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Focus: Governance Efficacy

Tyranny of Old Ideas About School Board Responsibilities

by Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., and Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D.

Many of our educational systems and processes have failed to keep up with the current age and a changing student body, nor do they represent our most recent thinking and legislation. This is the case with the roles and responsibilities of a school board, whose governance structures are not always reflective of a commitment to equity, access and excellence in education for all students.

Daniel Gross (2009) introduces his commentary on Matt Miller’s book, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Prosperity to Unleash a New Prosperity* (which inspired the title of this article), by reminding us that all too often conventional wisdom “in vital areas – health care, taxes, education, trade, social mobility – government and business remain in the grip of tired old rules that don’t work in the global economy.”

The purpose of this article is to consider an update for existing school board member responsibilities to be more inclusive and responsive to today’s changing demographics and school requirements. Below, we have identified key responsibilities that can benefit from re-thinking to better meet our present and future commitments to equity and college readiness for all students, particularly as we celebrated the 55th anniversary of the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in May.

After a brief discussion of each responsibility (taken from Texas’ delineation of school board roles) in

the most current language, we suggest a revised version of that responsibility that might serve us better in embracing these principles and encourage an emerging and strengthened role for school board members in a modern democratic society.

Current Responsibility: Ensure creation of a shared vision that promotes enhanced student achievement.

Recent literature and experience demonstrate that school boards are among the most critical factors that determine the success of school reform efforts. Their role as representatives of the community and families of students and with the legislative mandate to protect and guide the quality of education for the community is of greater significance now than ever before. School boards are facing electorates that demand better schools that are effective with all student groups and that are cost efficient in the delivery of services. School board participation in monitoring a school district’s success is being scrutinized carefully by their constituents.

Recommend change: *Ensure creation of a shared vision with input from parents and community that keeps schools responsible and accountable for establishing a college-going culture and preparing students to be college-ready.*

Current Responsibility: Adopt a shared vision based on community beliefs to guide local education.

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“Strong governance efficacy means that school leaders – at all levels – have the commitment and the capacity to deliver quality educational services to all students. And it means that school boards, school policies and school procedures support graduation and success for every student.”

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

(Tyranny of Old Ideas, continued from Page 1)

The concept of local control is undergoing fundamental changes defined by federal and state policies and judicial mandates that protect students' civil rights to a quality education. A vision that is entirely based on unfair community beliefs does not uphold the constitutional right for an equitable education for all (Cortez and Villarreal, 2006). For example, in his related 2008 opinion, Judge Wayne Justice stated, "It is equally unjust to perpetually fail to provide the resources and LEP [limited-English-proficient] programs necessary to ensure LEP students catch up" (LULAC-GI Forum vs. State of Texas, 2008). School practices that do not promote academic excellence where all students have access to a quality education are in non-compliance with the law.

Recommended change: *Adopt a shared vision based on academic access, equity and excellence for all students to guide education in its community.*

Current Responsibility: **Focus actions on policymaking, planning and evaluation.**

Of the major school board functions, policymaking is perhaps the one with the greatest impact on the quality of education that all children will receive in school. It is not uncommon for policies to be adopted by school boards that are convenient to the educator and negligent of what is best for children. While the functions of the board can be traced back to colonial times, current school boards must be agile in adapting its policies to be more reflective of an equity-based perspective.

Recommended change: *Focus policymaking on current research on best practices in an equity-based environment, current legislation and legal mandates.*

Current Responsibility: **Ensure progress toward achievement of district goals through a systematic, timely and comprehensive review of reports prepared by or at the direction of the superintendent.**

Progress monitoring is essential to uphold the democratic principles of our society and to ensure that all students receive equitable treatment and an excellent education that prepares them for college and work. The board must not only ensure these reports are done regularly, systematically and objectively, but also ensure they are shared with constituents, parents and community in a manner that is comprehensible and useful for future planning and ongoing district improvement.

The superintendent is responsible for directing that such reports be produced and accurately reflect knowledge of the interconnectedness of the educational pipeline, from pre-kindergarten through college. This requires a new way of requesting, compiling, analyzing and utilizing data, disaggregated by student groups. It will require that early childhood programs work more in concert with K-12 programs and that K-12 interface in more deliberate ways with local colleges and universities to use data more effectively in streamlining the education pipeline.

