School Board Governance Symposium

Improving Schools through Board Governance

Tuesday, October 22, 2013

Sponsored by the UGA Office of the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach
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Public Service & Outreach
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Vinson Institute of Government
The University of Georgia,
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School Board Governance Symposium
Improving Schools through Board Governance

Sponsored by the UGA Office of the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach
Tuesday, October 22, 2013
UGA Hotel and Conference Center

9:30 a.m.
Welcome and Introduction
Jennifer Frum
University of Georgia Vice President for Public Service and Outreach

9:45 a.m.
Keynote Address: Why Good Board Governance Matters
Thomas J. Gentzel
Executive Director, National School Boards Association

10:15 a.m.
Panel Presentation: Governance Challenges and Lessons Learned
Moderator: Dr. Theresa Wright
Carl Vinson Institute of Government
William “Brad” Bryant and James Bostic
Former Georgia Board of Education members
Tony Arasi and Zenda Bowie
Georgia School Boards Association staff members

11:30 a.m.
How to Improve Education through Good Governance: Examples from around the Country
Dr. Veronica Harts
Vice President for Professional Learning, AdvancED (SACS)

12:15 p.m.
Lunch Speaker
Michael L. Thurmond
Superintendent, DeKalb County School District

1:15 p.m.
Panel Presentation: The Intersecting Responsibilities and Roles of the School Board and the Superintendent on Policy and Administrative Issues
Moderator: Dr. Phillip Boyle
Carl Vinson Institute of Government
Chairman Carole Boyce and Superintendent Alvin Wilbanks
Gwinnett County School System
Chairman Nath Morris and Superintendent William Schofield
Hall County School System
Chairman James Fleming and Superintendent Molly Howard
Jefferson County School System

3:30 p.m.
Reflections: What Did We Learn Today?
In recent years, several schools boards in Georgia have lost or been threatened with losing accreditation due to breakdowns in school board governance. These events have raised the public’s awareness of the importance of effective board governance. Boards face a variety of governance challenges from school personnel management to policy leadership and much more. There is an established need for a greater understanding of the reasons for breakdowns in school board governance and how to avoid the causes in the future.

The Office of the Vice President, along with the directors of UGA public service and outreach units, has identified school board governance as a research priority for 2014. Our first step in addressing this need was sponsoring the School Board Governance Symposium: Improving Schools through Board Governance in October 2013 to foster a greater understanding of the attributes of effective school board governance in Georgia.

This report of the symposium proceedings is intended to be a resource for school boards, superintendents, and those who work with school leaders. We hope that the speeches, articles, and other resources will inform training programs and help improve school board governance in Georgia. Video archives of the symposium are located at: https://www.youtube.com/user/UGABeyondtheArch

I would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Sis Henry, executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association, her staff, the UGA project team at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, and all of the speakers, panelists, and moderators for their contributions to this successful symposium.

Jennifer Frum, Ph.D.
Vice President for Public Service and Outreach
University of Georgia
Welcome

Good morning. I am Dr. Jennifer Frum, Vice President for Public Service and Outreach here at the University of Georgia. We are honored to have each of you with us today to learn about how to improve schools through school board governance. We are delighted to have a distinguished and experienced panel of speakers for all of us to learn from.

We are equally honored to have so many school board members from around the state here. We know your attendance today is a reflection of your sacrifice and commitment to public service and your desire to make your schools and the board you serve on as effective as possible.

We are proud to say that as Georgia’s flagship land-grant institution, UGA is a national leader in university outreach. Our faculty and staff work in every corner of the state helping to create jobs and prosperity, develop the state’s leaders, and solve critical community and statewide challenges. Much of this work is carried out through UGA’s eight Public Service and Outreach units:

- the Archway Partnership
- the Carl Vinson Institute of Government
- the J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development
- our Marine Outreach Programs, which include the Marine Extension Service and Georgia Sea Grant
- the Office of Service-Learning
- the Small Business Development Center
- the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, and
- the UGA Center for Continuing Education, which includes our meeting place today.
Earlier this year, leaders from throughout public service and outreach met to discuss how the university could better assist in addressing matters important to the state. What additional services, research, or other support can we contribute to help solve difficult issues, both statewide and for individual communities?

One of the goals of the new UGA President Jere Morehead is to increase the university’s role in the state’s economic development. We all know that education and jobs go hand-in-hand. A strong K–16 system is essential for economic growth, innovation, and productivity. Statewide economic development will not succeed if Georgians do not possess the skills and knowledge to continue to advance the state in today’s global knowledge economy. Given these realities and some of the state’s recent higher profile school governance challenges, we are honored to host this symposium to consider ways to improve schools through effective school board governance.

The dictionary defines a symposium as “a formal meeting at which several specialists deliver short addresses on a topic or on related topics.” Our specialists today are people who are well versed in issues related to school board governance. We all know that most school boards around the state operate effectively and manage the resources entrusted to them efficiently. Our hope for today is that you will leave here even better informed about

- why school board governance matters and its impact on educational outcomes,
- the causes and warning signs of breakdowns in board governance, and
- the administrative and policy roles of boards and how those roles interface with the role of the superintendent.

I know we will all benefit from the insights that will be shared by our speakers, and I look forward to learning with you as we discuss how to improve school board governance.
Good morning, everybody. It is good to be here as a Nittany Lion in Bulldog Country. I have to tell you, Penn State is also a land-grant university. I got a great tour of the campus yesterday, thanks to my good friend Sis Henry, who is a proud graduate of this school. What a beautiful place. It is just thrilling to be here. I do have to say that of all the titles I have had, being a friend of Sis Henry is one of my favorites. It is just good to be with her and her team from the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) and to get to know some of you.

Let me get something out of the way. Mark Twain once said that God created idiots—that was for practice. And then he created school boards. Go ahead, just laugh. Let’s just get it out there. Something was different then, and I think it was healthy, actually, because it was all about keeping people honest. Will Rogers did a lot of this, making a little fun, just keeping people honest.

Today, the tone has changed, and I think there is really an attack on local school governance and on public education. I commend you for holding this session because I think it is important to talk about these issues, celebrate the successes that we have seen, and to talk about the changes that need to be made. I would like to talk to you just briefly about where we are with public education and how school governance fits into that.

At the National School Boards Association (NSBA), we have some pretty strong and compelling beliefs. One of them is that we need to have a strong system of public education to ensure a strong democracy. Now, that sounds a bit like a bumper sticker, but when you think about it, it is absolutely critical. Our system of public education has allowed folks from all backgrounds, all walks of life, to be able to become one citizenry, to become one nation. And I think that is an important function. Frankly, some of the efforts now to dismantle public education threaten that fabric.
We also know that the challenges are greater and greater. We can, I think, rightfully celebrate a lot of the successes that public education has enjoyed in terms of improving student achievement. But we also know that the uprights on the goal post keep getting a little bit closer together: we have to do more and more, in many cases with fewer and fewer resources.

Finally, one of the other compelling beliefs is that a strong public school system needs strong community leadership. I think this is particularly important. When you think about the public schools that we have come to know and appreciate over the years, they really are embedded in the community’s life. As I have traveled around the country, I have found that in most communities, the public school is seen as one of the community’s greatest assets. And it is important to have strong, effective leadership at the local level. This is particularly important now because of the pressures that we are seeing from the state and, more and more, the federal levels of government, who are imposing more requirements on school districts. There is a different view of public schools if they are seen as community assets led by community folks versus the public schools being an outpost of a distant bureaucracy, often a state capital or Washington, DC. NSBA thinks the more that we can connect communities to the schools, the more successful they will be.

What do we know about effective school governance? What makes a school board effective? First of all, the schools, school boards, school governance is democracy. It is not always pretty. It does not always work perfectly. It is not a machine that can be fine-tuned. But there are some really important attributes that I am sure will be discussed as we go through the day. Our Center for Public Education at the NSBA—www.centerforpubliceducation.org, if you want to visit the website—has done a lot of good work in this area, looking at what constitutes an effective school board.

When we examined the high-achieving school districts, we found that those school boards behave a little differently than the school boards in lower achieving districts. As Yogi Berra once said, “I think it’s too coincidental to be a coincidence.” These things actually relate. Where a school board spends its time and where it devotes its effort does matter. A board’s effectiveness also involves evaluating its own performance on a regular basis and then, quite importantly, committing to a vision about what the public school should be achieving in that district. These are important roles for boards.
Some things that we have seen with high-performing school boards include not getting involved in operations—kind of having their arms around an organization but not having their fingers in it, so that their focus is on policies that improve student achievement.

Now, I will tell you one of the things that I think has changed for the better over the 33 years that I have been working with school boards. Back in the day, back in 1980, when I started at the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, we used to talk about the four B’s of school boards: buildings, buses, budgets, and ball games. That is where the boards kept their focus. That was a reality. Because the thinking then was that we hired a superintendent to handle the education side of the shop. That is still true in many ways today. I am going to talk about that in just a moment, but I think one of the biggest changes is that boards have to own responsibility for student achievement. You cannot separate the governance of a system from the management of a system and say that the management side has total responsibility for education. That is important.

Another key role of a high-performing school board is connecting with the community in an ongoing way. This is not just the public comment period at a meeting. It is really engaging a community and hearing what they have to say. As we regularly tell school boards, that can often mean hearing things you do not want to hear. But true community engagement means having a real conversation, real talk about what is happening in the schools.

Another attribute is using data. This is important. I think we have seen a great increase in the effectiveness of school boards as they have begun to actually look at data to measure their performance and to make decisions based on that. They are investing in professional development for their staff and using data to align resources with the needs of the district. Adopting a budget is a lot more than just approving numbers, because a budget speaks directly, of course, to the priorities of the district. That is where real meaning can be seen in the work of a school board.

A final key role of high-performing school boards, crucially, is having respectful relationships with the superintendent and with the leadership team of the district. Folks, this does not mean always agreeing. In fact, I have often told school boards, “If you go to board meetings and everybody is always agreeing, then somebody is not thinking.” Because one of the points of a school board is to bring different perspectives to the table. But it is about having respectful conversation, and it is about making decisions and working through those things and moving on.

Overall, I guess we could say that this is about aligning an organization, aligning the governance of the organization with the management of the organization and the instructional work of an organization. The analogy might be to driving a car that is out of alignment. Anyone ever do this? It is frustrating. I mean, you can get from here to there, but you will wind up spending a lot of energy just trying to stay on track. Similarly, to the extent that boards and superintendents and leadership teams can talk about these things, I think it helps ensure that everybody is pulling in the same direction.
NSBA developed some work back in the 1990s—and we have updated it since—called the Key Work of School Boards (see figure below). It looks at some of these attributes and some of the things that boards need to be focusing on to make all of these ideas real and to invest board members’ time in the right way. These include several components that I will talk about just briefly. Keep in mind as I go through these that it is important to look at these components holistically and not just as individual items to be checked off. This is systems thinking, and it is about how parts of an organization work together.

