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Focus: Governance Efficacy

Students' Civil Rights is a Matter of Good Governance

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

The South Central Collaborative for Equity (SCCE) has been able to support many school systems as they have worked to assure the protection of civil rights for students in public schools. This work has taken many forms including working directly with students in student leadership skills building, reducing racial and sexual harassment and bullying in schools, student engagement including developing student voice, and most importantly building academic strength and capacity in core content subject areas to produce greater school success. The SCCE has worked with administrators, teachers, parents and community people to strengthen academic and pedagogical practice on the part of educators or, on the part of parents and community stakeholders, increase leadership and advocacy capacity to support success for all learners. It is clear that some of the most rewarding work the SCCE has undertaken over the years has been its work with boards of education.

The SCCE has been able to work successfully with five school districts to create or revise critical policy concerns to ensure the protection of students' civil rights in several critical areas. This work was essential to establish the proper foundation for appropriate administrative action to occur in schools and classrooms of the districts in question. Some quick examples of this important governance work will demonstrate how critical this aspect of school change and reform can be,

as reflected in the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework. (Robledo Montecel, 2005)

An Arkansan district is seeking unitary status after years of desegregation and supervision by the court. The district is about to petition the court to receive unitary status in the area of student discipline. The district is currently gathering evidence of the sound, good faith work it has undertaken to address the issue of over-representation of African American boys in disciplinary actions including suspensions and expulsions. A major portion of its good faith work is centered around the efforts of the school board to create new policy reflected in a revised student code of conduct, the approval of fiscal resources to elevate the capacity of staff to implement new disciplinary approaches in schools and classrooms, and the fiscal resources required to implement new programs such as "From the Heart" and "Why Try."

Two parishes in Louisiana have also had to revise policy and reflect the revisions in new student codes of conduct and personnel policies regarding employee recruitment and hiring and practices.

A district in Oklahoma has created a new civil rights plan to ensure the protection of equal educational opportunity for English Learners. While a major portion of the plan is focused on appropriate educational responses for these learn-
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“Effective governance requires a willingness to be held accountable and to hold others accountable to the results of excellence and equity for all students, without exception.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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ers, the board had to commit resources, staff, and restructured policy to ensure the plan's success.

In each of these instances it is a matter of the sound governance that must drive the actions of districts. The fundamentals of governance efficacy and fair, appropriate, equitable funding must be assured to guarantee the protection of civil rights for all learners. The SCCE has operated with the boards of these districts, as it does with all districts, with the view that boards of education and the governance they provide must:

1. Proactively protect and guarantee the civil rights of all learners
2. Build and articulate a vision of success and college going
3. Define and reflect the equity context as a basis for supporting student success

4. Create a dynamic communicative environment that courageously challenges inequities
5. Conduct on going equity-based environmental scanning to assure every student's civil rights protection
6. Support the implementation of competent curriculum and relevant pedagogy which is highly responsive to all diverse learners
7. Keep stakeholders informed, involved, engaged and trained in the skills and competencies to sustain effective school reform.

Good governance, sound governance is clearly essential to the students' civil rights protection.

Resources

Montemayor, A.M. "Stop the Merry-go-Round, Children Might Fall Off! – Parents as Stewards of Governance for School Reform that Supports Educational Equity," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, June-July 2007).

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Robledo, Montecel, M. "A Quality Schools Action Framework – Framing Systems Change for Student Success," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2005).

Rodríguez, R.G., and A. Villarreal. "School Boards Come of Age with a 21st Century Vision," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2013).

Rodríguez, R.G., and A. Villarreal. "Student Voice – A Key Element in Effective School Governance and Accountability," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, June-July 2012).

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Tracking the Learning and Tracking the Dollar – A School Board Member’s Priorities

Interview with Velma Vela Ybarra conducted by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Velma Vela Ybarra is an educator and school board member for Harlandale ISD in San Antonio, Texas. Ms. Ybarra discusses her experience as a school board member and the responsibilities of the board.

On key responsibilities of a school board

I have been an educator for 38 and a half years serving children as teacher, vice principal and central office administrator in Crystal City and in the Harlandale school district. I decided to run for the school board because no women had served for the last 10 years and as a Latina it is a benefit for a school board member to have a background in education. My youngest son graduated from Harlandale High School, and I also have five grandchildren in the school district, so I have a vested deep interest in their education.

The key responsibilities of a school board are, first, they must be cognizant of the community that they are serving. They also have to focus on learning and student achievement -- making sure the resources are meeting the prioritized needs of the district and making sure we are investing our tax dollars efficiently and that any decisions we make on allocating those resources are always based on data.

The two key responsibilities that I would hope community members would say that define me and that I take seriously are: (1) tracking the learning: looking at how kids, especially those who are struggling the most, how they are progressing, looking at data making sure we are providing a grand education for them, and (2) tracking the dollar: the fiduciary responsibility to make sure that if the community has entrusted us to take care of the tax dollars that we likewise are making frugal decisions on how we using that money and investing.

On monitoring the progress and support of students

Approximately 20 percent of our students district

twice are English learners and growing. The success of children in the special education and ESL programs are of special concern to me. One of the very first requests I made was that we look at tracking monthly how many of our English learners and special education children were leaving us before they attained their high school diploma. We looked at the quality of our dual language program and providing resources.

For example, this year, we provided in direct and indirect dollars, \$800,000 for materials to supplement instruction. We looked carefully at the numbers of teachers who are bilingual and ESL trained and certified because of the need that has been determined by the data. We have children in that special population who are struggling, and we have a commitment to make it better.

We have excellent dedicated teachers and principals who are aware of these findings and who provide the focus to improve our success rate with them. We get professional development, intervention specialists to work with the children when they wind up in trouble, using our early warning system where we look on how all kids, especially our ELL and special education students, are doing in terms of attendance and pass rates. And we use all of that data to make sure that we get our interventionists and our reading specialists and to provide staff development for our teachers who are faced with incredible challenges with curriculum and rigor required.

On budgeting resources

We are blessed with a balance that allows us to have resources. However when we are faced with an X amount of dollars and many, many needs we always look from the classroom out. The dollars first have to go to staffing and meeting the requirements in the classroom. Another challenge is improving technology. When we are pressed by budget limitations, we work from the classroom out.

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- School board governance efficacy resources
- Podcasts on the generations of civil rights and educational equity

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

On advice for potential school board members

If someone were to consider running for the school board – I would especially advise Latina women to get involved -- they should participate and consider running for public office. There will be challenges. Sometimes we, as women, have to lean in a little more and it might be considered aggressive. But if you don't lean in, you miss the opportunity to advocate, firmly, for the things you believe should be done in a more effective way.

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Eight Characteristics of an Effective School Board

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision
2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Dervarics, C. and E. O'Brian. "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards," the Center for Public Education (Alexandria, VA: The Center for Public Education, 2011).

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