Recommended change: *Ensure progress toward achievement of district goals through a systematic, timely and comprehensive review of student achievement, graduation, college enrollment, and college success reports, disaggregated by student population, resulting in equal access to a quality curriculum and improved learning for all students.*

Current Responsibility: **Monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional programs by reviewing reports prepared by or at the direction of the superintendent and direct the superintendent to make modifications that promote maximum achievement for all students.**

The sharing and monitoring of reports with transparency is essential to "keeping the public in public schools." School boards should ensure that their districts have access to the most recent research-based best practices and experts in various fields to assist in the interpretation of reports and in the continuous improvement of each school.

Recommended change: *Monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional programs by requesting a panel of experts to review reports and make recommendations for school district and the various schools, and direct the superintendent to make modifications that promote maximum and equitable achievement for all student groups.*

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A Guide for School Board Members to Assess District Effectiveness

By Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., and Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D.

Access, excellence and equity in education and eliminating achievement gaps among various student groups are two major outcome areas that a school board should use to assess the overall performance of its school district and for which they should hold individual schools and their leadership accountable.

Robledo Montecel (2005) has identified two fundamental elements as critical for student success: fair funding and governance efficacy. Governance efficacy “strengthens school holding power when administrative and supervisory personnel have the capacity to deliver quality educational services to all students, along with the policymaking and pro-active support of a school board to hold on to every student” (2005). As elected officials, it is precisely the challenge and responsibility of school board members to take a pro-active stance in fulfilling their governance duty to the communities they serve.

While not an all-inclusive list, the following standards are intended to raise school board awareness of equity as a lens through which to view and assess school performance and to rethink their role as guardians of a school district’s progress.

School leaders at all levels need to create a shared vision of success for all students. But school board members in particular have the unique responsibility of ensuring that systems for equity are in place and are operating effectively within each school. (See IDRA’s Six Goals of Educational Equity online.)

Standard 1: All students graduate college ready and career ready.

Anything less than the 90 percent standard represents a huge loss of human capital and potential innate in each and every one of our children. Identification and development of this human resource are the greatest charges that our society and educational systems, in particular, must address. While we can quantify the economic cost of school dropouts in terms of a loss of consumers and producers to a society, loss in human creativity, spirit and innovation is immeasurable whenever we

under-educate students or lead them to drop out.

As a world leader, our country must not allow this situation to continue unchallenged. The future of our nation is dependant upon the youth of today. Griffin and Ward (2006) have identified the focus on student achievement as a school board’s number one job.

To this end, each school board must have a set of expectations around each of the following student performance indicators: academic achievement, college readiness, graduation rates, college enrollment, workforce success, and scores in college entrance exams.

Key questions for school board members to ask are:

- Do all policies and practices support high achievement for all students?
- Do achievement gaps among different student groups exist?
- Is this prevalent in all schools in the district?
- What policies are needed in order to increase the achievement level of our schools and close an achievement gap among schools and the state?
- Is there evidence of comparable support, assistance and guidance for all students to be college ready?

Standard 2: All students, including English language learners and students with disabilities, have access to a curriculum and a graduation plan to meet college and workforce readiness requirements.

Every school in a district must promote a college-going culture where all students are expected to graduate with the requisite knowledge and skills to be successful in college and/or become a highly productive member of the workforce. In his book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, Wagner (2009) identifies seven survival skills in today’s highly competitive world that must be addressed in curriculum: critical thinking and

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School board members in particular have the unique responsibility of ensuring that systems for equity are in place and are operating effectively within each school.

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problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.

Tracking students into anything less than a rigorous and relevant curriculum undermines the democratic process and represents an unconscionable practice that leads to an inadequate education and loss of human capital and potential. School board members should not allow any of their schools to be lulled into a “sea of uncertainty” created by preconceived and deficit ideas of children or a defeatist attitude about the potential of the school to make a difference.

Schools must reflect and clearly articulate the belief that all children will learn and have the conviction and commitment to act appropriately in order to provide equitable support and opportunities for all children to have an excellent education. In fact, each school board member should communicate high performance expectations for college readiness throughout all levels of the school hierarchy and generate district-wide support by redefining the role of auxiliary staff in supporting this goal.