The Key Work of School Boards involves creating that vision that I talked about: having a clear sense of where the schools ought to be going and the expectations, having standards by which to measure the foundation of the learning system. These can include federal and national standards, local standards, assessment, and tracking performance as we go along. There is a lot of conversation, of course, about the overreliance on standardized testing. That is not what this is about. This is about having real, meaningful multiple measures of student performance that can be fed back into a system and into the decision-making processes for a school board so that it knows where to align its resources—and then, taking responsibility. This is absolutely critical: the board must take responsibility for student performance and use data to report it publicly and to make decisions based on it.

There is a great story about Rudy Giuliani, when he was mayor of New York. This is such a good story that I actually hope it is true. Because I have been telling the story for years, I am going to just believe that it is true. As you may remember, when he was mayor of New York, crime dropped pretty dramatically in New York City. A lot of it was the use of data. They really aligned and targeted policing to the places that needed it. At a news conference, a reporter—with all respect to reporters in the room—the reporter challenged the mayor and said, “Your Honor, you’ve been talking about the crime drop in the city, but what about…” and he pointed to some precincts in one part of the city where it had not. The crime rate had actually gone up pretty dramatically. Giuliani’s answer, I thought, was great. He said, “That’s a problem, and we have the data. We’re looking at it, and we’re going to work on that. You’re going to see improvement.” What I love about his answer is that he owned the problem. It was not about whitewashing things. It was saying, “Things are a lot better than they were, but we’re not there yet.”
yet. There are issues throughout the system.” That applies to public schools equally. I think we have to acknowledge that there will always be issues. These are human systems. They are not perfect. But by taking responsibility and accountability for performance, reporting it, acknowledging the shortcomings and where resources are being deployed, I think we address that in a meaningful way.

Alignment, which I already mentioned, is another issue, another attribute of an effective school board. It involves ensuring that all of the resources and efforts of the district are aligned, so everybody is sort of pulling in the same direction.

Climate and culture are another attribute within the Key Work of School Boards—to try to create an environment in which learning thrives and, frankly, an environment in which people feel free to try new things, to adapt. I think this is one of the linchpins of improved student performance. One of the great things about public education, the history in this country, is that there is a great spirit of trial-and-error, of trying new things and districts learning from each other. I worry a bit that we have lost some of that with this heavy focus on reporting standardized test scores, using that as the measure of how well schools are doing. We have, to some extent, lost that spirit of trying new things and being willing to say, “That didn’t work, but we learned a lesson from it and we’re going to try something else.” This is how any organization gets better.

Another attribute is community engagement. As I mentioned, this is ongoing, it is two-way, and it has to be real. It has to be meaningful. I say to the board members who are here today, first of all, thank you for your service, because I think what you do is one of the last vestiges of true community service in our country. But you also are public officials, and you are in the community. You are the eyes and ears; you are good connectors. You can listen, and you can engage. And that is really important. When people know that the members of the school board truly want to hear what the public is saying, the relationships almost automatically get better. And there is finally continuous improvement, which I think for any organization is absolutely critical. You must be willing to say, “We are almost there, but we’re not there yet.”

I will date myself, and I will date a few others in this room. Anybody remember the Ed Sullivan Show? My favorite act on the Ed Sullivan Show was the guy with the spinning plates. Who remembers this act? Ten plates. For the younger people in the crowd, there were these poles, and he had plates. They were playing this frenetic music, and he would run and try to get this plate spinning and then the next one and the next one and the next one. And by the time he gets about halfway down, the first plate starts to wobble and...
topple. And he would be going back, fixing that one, and the next, and the next. Ladies and gentlemen, that is your work. That is your work, right? I mean, it is never really done. You can get all 10 plates spinning, but you are not sitting back and saying, “That is terrific,” as they are crashing to the floor. You have to be constantly working on it.

How do we help school boards know how to achieve that kind of success? First of all—and this may sound a bit gratuitous, but I have pointed to this all over the country, so I’m very happy to repeat it here today—your state, Georgia, is seen nationally as a leader in this effort. I do want to commend the Georgia School Boards Association, the Association of Superintendents, because you had a magnificent effort, the visioning project, which has gained national attention. And GSBA has also helped to write standards for effective school governance. These are the kinds of tools that boards can use and talk about in their retreats and in their conversations. Because it has to be an ongoing conversation.

A number of other states have done some great work as well, Iowa and others, but let me just say this: that conversation about how we are doing, that question, and what can we do better, has to take place on an ongoing basis, and we have to have some way of measuring that.

One other point: I came from a state where school boards have nine members typically, but whether it is five, seven, nine, it does not matter. When one person leaves the board, the board changes. It is a different board. The dynamics on the board have changed. That is another reason why this conversation has to be ongoing. It has to be meaningful, and we have to talk about it.

There clearly are a lot of examples where this is working well. Just one that I want to cite to you is Charlotte-Mecklenburg, because they just won the award from our Council of Urban Boards of Education. They have seen substantial improvement in student achievement among minorities and in economically disadvantaged populations over the last five years. This happened because the board took real ownership, and they invested in their own professional development. They encouraged a lot of community engagement around hiring a new superintendent, a lot of conversation. And they developed an academic plan with a lot of community engagement as well as a weighted funding formula within the district to drive dollars where the greatest need was. And finally, again, they succeeded by engaging a lot of folks through task forces and other conversations. An example like Charlotte really shows us this can work. It can work when people invest and they commit collectively to making it work. And they see that it can make a difference.

What are the challenges? What are the headwinds that we are seeing? If we know what works, why doesn’t it always work?

There is one reason why I am still working with school boards after 33 years, and that is because I love what I do. One of the things I love about it is meeting so many different folks. School boards reflect a cross-section of our society, which I think is one of the real strengths, quite honestly. For example, I had somebody say to me recently, “Our school board doesn’t really have anybody on it who was an educator.” My answer to that
is, “So?" I mean, I think it is great if you have somebody with an education background, but what is most important is that people can see themselves, their community reflected on their board. It is important that somebody is sitting at that table, asking the questions that you would ask as a member of the community.

But having said all that, it is a cross-section, so there are some people on school boards—nobody here, nobody in Georgia—but there are some people on school boards who maybe do not always get this message that I am delivering, who maybe are in a different place. But I have to tell you, after 33 years, they are the exceptions. Now, unfortunately, they can be what I call the nickel in the dryer. They make a lot of noise; they get attention for the wrong reasons; and they can create a perception about school boards that I think is quite unfair. But this is democracy. It is not always pretty. It does not always work exactly the way we want it to. But I do think that by having standards and the expectations for how things should work, continuously investing and making it better, we can achieve that.

One of the headwinds is that, yes, sometimes the individuals on the board create a challenge to the governing system. But I think we have external challenges as well. We have always had this tension between state government and local government. In every state, education is a fundamental role of the state, and it should be. It is often a constitutional role of the state. There is a tension between how much the state should dictate in terms of having uniformity and how much flexibility there should be in terms of local decision-making. I do not think that is bad. In fact, I think that is pretty healthy. That leads to good conversation about public policy.

School boards and school boards associations are quite different than other interest groups that might be lobbying, because in our case and in the case of the Municipal League and other such groups that represent elected officials, it is really about connecting elected officials at one level with elected officials at another level. I can tell you after 33 years, I have never been involved in lobbying for anything that resulted in the personal benefit of school board members. Never. It was always about what our members, as local elected officials, felt was important to do for public education in the state.

There is always that challenge of working with state government, and now, of course, we are seeing an increasing challenge in terms of what is happening with the federal government. A federal role that has expanded dramatically from the days of the 1950s with Sputnik and the guy with the spinning plates. Back then, the federal role was seen as being targeted and limited because there was a national need for math and science education initially.

Today, the role of the federal government has grown dramatically. I think what is troubling about this is that it is not always happening through a democratic process. I do not mean this next couple of sentences to be an attack on any one administration. This is a trend we have seen for the last number of years. I think maybe we can say that because Congress is so effective at doing its work—as we just saw last week—and of course, because Congress is ineffective, because it is not moving, we have been waiting for years for re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It has created a sort of power vacuum
into which the Department of Education has moved. Through waivers and all kinds of special provisions, the Department is making federal education policy.

NSBA responded to that issue earlier this year by introducing the bill that we drafted called the Local School Board Governance and Flexibility Act, which would limit the authority of the Secretary of Education to issue those kinds of regulations. Because what we need to do is get back to a place where policy is being made by elected officials and is being implemented by appointed officials.

Again, this is not an attack on any one Secretary of Education; it is a trend that we have been seeing. I think it is a concern from a governance point of view and from a true federalism perspective as well. We are fighting that good fight for community-based schools, for effective school boards.

I just want to close with one or two quick thoughts. One is that this work depends on good people coming forward and being willing to serve. Many of you in this room fit that bill. I do want to thank you for that, because I do not think most people really understand what school boards are, what you are charged with doing. And that is something that we and our state associations are committed to trying to do a better job of helping to inform. If people do not appreciate that role, then they do not necessarily understand how schools are governed and why decisions are being made. The role of local school boards is one that we need to strengthen and defend.

Beyond that, I think we have a responsibility to talk about this in terms of a democracy. We can debate issues like vouchers; we can debate charter schools. All of these things that we are dealing with right now are not bad issues to debate. They are new ideas, and we should be talking about them. But the dirty little secret right now is that in many cases, in too many places, some of these things are being used for one of two reasons that I think are very troubling. One, by private interests that are frankly lining their own pockets at public expense. We have seen major movement by some groups that are trying to do that, to privatize, because they see the opportunity—an institution that is spending hundreds of billions of dollars a year, the largest collective employer in the country—they see an opportunity to make money.

The other troubling result is that we are seeing a resegregation of our schools in too many places. We have to be honest about that. That is not the public education system that built this country. It was a system that brought everybody together. So, we need to make sure it is a great system, a system of choice for all parents.

In closing, I think the goal for us is really quite simple. At the end of the day, every child should have access to a great school where he or she lives. There should be no exceptions to that rule. We should not be satisfied that there are some places, some communities where the schools just never will be very good. We cannot accept that. So, that is the challenge. Those are the data that we have to own, and that is the work that we have

1 Gentzel is referring to the 2013 federal government shutdown that took place from October 1–October 16.
to do. I will stop with that and if we have a couple of minutes, I would like to take a few questions to see if I have provoked any particular thoughts.

**Audience Member #1:** Could you talk a little bit about when you have seen school boards work effectively with local media? Here is my context. We work closely with economic developers all over the state, and we hear frequently that prospects coming to the state have already done their research about particular cities or counties or regions. They have looked at education statistics and whether there is controversy in local school districts. The nickel in the dryer. Sometimes a lot of that gets played out in the local media in various sensational ways. How can school boards work effectively with local media to raise up the positives, the good things that are happening in the school district, knowing that this information is out there forever on the Internet? Anybody can access it, and it really has an economic development impact in the broader future of communities.

