to interact with the many actors who come to the board for help with concerns and problems. If many boards use this book as a guide, some of their critics will have much less to say.

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