Key questions for school board members to ask are:

- Are college readiness and workforce skills integrated into the K-12 curriculum?
- Does each school differentiate instruction in a manner that does not water down the curriculum?

Standard 3: All students have access to highly qualified teachers, administrators and support staff to ensure that a high caliber curriculum for college readiness is implemented with integrity and rigor.

Without teachers and administrators who are highly qualified and possess a genuine desire to make a difference for all students, a school district can never reach its full potential to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to graduate college ready and become a success in a highly competitive market. An exemplary school district is one that has highly qualified teachers, administrators and other support staff equitably distributed among all schools.

Key questions for school board members to ask are:

- What mechanisms ensure that various district

leaders are accountable and supported for promoting student academic success and college readiness?

- Are teachers teaching outside of their areas of certification and expertise?
- What are we doing to take care of teacher shortages in this area?
- Is there equity district-wide to ensure the placement of master teachers in every school?
- Do teachers and administrators have the knowledge and skills to work in schools and classrooms with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

Standard 4: Each school has established meaningful partnerships with parents and the community wherein high expectations and shared accountability for student success become the norm.

Parents and community members have much at stake in ensuring that the education of their children is of the highest quality. School board members, as representatives of the community, also have a legal responsibility to protect the interests and educational welfare of their constituents.

It is imperative that schools establish partnerships where planning and implementing strategies for student success becomes a shared responsibility among educators, community and parents. The community and parents have much to offer schools, but all too often, schools are lax in valuing them and seizing opportunities to partner.

Key questions for school board members to ask are:

- How are parents being involved in the planning and implementation of strategies for student success?
- Are there mechanisms in place for ensuring continuous communication, information, planning and feedback regarding parent involvement in the teaching and learning process?
- Is there meaningful participation of parents and community in the planning and implementation of student success activities?
- Do schools have partnership agreements with parents and community members to ensure student success?
- Are requirements for graduation and college

readiness shared with parents in a language that is understood?

These four standards are critical to ensuring equity and success of a school district in serving and building upon assets of its various student groups and community. As a representative of the community, the school board member has a major role to play in college readiness, as well as a responsibility to many stakeholders, including students, parents and future generations to come.

Resources

- Griffin, A., and C. Ward. “Five Characteristics of an Effective School Board: A Multifaceted Role, Defined – How does your school district measure up?” *Edutopia* (San Rafael, California: George Lucas Educational Foundation, March 21, 2006).
- National School Boards Association. Key Works of School Boards, web site: www.nsba.org/MAinMenu?Governance?KeyWork.aspx
- 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).
- Wagner, T. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need – And What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., is director of IDRA Field Services. Rosana G. Rodriguez, Ph.D., is director of development. Comments and questions may be directed to them via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

All Students Deserve a Chance – Don't Take it Away

By Rogelio López del Bosque, Ed.D.

High school graduates need the same set of skills and knowledge whether they plan to go to college or enter the workforce, said 71 percent of high school teachers in a recent national survey by ACT Inc., the educational testing company. But almost all high school teachers (94 percent) in the study said that secondary teachers lower expectations for students who aren't headed for college. In fact, 42 percent said teachers reduce academic expectations significantly for students they perceive as not being college-bound. (2010)

It can be impressive to see schools displaying college banners and materials and to see their statements and plans so eloquently written about striving for success and using the appropriate buzz words for setting up a college culture. It all sounds wonderful, but has no value if there is an institutionalized deficit view of students and community.

Unfortunately, the new graduation guidelines in Texas put such low expectations into the high school structure. With the passage of House Bill 3 last year, Texas has a new set of graduation plans for incoming ninth graders. There are now three official tracks for graduation: the Minimum High School Program with 22 credits, the Recommended High School Program with 26 credits, and the Distinguished Achievement Program with 26 credits.

IDRA and others, including the Texas Center for Education Policy, have shown that there are in reality four tracks. Within the Recommended High School Program, there are two tracks that are significantly different. One is a "career and technology" track that is designed to prepare students more for the workforce, while the other is more likely to prepare students for college.