**Mr. Gentzel:** Well, that is a great question. Let me just say, I think we need to answer it by acknowledging that the type of media that cover school boards can vary pretty widely. I mean, in a large system, you are likely to have television cameras. You are likely to have different types of media than you might have in a smaller district, for instance. But the underlying challenge is pretty much the same. It is about helping to explain what is happening. I mean, there is clearly going to be those times and places where the media has an agenda, and that is a separate conversation.

I will tell you a quick story. My oldest son’s very first job out of college was as a reporter for a local newspaper. He got the assignment of covering school board meetings. New reporter. School board meetings. How unusual. I say this because this happens a lot. He called me. I was still at the Pennsylvania School Boards Association back then. He said, “Dad, I’m on deadline. I was at this board meeting last night, and they were using all these acronyms.” He said, “Help me understand how special ed funding works,” because that is what they were talking about. I-D-E-A, I explained what that was. We went through the funding thing. About a week later, I get in the mail an envelope, and it had the first article that he ever wrote with his byline. He was so proud of this, and it was about that board meeting. I am reading this article. I get down to about the second paragraph, and it says, “According to a source at the Pennsylvania School Boards Association…” A source?! That is me! I called him up, and he said, “I can’t say, ‘According to my Dad.’”

The reason I tell the story is that I have often thought about that. A lot of these issues come from not taking the time to really work with the reporters who cover school board meetings. Many of those reporters are much like my son at that point in his career: one of their first jobs, trying to do their jobs, get the story in on deadline. And if nobody pulls them aside and says, “Here’s what we’re talking about; here’s the background,” you are going to get some bad coverage, frankly. We talk to boards about this a lot. It takes time; it can be frustrating; and, frankly, you occasionally run into an editor or publisher or somebody who is just a problem. I know it is a simplified answer, but in my experience, if we spend the time having those conversations, pulling people in before a board meeting, saying, “Here’s what’s coming up on the agenda,” making sure they have the background, it will help. And it is not just school boards. It can be a meeting of the town
council, it can be other groups. If the reporter does not even get a copy of the agenda, does not even get the materials that the board is looking at, if you are not going to share that information, you cannot really complain that you are not getting good coverage. I think it is about a larger relationship, too. It is about meeting with the media on a regular basis so that they understand. I am talking now about the editorial boards and the others, to help them understand the initiatives that districts are undertaking, the challenges they are facing. It might be financial issues or others; at least help them have a context for it. I think that is something that does not often happen or does not happen as much as it should.

**Audience Member #2:** Sort of a follow-up question about the media, which is a business I come from. With the advent of social media, all that due diligence sounds great, but the news cycle is, I think, being adversely affected by bloggers and other independent media sources—as they refer to themselves—who are throwing out stories. And then the traditional media, in a race to feel like they have not been beaten on a story, start putting things out that are unrelated to any factual background. Walking that back is often a very difficult, if not impossible, task. We in DeKalb are a new school board, the veterans have been on for 10 months and the rookies have been on for eight months. One of the challenges that I am seeing, both before as a parent and now as a school board member, is that school systems have not really embraced social media, so we are at a significant disadvantage. The fear that is built into school systems for innovation manifests itself in many ways, social media being one of those. I wanted to get your thoughts on that.

**Mr. Gentzel:** I think that is a wonderful comment, because I do not think most school systems have effectively utilized social media. We are seeing that changing, and I think there is an awareness now that more effort has to be spent doing that. That is one of the areas where I think we, in state associations and others, could be helpful to school systems in giving them some good advice and guidance. I want to just take it one step further though, because there is another form of social media that has nothing to do with technology. It really has to do with connecting with people.

Here is another quick story. I had a barber for years. His name was Merle. He had this little shop, and he was a great guy. He was very well read; he was funny; he was an inter-
interesting guy. He was one of those people where you go in, maybe four weeks later, and you just sort of pick up the conversation where it was left off. People like this. One day, I was sitting there, and it really hit me that in this little shop, in downtown Harrisburg, I see some state legislators. I see attorneys in town. I see a couple of business leaders. I see working guys come in. I see parents with their little kids in, too. And Merle talked with all of them. Merle was comfortable with all of them. Merle IS social media. Merle is the kind of guy who you need to spend time talking to because when people go through that chair in his shop and he says, “Now, I don’t know what the school board was thinking when they did this….” You need somebody like Merle to say, “I think what actually happened there was….” He has instant credibility, and he can get the word out.

I think about people as social media as much as I do electronics. I agree with your comment; I am not discounting that at all. But that is another place where some of the most influential people in the community do not have a title in front of their names, at least an official title. I mean, his was “Barber,” but a great guy. He was somebody who had that kind of credibility, and you all know people that connect well across social strata, who just seem to kind of move effortlessly and who people respect. I think that is another place where we have to spend time, and this is work that school board members can do.

We had a guy in our church pass away a number of years ago, and he was a curmudgeon. He was out of the Greatest Generation, and every time I saw this guy, he was complaining about something. But he meant well. And he was one of those people that paid attention. He was reading the paper, and he was trying to figure things out. If there was anything to do with education, he always pulled me aside. Now, I did not necessarily know the answer, but at least he gave me an opportunity. And what struck me was, when he passed away, there were hundreds and hundreds of people that attended his funeral. And there were hundreds and hundreds of people that he talked to on a daily basis. I keep giving these examples to say that if we do not invest in getting information out on sort of a one-on-one basis to people like that, we are missing an extraordinary opportunity. It is about all of that. It is about working with reporters, it is about social media. But it is not just waiting for people to come to us to find out what is happening. It is about getting out there and explaining it.

Thank you very much.

This speech has been edited for print publication. The full speech can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70rQDAkmEak.
Tom Gentzel is the executive director of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), which represents state associations of school boards and their more than 13,000 member school districts across the United States.

NSBA’s mission is to work with and through state school boards associations to advocate for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. Headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, NSBA represents the school board perspective in working with federal government agencies, the courts, and national organizations that impact education, and it provides vital information and services to its member state associations. Mr. Gentzel joined NSBA in December 2012, becoming the organization’s sixth executive director since it was founded in 1940.

Prior to joining NSBA, Mr. Gentzel served as the executive director of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA). His career at PSBA started in 1980 as a lobbyist, and five years later, he took the helm of the organization’s Office of Governmental and Member Relations—a position he held for more than 16 years. He became the organization’s executive director in 2001 and headed a staff of more than 150 persons. PSBA’s services include publications, conferences, and seminars as well as insurance programs, management and legal assistance, and advocacy services for local school officials.

Mr. Gentzel received a bachelor of science degree in community development and a master of public administration degree from Penn State.
Over the last decade, a few school systems in Georgia have lost or been threatened with losing accreditation either partially or fully due to school board governance issues. In an effort to learn best practices and warning signs of dysfunctional boards, the University of Georgia assembled a panel of experts who have intervened with these school systems to share their thoughts. The symposium’s morning session featured a panel discussion with Tony Arasi and Zenda Bowie from the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) and Brad Bryant and James Bostic, who have both served on the Georgia State Board of Education. This article highlights the critical components of effective board governance discussed during the panel.

**Constantly work toward strengthening relationships.**

“Each time a new member comes on to your board, you effectively have a new board,” stated Mr. Bryant. “You need to prepare and plan for this.” Developing positive relationships is critical to school board governance. Mr. Bryant continued, “If you don’t get the relationships right, then you are going to walk into a boardroom where you better put your coat on because there is going to be a frigidity that is not going to allow good things to happen.”

Board members must nurture several key relationships, and, as Mr. Bryant pointed out, building those relationships takes time and conscious effort. First, they must develop a positive rapport with the other board members. Mr. Bryant suggested that when it is difficult to find areas of agreement, talking about family and children can be a good start: “I would always start with finding places of common ground. Usually you can find common ground by talking about family.”

Mr. Arasi shared that when he is helping boards that are having conflict, “we remind school boards we work with to remember what they have in common. So many school boards have so much in common but they spend too much time on the few things they don’t agree on. Do you want every child to have a chance to learn? Everybody does. Do you want children to feel safe at school? Everybody does. Do you want children to feel that the schools care about them and their parents? Everybody does. Sometimes you have to take a deep breath and reflect on what you have in common.”

Another critical relationship is between the board and the superintendent. The superintendent is part of the governance team and is by law the secretary of the board. Dr. Bostic suggested that a superintendent should be mindful of spending time with the
board members that are not on his or her side of an issue. The superintendent needs to explain the issue in such a way that all board members understand where he or she is coming from. The superintendent’s goal must be to try to get the board members on the same side.

Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the board members and the superintendent.

The concept of shared school board governance rests on the premise that the board and its superintendent respect each other’s roles and responsibilities and build effective relationships. Perhaps the most common reason for lack of cohesion on school board–superintendent teams is role confusion. Without this clarity, a board and its superintendent can easily become dysfunctional and lack the cohesiveness necessary to lead the district effectively.

Boards must focus on the vision and “big picture” issues, and the superintendent’s job is to implement that vision. For example, board members should not be involved in hiring decisions at the school level or vendor issues, nor should individual board members informally visit schools or hold community meetings on their own and establish separate, individual relationships with the schools. According to Mr. Arasi, “One of the challenges board members face every day is that they are elected individually, but they govern collectively. [Board members must] learn to function within that framework.” He added, “Board members must work to educate the public that they are a member of a team.”

The figure on page 22 created by GSBA delineates the roles of superintendent and school board. Dr. Bostic suggested that sometimes having the roles and responsibilities of the board and superintendent clearly laid out and printed can be helpful: “Have them in front of you, so you can be aware when someone has crossed the line.” Having a clear picture of these roles can help avoid controversy.

Four Hallmarks of an Effective Board of Education

1 The governance team collaborates and communicates with the public so that everyone feels responsible to and for the students.

2 Board meetings make sense even to an outsider. Be careful with acronyms, and define them when used. Keep the focus of the board meeting on the students and their opportunities for achievement.

3 The governance team exhibits mutual respect, and healthy, respectful debate is the norm. You can feel the level of respect among the governance team when you walk in the room; respect those who have come to participate in the board meeting as well.

4 Board meetings evoke an atmosphere of hope and well-being.
Look out for some of the warning signs that board governance could be at risk.

Dr. Bostic listed several potential signals that a board is at risk. “If you are a superintendent or a new board member, let me talk about some of the warning signs you need to be concerned with:

- If a board member comes who has campaigned with a personal grudge against an individual member of the school board or the superintendent, you are in trouble from the very beginning… You will have a difficult time establishing a relationship with that board member.”

- “If you have a board member who does not have the highest personal integrity and character, you are in trouble. You want board members who care about student achievement.” You do not want them to be interested in hiring teachers or vendor contracts. “If that is their interest, you are in trouble.”
• “Strategic plans are very, very important, and if you have a board member that cannot even spell strategic plan, then you are in deep, deep trouble. They will not understand what you are trying to do as you set goals and objectives for the school system.”

• “Data—If you cannot understand the data that is brought to you on your school board and you can’t understand what it says about the students in your district, you need to get off the school board…. [Understanding the data] is essential to understanding what needs to happen for student achievement.”

• “It is almost always about accreditation—if you have a board member that can’t spell accreditation, then you are in trouble. Board members must be aware of the criteria for accreditation and why it matters for student achievement.”

The panelists shared some additional insights and discussed tactics they take when called on to intervene with a school board that is at risk of losing accreditation. Dr. Bostic starts by asking a few questions: “I always ask, are the board members listening to each other? Are they hearing what other people are saying? Is the chair a good person who allows board members to speak and make their own comments rather than only letting certain board members speak?” He also looks at how many people are on the board, which can be an indicator of the challenges he will face. In his experience, the larger the board, the greater the challenge will be. Managing relationships among nine board members is significantly more challenging and takes more time than with a five-member board.

Ms. Bowie countered that she did not see the size of the board as a significant issue. From her perspective, the key to helping improve a board’s ability to function is the members’ willingness to work together and change their behavior. Ms. Bowie said she likes to contact each board member individually before meeting with the whole board. She asks them, “What is going well, and what is not going so well? Often times I find them all saying the same thing. The magic wand I carry when I go into troubled districts only works when the magic starts from within … people have to be willing to accept the responsibility to change. They need to ask themselves, ‘What is it that I need to do differently?’ … You have to make some changes and adjustments when it comes to compromise.”

Georgia Model Code of Ethics for Local Boards of Education

A 2010 state law required the Georgia Board of Education to adopt a code of ethics that local school board members must sign annually and agree to follow. To run for reelection, board members must sign an affidavit that they have abided by the code of ethics. Tony Arasi of the Georgia School Boards Association said that this code has helped keep board members on the right track. More information is available at http://www.gsba.com/.
Mr. Arasi added that “one of the things a well-functioning board member can do, rather than finger pointing, is to start asking questions. ‘Do we need more clarity on roles and responsibilities? … Is [a contentious issue really caused by] misinformation? … Is the data being interpreted correctly by the board and by the public?’ Try to be thoughtful about how to bring the dissenting people back into the group. Mr. Arasi suggested that the state code of ethics (see sidebar on page 23) could be used as a hammer if the atmosphere gets bad. However, boards should try to resolve conflict “within the family” first.

**Board member training and mentoring can help mitigate the risks.**

School board members come from a variety of backgrounds and have diverse experiences and skill sets. To effectively introduce new members to the school board, veterans can provide guidance on how meetings are run, familiarize them with how to interpret and use data, and help them get the most out of the training available. Panelists also suggested several strategies school boards can use to recruit effective members.

According to Mr. Arasi, some school systems have found that the best way to ensure potential candidates for the board possess necessary qualities is for districts to try to “grow” their own board members. In other words, try to encourage certain people to run for the position who have already been involved in or who have some awareness of the inner workings of the school system. Other districts have found that having an education background need not be a prerequisite for effective school board governance.

According to Ms. Bowie, new board members just need to keep an open mind without narrowly focusing on their personal experiences. “In this state, we have quite a diversity of school board members,” she said. “Regardless of where they come from, their experiences, or their level of education, if they walk into that [board] room willing to listen … and ask questions and willing to learn, then that helps.”

Mr. Arasi added that veteran board members should welcome new board members and be patient with them as they learn the ropes. New members who do not have an education background might need some time to learn how to read the data and understand QBE (quality basic education funding formula). Veteran board members can model how to be an effective board member and ensure that new board members are not isolated.

**Establish a clear policy about how the board will talk to the media.**

How the system is perceived by the public is often defined by the media. Dr. Bostic suggested a proactive approach to working with the media. When dealing with a controversial issue, he recommends that the board chair or superintendent explain the issue to the reporter in advance. “This helps with transparency. … It is not a good idea to ram something through without the community understanding the importance of what you are doing,” Dr. Bostic said.

Many school systems have an established policy that the chair speaks for the board. This helps the board present itself as a single governing body with a unified front. Some members of the media are not accustomed to this policy, and some board members might choose to speak separately, but this can backfire. Mr. Bryant observed that controversy sells newspapers: “If a reporter sees a fissure, they will put a microphone in your face, then in the face of another board member and ask if you agree or disagree. If I
answer, then I open myself up to the back and forth. This is a culture that works within a legislative branch of government but not well within the board framework where the board acts as a single body.” A policy of having one person speak for the board is a protection that mitigates this risk.

**Engage your community to sustain reforms.**

Panelists also emphasized that building partnerships throughout the community helps to sustain positive efforts in the school district. Over time superintendents and board members come and go; it takes a community to reinvigorate and sustain a school district—a committed community of parents, educators, elected officials, and civic leaders, as well as the general public. Consequently, one of the most important competences of an effective school board is that it can bring the wider community together in a joint effort to improve the school system.

The school board alone cannot make change happen; it takes the collaborative efforts and energy from parents, the community, the school board, the superintendent, and district staff to successfully implement best practices and induce positive change. Therefore, the board must solicit community input on certain issues and then report back on how that input is being used. Panelists said that boards are moving toward a more formalized manner of getting community input, such as using surveys, which they see as a positive trend.

Mr. Arasi added that establishing and maintaining partnerships with the community takes work. “You don’t want the public to learn about the school board and what is going on through the media only. … You need to share accurate information, areas in which you have challenges, and the good news. You need to model continuous improvement. Be open and transparent with the community. A number of districts, when they have challenges, now are going to the community for input. … Don’t just rely on the media.”

In addition, Mr. Bryant suggested that the advent of social media has made it harder to maintain healthy relationships. Today, people get information in a variety of ways, but given the speed of social media, that information often is repeated and forwarded without regard to accuracy. Effective engagement with the community can help reduce the risk that inaccurate information will spread and cause problems on the board.

**Develop a solid foundation in the finances of the system, the use of data, and accreditation.**

Panelists stressed the importance of the basics of financial administration and having the financial and managerial skill set to navigate through large and complex school budgets. School board members need to understand data and how to use it to drive policy decisions. Boards and superintendents who understand the data and are willing to look at the facts are much more likely to make successful decisions.

Mr. Bryant shared that he has used data to help school boards see their problems in a new light. A few years ago, he and Tony Arasi traveled to South Carolina to help a school system, and they used the data to start a meaningful conversation about student achievement. Dr. Bostic had a similar experience when working with a school system in Georgia. Mr. Bryant concluded that boards need to use school system data to help them focus on what needs improving.
According to Dr. Bostic, effective board members must have strong integrity and good character. Those qualities are particularly important considering that board members are responsible for making financial and other decisions for the school system; many of them have never previously faced such high-stakes responsibilities. In addition, they are highly visible members of the community, and their behavior sets the standard for others as to what is acceptable and ethical behavior.

Finally, board members and the superintendent need to understand the importance of school accreditation. Accreditation, a voluntary method of quality assurance for universities and secondary schools, is designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. The accreditation process is also known to effectively drive student performance and continual improvement in education. While accreditation is a set of rigorous protocols and research-based processes for evaluating an institution’s organizational effectiveness, it is also more than just that. Today, accreditation examines the whole institution—the programs, the cultural context, the community of stakeholders—to determine how well the parts work together to meet the needs of students. The panelists believe this should be emphasized in the initial orientation about what it means to be a school board member. It is crucial to make sure new members understand what the basic tenets and standards for accreditation are in order to maintain them, and to know which accrediting agency is responsible for their schools.

**Question and Answers**

The panel session concluded with some questions from the audience.

**Audience Member #1:** When you have a board member who does not come into the fold, how do you address this? We had a case of a board member talking in public about an issue that was discussed in executive session.

**Ms. Bowie:** When the board selects its officers [in districts that do so], it needs to be intentional and decisive when choosing the board chair and the vice chair. When a board member violates the rules, it is incumbent upon the board chair or vice chair to hold the board member accountable. An elected official must hold an elected official accountable—it is not the superintendent who has this responsibility. If a board has discipline problems or is functioning inappropriately, that culture is likely to trickle down to how school leaders and students act. Boards also need to be very careful about discussing what happens in executive session. That only becomes public based on the vote, and violating that confidence goes against the code of ethics. If something comes out of that meeting and hits the public, you need to address it immediately. You need to be clear that there are consequences and establish what those consequences are.

**Mr. Arasi:** Also, the code of ethics allows for an open hearing on the board members. We recommend that boards use this sparingly and only if absolutely necessary, but it is a provision in the code. Also, I strongly suggest that the board’s attorney talk to the board member. Based on a new state law, people who run for reelection will have to sign an affidavit saying that they abided by the code of ethics. Falsifying that is a felony.

**Audience Member #2:** Please comment on aspiring candidates and how to educate them. Should we legislate that candidates should be trained first?
Dr. Bostic: GSBA has everything you need to learn how to be a good school board member. You need to participate in the training and follow the rules. I would say that the school board members do need to be able to understand finances and analyze the data. If you are going to be a good school board member, you have to understand the data and the budget.

Mr. Bryant: We can’t legislate the heart of a public servant. Voters need to look for good public servants who have a passion for public service.

Audience Member #3: Can you describe or grade the culture in the school districts and the culture in the community and how well they match the evolving expectations of boards?

Mr. Bryant: The quality of board governance can change in the blink of an eye. Generally, the rule is if you have a community that is dysfunctional or does not have the capacity to create a functional board, you’ll see that reflected in the school board. Dysfunction will float up.

Ms. Bowie: Board members need to keep in mind that most people in the community don’t have children in school. So, you need to keep it simple and explain the budget and the issues to community members. We need to get away from “education-ese.” GSBA has a toolkit that can help board members explain the budget and other issues to the community.

Points to Consider

- Relationships are the key to successful school board governance, particularly because the board is continually evolving as members come and go. Constant two-way communication among board members and between the board and the superintendent garners trust. A successful board chair encourages such communication.

- Roles and responsibilities of board members and superintendents should be clearly defined. Board members should focus on the big picture vision, mission, and beliefs of the school district, and the superintendent is responsible for implementing that vision.

- Effective school board members have several traits in common, including patience, good character, and strong integrity. They also have a solid understanding of the basics of financial administration and using data to improve child outcomes, and they recognize the importance of accreditation.

- School boards need a clear policy for handling the media so that controversy can be minimalized. When board members and the superintendent present a united front, it shows stakeholders that they are unified and working together.