Students and parents must be informed that both the minimal track and career and technology track are not designed to prepare students for college. And schools should not be making college choices on behalf of students. Placing students on non-college graduation routes limits their options for a better life later on.

So, why then were these routes even offered?

Clearly, the state is providing another way out for those schools that are failing to prepare our students for college. The deep-rooted institutionalized low expectations and "college is not for everyone" mentality continues to haunt our students, particularly minority students.

But lowering this academic expectation is not acceptable.

As a former high school principal, I worked collaboratively with staff to create a high level of expectations for our students. But we often were slowed by that old informal power structure with deficit views of our students and community. Our determination and efforts to create a college culture was met with low expectations mainly because of the school's location and the students' demographics. Reaching out to our parents and community, keeping them informed and truly engaged in all matters of their school, was critical.

As a result, the school made the Texas Business and Education Council (TBEC) honor roll three times; it was selected as one of the Top Ten Schools in Houston and its surrounding area by Children at Risk and Rice University; it was a *US News and World Report* bronze medal winner; and it achieved exemplary status by the fifth year. Every year, we raised the bar; and every year, our students would surpass it.

Below is list of strategies we implemented and found pivotal in maintaining a realistic college culture. If you want to see some results, everyone must be engaged in this effort.

School Services for Students

- Increase rigor of the curriculum to ensure acceptance into and success in college.
- Provide direct instruction in preparation for the SAT examination.
- Expand the number of dual credit courses being offered each semester.
- Provide a college skills course emphasizing

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Schools should not be making college choices on behalf of students. Placing students on non-college graduation routes limits their options for a better life later on.

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- applications and financial aid.
- Provide a “college connection” course for transition to college.
- Hire a dedicated counselor to assist students in preparing for college.
- Set up visits to three to four college campuses per year for 11th and 12th graders.
- Provide information and encouragement for students to seek out and apply for scholarships.
- Assist students with Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.
- Offer pathways to college training for students and parents (in Spanish and English for example) through the IDRA Texas Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC). See the free IDRA guide, *Hacia Adelante - Pathways to College - A Guide for Families*, online at <http://www.idra.org>.
- Hold college nights for the entire school with in-state and out-of-state colleges and universities.
- Provide multiple links on the school’s web site directing students and parents to college and scholarship opportunities.
- Include freshmen orientation in your school’s efforts to prepare the students’ collegiate academic career.
- Keep the school library open in the evenings to support student achievement and computer access.
- Set up 30 minutes of silent, sustained reading every school day.
- Include vocabulary instruction and reinforcement in every class every day.
- Lead writing across the curriculum.
- Provide advanced technology courses.
- Ensure close monitoring of student academic progress.

School Services for Parents

- Provide information on the school’s efforts to prepare students for college.
- Ensure true parent engagement in the school.
- Set up grade-level parent meetings several times a year to provide critical information on passing standards and graduation requirements and assist with the college application and financial aid process.

- Provide all information in English and parents’ home language in discussions at all meetings.
- Provide sustained information and encouragement regarding scholarship opportunities.
- Offer computer access to parents and members of the community in the evenings.
- Offer technology courses in literacy, Spanish and English as a second language.

School Services for Instructional Staff

- Instill a philosophy of valuing all students and parents.
- Reinforce an instructional philosophy of college preparation for all students (through direct goals and objectives). Sustain the effort to change the culture that expects less of urban, minority students.
- Do not accept mediocre work; demand excellence from the students.
- Provide AP training for all staff at a local university each summer.
- Lead careful discussions and analysis of PSAT/TAKS/Stanford 10 testing results with teachers and parents and adjust instruction to meet targeted needs.
- Provide professional development to help teachers understand how better to prepare students for the academic rigors of college.
- Prepare and assist teachers with classroom management, discipline and research.

Historically there is a high failure rate for many students who attend college. But with the above activities, my school’s percentage of students meeting college-readiness jumped from 10 percent in English language arts to 80 percent and from 47 percent in mathematics to 77 percent in 2006-07 alone.

Our commitment was to value our students and parents and to work collaboratively as a team. We provided a safe, supportive environment with caring teachers using cutting-edge innovative instruction. We felt obligated to prepare all our students and do much more. This starts with the principal working collaboratively with staff, students and community. If we don’t do what is necessary to help the students, then who will?