- Without community partnerships, positive efforts in the school district cannot be sustained. Soliciting public input is an important element in making data-driven decisions.
Morning Panel Participants

James E. Bostic, Jr.
Managing Director, HEP & Associates

James Bostic is the managing director of HEP & Associates, an educational consulting company, and a partner at Coleman Lew & Associates, Inc., an executive search firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. He has more than 25 years of experience in the paper and forest products industry with Georgia-Pacific (G-P) Corporation.

At G-P, he served in a variety of positions of increasing responsibility and was promoted to executive vice president in 2000. Dr. Bostic retired from G-P in December 2005.

Dr. Bostic is also active in the community. He served as a member of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and was chair for five years. He also served on the Georgia State Board of Education for nine years and was selected to assist Georgia Governors Sonny Perdue and Nathan Deal with local school board governance issues.

Dr. Bostic is a member of the board of trustees at Wofford College, the board of directors of ACT, Inc., and the board of directors of Clemson IPTAY, and he is a past president of this organization.

A native of Marlboro County, South Carolina, Dr. Bostic earned a bachelor's degree and a PhD in chemistry from Clemson University.

Brad Bryant
Executive Director, REACH Georgia

Brad Bryant served on the DeKalb County Board of Education in Georgia for 12 years, including seven years as chairman. Mr. Bryant was appointed to the Georgia Board of Education in 2003 and served in that role until his 2010 appointment to fill the unexpired term of State School Superintendent Kathy Cox. Bryant was the first full-time executive director of the Georgia Foundation for Public Education, created by the Georgia General Assembly to promote educational excellence in Georgia. Mr. Bryant currently is the executive director of REACH Georgia, the state’s needs-based scholarship program.

Mr. Bryant has expertise in school governance and leadership. He is a past president of the Georgia School Boards Association and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). Mr. Bryant was a member of the team that successfully defended Georgia’s Race to the Top application, led NASBE’s Partnership Initiative with the US Army, and represented the state boards of education at the national launch of the Common Core State Standards, and he is an advocate for the Data Quality Campaign. He currently is co-chair of Atlanta’s Ready by 21 Leadership Council.

A graduate of Mercer Law School, Mr. Bryant’s interest in education policy began when he was a federal law clerk handling school desegregation cases in the Georgia Middle District.
Tony Arasi
Director of Board Development, Georgia School Boards Association

Tony Arasi is the director of professional development for the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA). He has coordinated all GSBA conferences, workshops, and staff development activities since 2005. He has conducted more than 100 custom board workshops and retreats.

Mr. Arasi formerly served as assistant and associate superintendent in the Cobb County School System outside of Atlanta. Previously a middle school science teacher, Mr. Arasi also was a high school principal for 10 years, five of those at Walton High School, which is a National School of Excellence and was rated by U.S. News and World Report in 2000 as one of the top six high schools in the nation.

Mr. Arasi also currently serves on the graduate school faculty at Kennesaw State University as an adjunct lecturer in the Educational Leadership Department. He has taught many classes, including education law, school finance, human resource management, staff development, and multicultural education.

Zenda Bowie
Director of Field Services, Georgia School Boards Association

Zenda Bowie was named director of field services for the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) in September 2006. Her responsibilities include oversight of the mentoring program, veteran school board training programs, and the Federal Relations Network. She also provides support for GSBA’s professional development activities.

Ms. Bowie came to GSBA having served 17 years as an elected school board member in Fulton County. She is a past president of GSBA. She also has 27 years of experience with the American Lung Association, Southeast Region, where she was progressively promoted from health educator in 1979 to chief operating officer in 1999. Ms. Bowie has served on numerous nonprofit organization boards and has been the recipient of several awards. Her current memberships include the National Association of Parliamentarians, the Georgia Association of Parliamentarians, and the board of directors of Communities in Schools–Georgia.

Ms. Bowie received her bachelor’s degree in modern language from Talladega College in Alabama.
Dr. Veronica Harts highlighted several school districts in the Southeast that have worked with AdvancEd and established best practices. Dr. Harts stressed the common thread among these districts of positive, continuous communication among board members and with the superintendent as well as an overriding focus on students and their needs. She also discussed the changing roles that board members must adapt to, from private citizen to candidate to board member. Candidates have to be political and be clear about why they are running for the board. Once elected, their focus must shift to the students in the district and ensuring that every child in the system is supported. She reiterated the morning panel’s assertion that “you run individually, but you govern collectively.”

According to Dr. Harts, Newton–Conover City Schools in North Carolina has “established an exemplary measure to align their mission and vision of the system and its schools whereby students were an active part of creating classroom missions aligned with the school and system mission.” In other words, the board has gone beyond aligning the mission of the schools with that of the district. The school system has taken this vision deeper, into the classrooms. Students in the system take an active role in creating classroom missions and visions that align with those of the schools and district. Dr. Harts equated this practice to strategic planning, stating, “If you have no map, you’ll definitely get lost along the way.”

Dr. Harts also referred to Elmore County Public Schools in Wetumpka, Alabama, the Houston County Board of Education in Perry, Georgia, and the Alamance-Burlington School System in North Carolina as systems that have established sound practices and visions. One lesson learned is that “an effective board will establish sound workable relationships among the stakeholders.” In addition, an effective school board engages in “meaningful
collaboration to use resources to make sure that teaching and learning is of the highest standard in the system, in spite of financial challenges.” Finally, Dr. Harts noted another effective school board practice: “equipping schools with technological resources to ensure that their students are ready for a global society and 21st century learning skills.”

Finally, Dr. Harts highlighted **Williamson County Schools** in Franklin, Tennessee, and the **Jefferson County Board of Education** in Louisville, Georgia. She stressed that in these systems, the board and the superintendent have clearly defined roles and responsibilities: “The governing body protects, supports, and respects the autonomy of the system and school leadership to accomplish their goals.”

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**Veronica Harts**  
Vice President of Innovative Learning  
AdvancED

Veronica Harts is vice president of innovative learning at AdvancED in Alpharetta, Georgia. She began her work in professional learning with AdvancED in July 2006. The scope of her work encompasses the design, development, and delivery of quality professional learning experiences at the state, regional, national, and international levels.

Before joining AdvancED, Dr. Harts was an educator for 20 years in the Calcasieu Parish School System in Lake Charles, Louisiana. She worked as an elementary school administrator, curriculum specialist, and classroom teacher. Dr. Harts is a past Louisiana Teacher of the Year. She has taught classes at the university level and has worked as an independent early childhood consultant. She is also a past recipient of the Fulbright Memorial Fund exchange program to Tokyo, Japan.

Dr. Harts completed her undergraduate and master’s degrees at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and her doctoral degree at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas.
Thank you so much for planning and organizing this important conference on school board governance. I am convinced that the future of public education in Georgia will be greatly enhanced by the work of the public servants who have come here today and who have been called to serve on local school boards across the great state of Georgia. The policies and budgets that you enact and, more importantly, the superintendents that you hire will play a critical role in shaping Georgia’s economic and educational destiny.

Until recently, school board governance has often been overlooked and undervalued by national and state educational reformers. Instead of governance, we focus on school finance, standardized tests, the charter school movement, increased rigor in the classroom, teacher preparation and development, and central office decentralization. These have been the primary foci of reformers both here in Georgia and at the national level. But I am convinced that this symposium is evidence of a growing realization that effective school board leadership and effective school board governance through policy making is essential to improving the success of our public schools.

To all who gather here today in my hometown of Athens, my heartfelt thanks to you for your service to the children of Georgia. Having served in various political offices for more than three decades, I can state without any reservation, I know that being a school board member is the toughest political job you can find. It is a tough, tough job. I know what it is like when you are out in your hometown with your wife, your family, your children having dinner on a Friday or Saturday evening and some honest constituent stakeholder comes up and says, “I know you’re having dinner, but....” Fair enough? Even at church on Sunday morning, “I know you are at the altar praying, but....” “I know it is 5:30 in the morning, but....” Thank you so much for what you are doing for our children and making a difference in their lives.
Before I proceed, I want to take the opportunity to recognize some very close personal friends in the audience. First of all, I have to recognize one of my most cherished mentors and friends, Sis Henry. She is the lady who introduced me to school board governance and helped me understand the complexities of serving in this capacity. She made it possible for me to work with school board members, not just here in Georgia, but all across the southeastern United States. She is the preeminent advocate for public education in Georgia. Sis, I love you.

Also, because I want to continue to be employed, I will recognize three of my main bosses who are here today. Mr. Thaddeus Mayfield is there on the left. Attorney Marshall Orson. Thank you so much, Marshall. And, of course, the vice chair of the DeKalb School Board, Mr. Jimmy McMahan. That will keep me on the board for at least another two months. I know how this game works, see. But they have been by my side, and I thank them for giving me this opportunity to serve in this unique capacity. I thank them also for their dedication and commitment to improving education in DeKalb County. Also, my chief of staff is here, Ms. Ramona Tyson, as well as my partners from the McKenna Long & Aldridge Governance Center. I thank you all so much for your support and assistance.

These are difficult and trying times for Georgia’s educational leaders. Billions of dollars have been lost in ad valorem tax revenue, and deep state budget cuts have transformed the management of local school districts into what could easily be described as mission impossible. These are unprecedented revenue losses. Political leaders and other stakeholders are demanding greater fiscal and employee accountability. Most important, an outcry over student underperformance has changed the landscape of school governance in Georgia and across America. Every day I hear and you hear a growing chorus of disgruntled critics who have declared that our schools are broken beyond repair and redemption. Despite these challenges, despite the critics, I encourage each of you not to grow weary in your good doings. Despite those who doubt and despite those who may not fully understand, I implore you to keep the faith. Despite those who make very, very harsh speeches about the quality of our education, it is my hope, and often it is my prayer, that the men and women in this room will continue to believe that every child deserves the opportunity to get a quality education in Georgia.
I continue to hope that the men and women in this room and across the state who have answered the call to serve our children will continue to believe that every child, no matter where he or she may have been born, no matter the race, color, or creed, can learn and succeed in America today. For those not in this room, but for those beyond the sound of my voice who may harbor some unresolved doubts, I stand at this podium this afternoon. I say to the doubters that your speaker this afternoon is a living, breathing testament to the transformative power of public education in Georgia. Your speaker, your superintendent is the recipient and the beneficiary of an education that has transformed lives and broken a generational cycle of poverty. Your speaker is descended from three generations of Georgia sharecroppers. My father sharecropped cotton, his father sharecropped cotton, and my father's father's father sharecropped cotton. If you really think about it, sharecropping was our family business.

The truth of the matter is that not that far from this location, we cropped a lot more than what we shared. For although my father could not read or write, he and my mother believed in the power and the sanctity of education. Although my family lacked material wealth, my life was enriched beyond measure by teachers, principals, and school board members who saw something of value in a little boy who lived on a dirt road in a rural part of Clarke County called Sandy Creek. My life was lifted by teachers and principals and school board members who invested time and energy and placed the best interest of the children they were teaching before their own best interests. Their return on investment was to break a generational cycle of poverty that stretched back several generations.

For any who doubt the transformative power of public education, I say to you, in one generation from that Georgia sharecropper named Sidney Thurmond, he gave birth and he raised a son who became a lawyer, an author, a legislator, a statewide elected official, a superintendent of the third largest district in Georgia and the 26th largest district in America. That is what public education can do.

By the way, if you look at me and see anything other than a Georgia sharecropper, you need to look a little bit closer. Because even though I wear a blue suit today, if you look at my heart and spirit, I have the heart and spirit of a Georgia sharecropper. Because sharecroppers believe in two things: 1) they believe in hard work, and 2) they can take a little bit and do a whole lot. So, what I am is a Georgia sharecropper. By law, I am just a sharecropper with a law degree, and that makes me a bad man.

But, there are hundreds of millions of Michael Thurmonds in your school system today. I am not unique. I am not special. I am one of those who benefitted from those who believed when others doubted. The one thing—as school board members and as superintendents and as educators—the one thing we must do is believe in the children we are trying to educate.

Coming over on US78 today, I thought a lot about this visit and coming back home to Athens. No matter how great or large the problems I face every day are, when I get to Athens they seem just a little bit smaller. They seem just a little less significant. Somehow I feel like I can grasp and deal with almost anything when I get to this place...
called Athens. When I think about public education today, I think about my career. For the first 11 years of my life here in Athens, I went to all segregated schools. It seems like it was a long time ago, but it was not. In my senior year, the mostly all-white high school of Athens High was consolidated with the all–African American Burney-Harris High School. We became the first senior class of Clarke Central High School in the fall of 1970. I graduated in 1971. Do you all remember those days? It seems like a long time ago, but it was little more than 40 years ago. I remember those first days at school when the big question that everyone had on their mind was, “Could white teachers teach black children?” “Could African American teachers teach white children?” It seems like a long time ago, but it was not. The one thing the last 40-plus years have taught us is that it does not matter what color the teacher is, if you love the children, you can teach them. But, if you do not love them, you never will. It is all about if you love the children.

One of the things I have seen in DeKalb as a superintendent—by the way y’all, do not believe the hype. I have been so impressed by how smart and intelligent the students are in DeKalb County and in other counties. I have just been blown away by what I see. Do not believe it. One other thing, when I walk into a Pre-K class and sit down, I cannot tell which of those children’s parents vote Republican. I cannot tell which vote Democrat. It is just impossible.

As school board members, as superintendents, the challenge is whether we can commit ourselves, not to a political agenda of partisanship, but can we commit ourselves to ensuring that every child has access to a quality education? Being in an elected school board is unique. I have never quite seen anything like an elected politician school board member. When I travel around the Southeast, I ask school board members, “How many of you all are politicians?” Only about 10% raise their hands. School board members do not consider themselves to be politicians. Well, if you have to run and get elected, guess what that makes you? A politician. To be honest, it is one of the most brutal forms of politics I have ever met. But that is okay. Being an elected official, a politician, is not a disgrace. What it means is that a majority of the people in your election district have expressed a belief and a confidence in you, that you can represent them and, more importantly, represent the children that you enroll.

The second thing that school board members told me that struck me as unique is that although you do not view yourself as a politician, you operate in one of the most political high-profile, contentious, stressful political environments possible. Even with that, according to Georgia state law, we do not expect you to act like politicians or elected officials. Because even after you have spent your money and your time begging for votes in difficult places, once you are elected, we say, “But you can’t act that way. Don’t listen to the people who elected you.” You were elected from a district, but you do not represent, what? Your district, right? Even though your friends, your neighbors, your church members, your community members pool their resources and get in their cars and go door-to-door for you and work for you—they get you elected—once you get elected, the last thing you can do is respond.

Being a school board member is unlike any political job that I have ever experienced. Even though you are not political, most of the revenue that is appropriated to school
districts is appropriated by one of the most partisan, political institutions on the face of the earth. That is the Georgia General Assembly. But, you are not supposed to act like politicians. We elect you to help get things straightened out at the school district, right? But as soon as you get elected, what do we tell you? You have no influence or involvement in hiring anyone other than the superintendent. When those parents call you about that principal or about that teacher, it is shocking to realize that you have absolutely nothing to do and nothing to do with it. And if you are shocked, think how the people feel who elected you to go straighten it out. This is what it means to be a school board member in Georgia. How do you deal with all of this? Focus. Commit yourselves. Subjugate yourselves. One of the things I have learned in life is that the only times I have ever really been able to achieve significant things is when I subjugated my own ambitions, my own wants, my own desires.

By the way, folks, I did not ask to be superintendent of DeKalb. I did not wake up that morning wondering if the DeKalb School District would call me to come and serve. My friends—even my wife and my daughter—begged me not to go. My “political advisor” said, “You will ruin any hope you ever have.” The last place you want to go is where? DeKalb. So, I went over to DeKalb, and I looked around. Nine board members were facing suspension. We have a $14.7 million deficit. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) had placed DeKalb on probation. Stakeholders, internal and external, had no trust in the district. Academics were failing. Other than that…they were in pretty good shape, actually.

But, you know what? When you hear the call, you have to answer it. If you spend 30 years in public service believing and stating that you want to give your life to public service, you will have the opportunity to do that. It is the best thing I have ever done. I am more excited than I have ever been. I am more optimistic than I have ever been. As a matter of fact, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter criticized me for being too optimistic. He said, “Don’t you know you’re in DeKalb? You are the superintendent? How can you be that optimistic?” Because when you go into a difficult situation like that, you do not look at the problems, you need to focus on your assets.

Deficit-driven strategies rarely succeed. If you go in a board meeting and spend 30 minutes, an hour, an hour and a half, two hours talking about the deficits in your school district, then you are not looking at your assets. After that one day in DeKalb, I realized I had 100,000 assets—my students. I had 14,000 assets—employees. All the other problems paled in comparison.

Last two things: You have to have a school board that cooperates and works together for the general good of the community or the district. You must hire a superintendent who is qualified and focused and who can provide leadership for all the other employees in the district. You need trained, educated, skilled leaders in the school. You need focused, dedicated principals and teachers.

However, a great majority of the studies I have read say that even if you have a great board and a great superintendent and great teachers and great principals, the individual that has the greatest impact on the child’s education or career is not the superintendent,
not the school board, not the principal, not the teacher. It is the parent. We cannot get this job done without parents. One of the big mistakes we have made—and we have allowed ourselves to be pushed in this corner—is that we have allowed the politicians to shift all of the responsibility for educating our children primarily onto teachers and principals. It is a huge political blunder—when all the studies show that the greatest influence is who? Parents. What we have done is to have allowed parental actions to be misinterpreted. If parents are not showing up to PTA meetings, we interpret that to mean parents are not concerned or that they do not love their children. That is not what that means. Ladies and gentlemen, do not get it twisted.

I spent a very, very hot afternoon in a parking lot at Walmart where more than 1,000-plus parents were waiting to pick up their children who were being transported from McNair to that parking lot so they could take them home.\(^2\) I was there with them, up close and personal. I can tell you, I saw love and I saw concern and I saw dedication and commitment in the eyes of those parents. “Governance” is not just what happens at the school board meeting. I have discussed with Bill Ide, who leads the Governance Center at McKenna Long, that the way we interact with every stakeholder defines the quality of our governance.

Last thing…the big challenge we have to overcome is moving the discussion beyond race. Often public education becomes a euphemism for what? Race. A lot has changed in 40 years, from that day I set foot in Clarke Central High School. But do you know at my 40th class reunion, we still had two: one for the black kids, one for the white kids. All of us feel like we must be about 85 years old (laughing). It is interesting because we had two student body presidents—guess which one I was.

We need to move forward. Let me tell you what the studies show. It is not a question of race anymore, folks. It is really a question of opportunity, of economic disadvantage. I can tell you now in grades 3–5, third through fifth grade, with the CRCT test in math, I

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\(^2\) Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy, an elementary school in DeKalb County with approximately 870 students. On August 20, 2013, a gunman entered the elementary school and fired shots. The students were quickly evacuated, and no one was shot or injured.
had a data-driven analysis done. I looked at it. That is supposed to be the most difficult of all subjects, right? Of all non-economically disadvantaged white students, about 97% passed the test. Of all non-economically disadvantaged African American students, about 90% passed the test. So when it comes to the achievement gap, we tend to say that whites achieve—it is not that. If you look at economically disadvantaged African American students, what percentage do you think passed the math test, grades 3–5? I am getting ready to surprise you. About 72%. Now, I thought it was much lower. You thought it was much lower. And the reason we think it is much lower is because we have been told that the public education system is a what? Failure. The data tell a different story. Economically disadvantaged students—red, white, black, blue, green, white, black, Hispanic, Asian—score at levels lower than their cohorts who are not economically disadvantaged. It is not race. We filter everything through our lens, and we say what? Race. But it is not. The ah-ha moment, the thing that will transform public education, is when we can move this discussion beyond a discussion about race.

The thing that will transform public education is when we can move this discussion beyond a discussion about race.

I know times are tough. I know money is short. I know patience is short. I know that there are many who do not believe as we do. But I encourage you once again to not give up.

I was sitting here today eating lunch and looking out across the campus, to the other side of East Campus Road. Instead of married housing, there used to be an all-black settlement called Allenville there. And my dad, who sharecropped cotton and worked in a poultry plant, he also had a vegetable route. I used to ride all over campus, selling fruit and vegetables to professors. And we would go to Allenville, and we would go out South Milledge Avenue. And we would stop by Ms. Lucy Como’s house, who owned the land that we sharecropped. She lived right over there on South Milledge Avenue. The house is still there today. I go by and look at it from time to time. And as we travelled around Athens, my job would be to take the vegetables in to the people who bought them. And one lady—my dad was named Sid Thurmond—she would say “Sid Thurmond. I want a peck of peas.”

Now, this is a room of highly educated people: how much is a peck of peas? Anybody from the country? Anybody know? I know somebody knows. A peck is what? Not quite a bushel, about a quarter of a bushel, right? A fourth of a bushel.

Then she would say, “Sid Thurmond, I want a dozen roasted ears.” What are roasted ears? Yes, corn. I can tell I am in Georgia.

Now, I have one that no one has ever answered. I have been all over the Southeast, all over the country. We would go to Ms. Suzy’s house, and she was raising six grandchildren,
and she would say, “Sid Thurmond, I want a mess of collard greens.” Now, how much is a mess? Now see, a mess is enough to make a meal, so you need to know how many folk are in the family, right? And then you go from there. It depends on where you are.