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- *Hacia Adelante - Pathways to College - A Guide for Families* (English and Spanish versions)
- Classnotes podcasts on principal leadership

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Resources

ACT, Inc. *ACT National Curriculum Survey 2009* (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT, Inc., January 20, 2010). <http://www.act.org/news/releases/2010/1-20-10.html>

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At a Time When We Most Need Strength, Texas Education is At-Risk of Being Weakened

by Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

Editor’s note: The original statement released by IDRA before adoption of these measures in Texas in 2009 is available online at http://www.idra.org/Press_Room/Recent_Statements/. For specific provisions of these measures, see IDRA’s Newsletter Plus.

At no point in history has Texas had a pipeline that moves all or even most students from quality early childhood education to college graduation and beyond. Today, our public schools are losing tens of thousands of students every year. And we only have a 5 percent higher education participation rate. That rate is a mere 3.7 percent for Hispanic students.

This affects everyone. In order to survive and thrive, Texans must be educated. Not just a few. All Texans.

But rather than embracing the challenge, some state leaders seem intent on lowering expectations. Unfortunately the new “accountability” plans that were adopted for Texas do not necessarily result in – as claimed by proponents – the creation of schools that educate all students to a true level of college readiness. In fact, these measures most likely will have a devastating effect on our state. Specifically, “accountability” policies are counterproductive when they:

- Bring back tracking of students into college and work (career/technical) tracks
- Lower standards for some students by decreasing performance standards required for graduation
- Give up on the idea that all students should be prepared for college by allowing schools to support only some students for college
- Provide no safeguards preventing over-referral of minority students into non-college tracks
- Substitute one set of high-stakes assessments with other high-stakes measures
- Lower performance standards for schools and students by requiring demonstrated achievement in just two content areas
- Weaken content in math and science courses by allowing substitution of career and technical education “equivalent” courses in all content areas
- Do little to address the over-testing of students and over-reliance on test scores
- Remove whatever transparency exists in the state’s accountability system by hopelessly complicating the process used to rate school and district performance
- Fail to provide any substantive funding to support the many changes required

In short, counterproductive accountability policies do nothing to ensure that the state will produce the highly educated workforce needed to be competitive in a global economy.

Texas cannot afford to move backwards. We cannot lower the bar and then claim to have increased the success rate, using smoke and mirrors to create another “Texas miracle.” While disguised as a move to address all the ills of prior reform efforts – including provisions in the increasingly unpopular NCLB – some parts of the changes represent a giant step backward for Texas education. Years of work will be needed to clean up the newly created quagmire.

A vital Texas must have educational parity for all Texans and not parcel out one set of opportunities for some and minimal expectations for others. Our current challenge of getting more of our schools and students to perform at high levels should not be met with a headlong effort to make it easier for everyone to look good. It is not time to run and hide. It is time to stand firm and defend what we know is good for all students.

(Tyranny of Old Ideas, continued from Page 2)

Current Responsibility: Develop skills in teamwork, problem solving and decision-making.

In our increasingly interconnected world, the skills of shared teamwork, problem solving and decision-making are crucial. The board must be the guiding light to consistently issue the call for district leaders to work collaboratively and to engage in meaningful partnerships with the local community and parents in creating schools that maintain highest standards of quality in instruction and support to graduate all students college- and workforce-ready. This can be fostered by recognizing, valuing and tapping into

the funds of knowledge represented in the diverse communities served by the district and building upon the assets of families, students and the local community.

Recommended change: *Build knowledge base about the assets and needs of the various student populations in the district and foster skill development in teamwork, problem solving and shared decision making.*

Resources

Cortez, A., and A. Villarreal. “Assessing Policies for Success of Minority Students.” *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association,

June-July 2006).

LULAC-GI Forum vs. State of Texas, 2008.

Miller, M. *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Thinking to Unleash a New Prosperity* (New York, N.Y.: Times Books, 2009).

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Focus: Governance Efficacy

“Whether at the school board, school administrator or teacher level, effective governance requires developing the shared habit of vision that eschews the tired excuses of the past and creates schools that work for all students.”

– Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework, IDRA (in press)

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