I hated that job, folks. I hated that job. I was like, “God, please! Get me off the back of this old raggedy blue Chevrolet truck.” And the main reason I hated the job was because all of the pretty little girls from school, they would see me and they would say, “Oh, that’s Michael Thurmond.” And I would duck. Send me to college! Send me somewhere, right? Just get me off that truck. And I used to feel so bad.

Remember how parents used to have you do chores, and you just said, “Why’s he doing this to me?” And one day we were riding back out to Sandy Creek—which is now a nature center—but it is near where I grew up. And Dad had noticed I was a little bit down. He looked at me and said, “Boy, raise your head. Let me tell you something. You just say your prayers and you keep working hard, and one day, one day, this vegetable route will be yours.” No, no, no, I don’t want no vegetable route!

So finally, you know, my daddy, he took the dollars, the dimes, and the quarters and bought the college degree in Augusta. He helped buy the law degree in Columbia, South Carolina—with a little bit of nothing and a whole lot of faith and hard work. So I came back here with a law degree, and I started practicing law. God called my dad home. He died as he had lived, with very little material wealth.

Right after that, I decided I was going into politics because I had had a lifelong dream of getting to Atlanta and serving in that Gold Dome. I used to sit and watch it. I would say, “That’s my goal. I’m going to get there one day.” And I ran down to the courthouse and got a map. You know how it is when you first decide you are getting ready to run for office? You go and get a map of your district. That is the first thing you do. Then you start looking at which neighborhoods and which houses. I got my map, and then I realized I did not have any money. No experience. I did not know who to turn to, where to go. All I had was a map and a dream. And for days I studied that map. One day I was looking at the map, and out of all of my frustration and confusion, I noticed something very familiar about that map. Inside the map was Broad Street. It ran to Rock Springs, it ran to 1st Street, it ran to 2nd Street. All the streets inside my district were the same streets my daddy’s old vegetable route used to run on. So I decided I would just follow my daddy’s vegetable route.

So I went out and knocked on the door, and I said, “Ma’am, excuse me, I’m Mike Thurmond, I’m running for the...” She said, “No, son. I know who you really are.” She said, “You’re Sid Thurmond’s baby boy. I remember you from the back of the vegetable truck.” She said, “Yeah, I’ll vote for you. Put a sign up.” And I went a little further down the street, and at the next house, the woman said, “I remember your daddy had nine children. He sent them all to college. He worked hard. He loved you all.” She said, “Yes, your daddy was a good man. I’d vote for you.” She did not vote for me because I had a law degree or a college degree, she voted because I had what? A good daddy. And finally, I went to the last house, and the lady said, “You don’t know me, but I know you. My grandma was Ms. Suzy, and your daddy used to give us fruits and vegetables on credit.
And because of that, we kept food on the table.” I gave her a sign, and she said, “Boy, let me tell you, give me your card, and I’ll take it to church. I’m going to have the pastor pray for you.” You see, my father did exactly what he promised me he would do: he left me his old vegetable route. But it was not just a vegetable route, it was a pathway to success.

What I am saying to you is money is short, tax revenues are down, but I am telling you, you have what you need. You have a love for children. You have faith in children. You have a belief that tomorrow can be better than today. And most of all, you have faith. So I say to you, do not give up, do not get out, and do not grow weary. All things are possible for those who truly love and believe in our children.

Thank you.

This speech has been edited for print publication. The full speech can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY45FegoVi8.
Michael L. Thurmond
Superintendent
DeKalb County School District

Michael L. Thurmond is the superintendent of the DeKalb County School District, the third-largest school system in Georgia with nearly 99,000 students and more than 13,400 employees. He is currently on leave from the Butler, Wooten & Fryhofer law firm.

Mr. Thurmond, born a sharecropper’s son in Clarke County, received a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy and religion from Paine College and a JD degree from the University of South Carolina School of Law.

In 1986, he became the first African American elected to the Georgia General Assembly from Clarke County since Reconstruction. During his legislative tenure, Mr. Thurmond authored major legislation that has provided more than $250 million in tax relief to Georgia’s senior citizens and working families.

Following his legislative service, Mr. Thurmond led the state Division of Family and Children Services, where he helped create the innovative Work First program. In November 1998, Mr. Thurmond was elected Georgia Labor Commissioner, becoming the first non-incumbent African American to be elected to statewide office in Georgia. Mr. Thurmond was the Democratic Party’s nominee for US Senate in 2010.

Mr. Thurmond has also served as a motivational speaker to state school board associations in nine southern states on issues regarding leadership, diversity, and public education advocacy. He is the author of several books, including *Freedom: Georgia’s Antislavery Heritage, 1733–1865*, which won the Georgia Historical Society’s Lilla Hawes Award.
The relationship between the school board and the superintendent is critical to the smooth operation of a school system. The afternoon session featured a panel of superintendents and board chairs from a small, a medium, and a large school system in Georgia. The three school systems are considered models for their size, and the participating administrators have numerous years of experience in the education field and in their respective school systems. The discussion centered on three questions: What makes your system work? How do you manage the communication between the superintendent and the board chair? What are the key ingredients to an effective relationship between the two?

Although each panel member has a unique perspective regarding how best to govern, several themes recurred throughout the discussion, particularly the overriding importance of positive and ongoing communication. Panelists identified additional components that contribute to a successful working relationship between a school board and a superintendent, including well-defined roles and responsibilities, establishing trust, strategic planning, and communication with constituents and stakeholders.

Board-Superintendent Communication
Communication is a simple word, but according to the panelists, this essential attribute of school board governance is a difficult process that takes time, effort, planning, and diligence. One of the most important aspects of communication is establishing clear roles and responsibilities. Dr. Howard, the superintendent of Jefferson County Schools, stressed that when she was hired four years ago, the board set out specific expectations that the members wanted her to accomplish for the school system. She said that she and the board “have very clear expectations of one another.” According to Dr. Howard, “The board said that they expected the superintendent to be the instructional leader,” which guided her as she took on the role. Similarly, Alvin Wilbanks of Gwinnett County said that “you need to know what each other’s roles are and work to maintain those roles.”

Mr. Wilbanks also said that one of the most effective tools a board has is its power to hire the superintendent. Board members should choose who they think will make the best partner for their team, the person who will work collaboratively with them and communicate. Dr. Howard concurred, saying that her board works under the operating principle that “our board of education has one employee. The superintendent is
that one employee.” She is responsible for and accountable for getting the best out of the board members and all of the people involved in the school system.

In addition, Mr. Wilbanks stressed that communication between the board and the superintendent is “key” and that these actors must “not let everything be personal.” Sometimes board members or the board and the superintendent have fundamental differences. In such cases, the parties need to be open and honest; they are not always going to agree on issues. Board members and superintendents need to ask themselves if their personal agenda is going to serve the people they represent and if they are truly carrying out the duties and responsibilities of their positions. Again, communicating opinions and discussing issues leads to healthy relationships among board members, the superintendent, and constituents.

Communication is more than just talking to one another. Mr. Fleming of Jefferson County suggested that sometimes people need to step back a little and focus on what they agree on, not on where they disagree. Board members should ask themselves, “Is this an issue that I am going to stand on, or is this an issue on which I can reach a compromise?” Boards should focus on the positive things, not dwell on the negatives. Dr. Howard of Jefferson County added that boards and superintendents have to “grow together and learn together.” A superintendent must provide his or her board with professional learning and growth, and help the members learn to become reflective practitioners and understand more than just the face value of a problem—to get into the depth of the problem.

Sometimes the simplest issues are the hardest ones to resolve. This is where communication becomes essential, allowing all parties to understand the issues and how other board members and stakeholders perceive the issues and then to make sound decisions based on all the facts. All
parties should be involved in decisions, because, ultimately, there is a difference between important and urgent, and communication plays a key role in deciphering this difference.

A good superintendent ensures that all board members know exactly what is happening, regardless of how small the situation may seem. In Alvin Wilbanks’ words, “No one wants to be surprised,” particularly about anything the media might pick up. Ms. Boyce, Gwinnett County board chair, said, “If one person has a question or has asked for some specific information, it is not a turf battle…. The superintendent in my system makes sure all board members are informed about the issue. The board works as a governance team.”

In addition, delaying a vote can sometimes be the best choice. Mr. Wilbanks of Gwinnett County said, “It is imperative that every board member knows the issues and understands what is being voted on.” If they do not feel they know enough about an issue, boards can delay the vote until they have adequate information. In the words of Superintendent Schofield of Hall County, “Somehow we equate making a decisive, quick decision with being powerful and strong, but often it is the opposite. True leadership is deliberate.” Delaying a decision can be the wisest action.

The representatives from Hall County described a 2008 situation regarding school safety that demonstrated how delaying a decision in order to gather additional information is sometimes the best thing a school board and superintendent can do. One board member wanted to put school safety officers in middle schools, but the board was working under a tight budget and four of the members expressed reservations about adding the officers. Once the issue was discussed and it became obvious that opinions differed, the board determined that additional information was needed before a final decision could be made. In the interim, the members interviewed parents and other interested parties and did additional research. “It really comes down to making sure that we’re doing what’s right for the kids.” When the issue was brought before the board again, the vote was 5-to-0 in favor of the officers. They listened to each other, considered the additional information received, and ended up putting the school safety officers in the middle schools.

Trust
Hand-in-hand with communication is trust. Each panel member emphasized trust as essential to establishing good working relationships among board members and with the superintendent. Trust enhances the performance of the entire school system. “Trust between the members of the board and the superintendent is very, very crucial,” said
Carole Boyce from Gwinnett County. If board members are not there for the kids and student achievement, they really do not belong in the position and other board members cannot build that trust with them. Similarly, Superintendent Wilbanks of Gwinnett said, “Some things really determine whether the board and superintendent are going to be operating as a team or not, and one of them is trust.” Jefferson County Board Chair James Fleming also emphasized trust as a key ingredient in his philosophy of governance: “Surround myself with good people, great people, and keep my mouth shut.”

Hall County Superintendent Schofield indicated that the idea of a “bad” board member—one perceived as obstinate or quarrelsome—is a misnomer. “I think what you have is a lack of trust and a lack of communication when a board member is labeled ‘bad.’” Nath Morris of Hall County agreed, saying that a successful board-superintendent relationship “just boils down to trust. You have a relationship that starts from day one with no hidden agendas. It’s building trust between every board member and the superintendent and even across board members.”

Trust is also essential when a school system is innovating and trying new ideas. Superintendent Schofield of Hall County defined trust as more than “doing what you say you’re going to do…. Trust also involves judging intentions.” He said that for far too long public education has remained essentially the same. He feels that radical transformation in public education is needed, and this can only happen if boards are risk-takers. He emphasized that a person can only be a risk-taker if he or she has trust. Schofield said, “The reason that I trust my board … the reason why we step back and try some things that, quite honestly, don’t always work very well is because I know I won’t be judged by my five board members based on what happened yesterday. Trust involves judging a pattern of behaviors. Trust is the key ingredient in a board-superintendent relationship if you are going to make it work.”

Communication with Constituents and the Media

All panel members discussed communication, not just among themselves but with constituents (business leaders, law enforcement, etc.), teachers, students, parents, and the media. Panelists stressed the importance of presenting a consistent message.

Representatives from both Hall and Gwinnett counties mentioned “board shopping” as an issue that requires coordination among board members and with the superintendent. Board shopping refers to constituents or members of the media going to different board members until they get the answer they want. In response to this, the Gwinnett board assigned one staff member to handle all basic constituent issues, and this person gets back to all board members regarding the issue so they all have the same answer. This process has helped the school system have a united front and communicate answers consistently. Mr. Wilbanks, Gwinnett County superintendent, explained, “If board members know about issues, even if they do not know all of the details, it allows for a united front with constituents and media. If someone is board shopping, it is harder to pit one board member against another if they all have the same information.” Mr. Wilbanks also discussed the value for board members of attending meetings as a “lever” for getting things done. He said that routinely attending meetings, participating
in discussions, and hearing the pros and cons of issues from both the board and stakeholders at the meetings facilitates board members’ understanding of the issues.

Mr. Morris, Hall County board chair, stressed the importance of engaging other people in the decision-making process, including teachers, parents, law enforcement (if appropriate), and the business community. Involving all of the stakeholders helps to ensure that the decision will be accepted and processes and policies followed. Ultimately, this all leads back to effective communication with all stakeholders.

**Strategic Planning**

Bringing together the themes of board-superintendent and constituent communication is the issue of strategic planning. A major ingredient in making the school board governance process work is having a good strategic plan in place that identifies goals and objectives that everyone has agreed need to be achieved, as iterated by Mr. Fleming of Jefferson County. The strategic plan needs to set the goals and expectations of the school system; ultimately, it should point toward what is best for the students. In Jefferson County, the school board has a “can-do attitude,” according to Dr. Howard. As such, the system embarked on a strategic planning process that involved the entire community, including business leaders and students. The plan is routinely revisited to determine whether they are meeting their intended goals, and it is revised as needed to ensure they continue to have clear expectations of one another.

In conclusion, although these are three unique and diverse school systems, they each engage in a common framework and adhere to common philosophies to make their relationships work. It is not enough to just be elected to a school board. It takes hard work, trust, communication, and a willingness to “do what’s right for the students” to be successful. The superintendent and the school board are the governance team. The panel demonstrated that regardless of your school system size, the relationship between the superintendent and the school board must be developed and cultivated. Successful school systems establish common goals and a shared vision through a community-informed strategic plan, bolstered by relationships of trust, civil dialogue, and constant communication. All members of the governance team must remain focused on doing what is right for the students in their school system.
Points to Consider

- Communication is the key to building trust. School boards and superintendents should communicate, not just among themselves but with all stakeholders.

- Roles and responsibilities of board members and superintendents should be clearly articulated.

- Delaying a vote can sometimes be the best choice, particularly when board members need more information to fully understand an issue.

- Both school superintendents and board members should routinely share information with each other when they become aware of a situation. Doing so will minimize surprises and reduce answer-shopping by constituents.

- Trust is essential for board members and superintendents to establish a successful working environment. School boards and superintendents can build relationships that work once trust is established.

- Addressing an issue with a consistent message shows stakeholders that the board and superintendent are unified and working together.

- All stakeholders, including business leaders, parents, teachers, and students, should be involved in major decisions regarding the school system.

- School systems should have a strategic plan that clearly articulates the goals and objectives that they want to achieve. Decisions and activities engaged in by all involved should work toward achieving these goals and objectives.
Afternoon Panel Participants

James Fleming has been serving on the Jefferson County Board of Education for 30 years, since 1983. He is a native of Jefferson County and a graduate of Wrens High School. Fleming graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in pharmacy.

Dr. Molly Howard was appointed Superintendent of Jefferson County Schools in June 2010. Prior to her appointment, she had served as principal of Jefferson County High School in Louisville, Georgia, since the school opened in 1995. Before opening the new high school, Dr. Howard was the director of Ogeechee Psychoeducational Services, a Georgia Department of Education program that serves students from seven area school districts who have severe emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Nath Morris, the chairman of the Hall County Board of Education, is in his 13th year serving as the North Hall Post of the board. He has been a legislative liaison and has a passion for maintaining local control of educational concerns. Mr. Morris, a graduate of the University of Georgia, is the US breeder sales manager for Perdue Farms and has been in the poultry industry for 24 years.

Will Schofield, who is a three-time (triple Dawg) graduate of the University of Georgia, is in his 27th year of public education. Mr. Schofield has served as a high school mathematics teacher, assistant principal, and principal and has spent 14 years as the superintendent of three school systems, two in Georgia and one in Bozeman, Montana. He is currently the superintendent of Hall County School District in Gainesville, Georgia.

Carole Boyce, who was elected to the Gwinnett County Board of Education in November 2004, has a passion for public education. During her career, she has taught middle school language arts and social studies in Greenville, South Carolina, and in DeKalb County Schools in Georgia. She also has had her own design firm. Ms. Boyce earned a bachelor’s degree in English and elementary education from Furman University and a master’s degree in middle grades education from Georgia State University. After attending the American College for the Applied Arts, she earned an additional bachelor’s degree in interior design.

Alvin Wilbanks is CEO and superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, a position he has held since 1996. Prior to being superintendent, he was the founding president of Gwinnett Technical College, which opened in 1984. Since 2000, he has advised two Georgia governors and a US Secretary of Education on crafting significant education reform legislation at the state and federal levels. Mr. Wilbanks has a bachelor’s and master’s degree in education.
Georgia has 180 school systems, each with a governance team comprising a superintendent and a locally elected school board, that are collectively responsible for the education of more than 1.6 million students. The culture, size, and tenure of each school board in the state are different. Additionally, with each election cycle, the mix of perspectives and personalities changes. No matter if the system is large or small, the governance of the local school system—with the lives it impacts and the tax dollars it controls—is always in the bright light of media and community attention. This symposium provided representatives from 34 different school systems the opportunity to hear from national and local school leaders some lessons learned and best practices that will help improve school board governance. As I listened to the discussion, I was drawn to some common themes touched on throughout the day.

The members of the morning panel, all of whom have worked with school governance teams, provided warning signs that board effectiveness is at risk, including board members who run for office on a single issue or come to the board with a grudge. In addition, they discussed the attributes of effective board members. According to the panelists, board members need strong personal ethics and integrity; they need to embrace strategic planning with community input; board members should become literate in how to use student achievement data and understand the system’s finances; and they need to be aware of accreditation criteria. Board members must listen to each other and be willing to compromise. And, perhaps most importantly, board members need to care about student achievement.

School board focus on student achievement was a recurring theme. Mr. Thomas Gentzel, director of the National School Boards Association, discussed the shift in school board responsibilities from the 4 Bs—buildings, buses, budgets, and ball games—to owning responsibility for student achievement. School boards in the 21st century must engage the community in planning and address what is happening in the schools. In Gentzel’s words, “The board must take responsibility for student performance and
use data to report it publically and to make decisions based on it.” Similarly, Superintendent Michael Thurmond of the DeKalb County School System insisted, “As school board members, as superintendents, the challenge is whether we can commit ourselves, not to a political agenda of partisanship, but can we commit ourselves to ensuring that every child has access to a quality education?”

Symposium participants also examined the challenges inherent in the unique structure of school board governance. As Tony Arasi with the Georgia School Boards Association noted, “They are elected individually, but they govern collectively.” Board members are elected by a constituency of voters tied geographically to a particular part of the school system, but once elected, they must represent the whole system. Another point emphasized throughout the symposium was that when a new member joins the school board, the dynamics change. Each time you have a new board member, you essentially have a new board. Constant attention to building and maintaining relationships is needed to have a high-functioning school board. Michael Thurmond reflected on the political/apolitical nature of school boards: “Having served in various political offices for more than three decades, I can state without reservation, I know that being a school board member is the toughest political job you can find. It is a tough, tough, job.”

Some common themes arose during the interaction between superintendents and board members, particularly the importance of trust and attention to internal and external communication. A relationship of trust and respect fosters an environment that allows for innovation and the willingness to try new things. This point was emphasized by all the symposium speakers and panelists. “Radical transformation is needed in public education,” said Superintendent Will Schofield of Hall County Public Schools. “A person can only be a risk-taker if he or she has trust…The reason why we step back and try some things that, quite honestly, don’t always work very well is because I know I won’t be judged by my five board members based on what happened yesterday. Trust involves judging a pattern of behaviors. Trust is the key ingredient in a board-superintendent relationship if you are going to make it work.”

Communication with one another, the media, and the public requires focused attention. In Superintendent Wilbanks’ words, “No one wants to be surprised.” The superintendent has a responsibility to make sure all board members are informed about issues likely to be picked up by the media. Panelists stressed the importance of having a consistent message and not allowing constituents or the media to “answer shop.” School systems should consider appointing one member to educate reporters in advance of decisions being made and to respond to requests for comment. The media and other opinion makers in social media or the community can be vital players in educating the public about issues. Mr. Gentzel noted that problems can occur when the leadership does not take the time to talk with and educate reporters and editorial boards about issues prior to the meetings and before decisions are made. “A lot of [bad press] comes from not taking the time to really work with the reporters who cover school board meetings…. If nobody takes them aside and says, ‘Here’s what we’re talking about; here’s the background,’ you are going to get some bad coverage.” Mr. Morris, Hall County board chair, emphasized that communicating with all the stakeholders helps ensure that a decision will be accepted and processes and policies followed.
Because of the unique governance dynamics of school boards, UGA’s Office of the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach sees the need to better understand the governance and operating environment of schools in Georgia. This symposium is the first step in an effort by the UGA public service and outreach faculty, led by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, to understand and address issues of school board governance. The information and best practices found in this compilation of the school board governance symposium proceedings will be used by UGA public service and outreach faculty to improve their training programs and outreach with school and community leaders. I hope that the symposium participants can refer back to this report and share it with their colleagues so the best practices and lessons learned can continue to foster improved school board governance throughout the state.
Thirty-four school systems participated in the 2013 School Board Governance Symposium.
The University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government has been helping government entities become more efficient, effective, and responsive for more than 85 years. Through training and development, customized assistance, application of technology, and studies relevant to operations and decision making, we have the expertise to meet the needs of government at all levels throughout Georgia. The Carl Vinson Institute of Government is an approved provider of school board governance training by the State Board of Education.