



Introduction

Politics, Governance, and System Improvement

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The most remarkable thing about our country is this: ordinary citizens control almost every major institution, public and private . . . Does this make sense? What it makes is a democracy. We, the people, govern ourselves.

—Henry N. Brickell and Regina H. Paul, *Time for Curriculum* (1988)

Today, with how much is at stake in the success of our nation’s institutions, especially public schools, Brickell’s observation doesn’t go nearly far enough.

What if more than merely extolling the democratic principles underlying it, we considered how local education governance could, in every district, become an exemplar of highly *effective* decision making, leadership, and action? Effective, as in major expansion in the capacity of local entities to bring about significant measurable improvements in the learning and lives of all students under their watch and care.

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We believe that most trustees want to make a difference in the lives of students and to improve the district and the system as a whole. Strangely, they get little help in defining and fulfilling this role. Paul Richman, former Executive Director of California's Parent Teacher Association, drew a similar conclusion when he made the following comments to us:

At a time when taking a coherent, system-wide approach to serving all kids and improving schools is more important than ever, effective governance is perhaps the least understood and most underutilized component for success and sustainability. School board members, superintendents, and their local communities especially need to understand and focus on effective governance. (personal communication, August 2018)

UNITY OF PURPOSE: DRIVEN BY A SHARED MORAL IMPERATIVE

That is what this book is about. Our vision is of a governance system, school board, and superintendent working together as a cohesive, unified team with a common vision driven by a shared moral imperative. This is a dynamic, powerful role for school boards. It assumes that governance is a basic function of the organization, an integral part of the system, setting the direction of the district, assuring the achievement of strategic goals and the moral imperative, holding the district accountable, and providing leadership to the community. Most important, it is a governance system that fulfills its responsibility to all the children and the community it serves.

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The question of the improvement of local education governance comes at a critical time for society. There are signs that the world is facing formidable, seemingly impossible obstacles with respect to both the physical and social climate. There is rapidly growing inequity between the rich and the poor in almost every country. Stress and anxiety among the young and old are becoming more marked and affecting younger and younger children. Trust in societies is worsening. Schooling is

also becoming less and less engaging for the majority of students as they go up the grade levels. Education cannot be expected to solve everything, but it is increasingly clear that it is the one social institution that has the potential to make a major difference for humanity in a troubled world. On the positive side, we have new, powerful education ideas that have the potential to deepen learning for all students, especially those that are most disconnected from life and schooling (see Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018). More than ever we need effective core governance at the local level led by trustees and superintendents who not only work jointly with each other but also form powerful partnerships with their schools and communities.

We wrote this book because there is an urgent need for better and markedly more effective school districts. Trustees, superintendents, schools, and communities working together can generate this new social presence and power.

We will make the case that there has been little attention paid to the study and improvement of school district governance. The education research and reform communities have seriously neglected the potentially powerful role of governance in sustaining long-term improvement. People seem to think that “it is what it is.” Too often given actions have become stereotypes, whether justified or not: individual trustees are often cast as the bad guys; boards as a whole are seen as part of a bureaucracy that is removed or unable to act responsively; and superintendents are cast as victims of meddling and micromanagement. In this way superintendents are absolved of building genuine working relationships with their boards, and we end up with variations on we-they relationships with best case scenarios from superintendents being “My board is great—they leave me alone to do my job.”

In this book we take a different tack with local school boards and their trustees and superintendents. We go to the core, basic foundation of understanding local efficacy: the mindset of high-performing trustees and superintendents carrying out the critical function of governance.

We believe that school boards are vastly underutilized at precisely the time when they are most needed. We hold another fundamental premise that we will position in the course of this book: *the vast majority of school board members want to improve the public education system.* We are sure there are some bad apples or quirky self-interested individuals among the lot (as is the case with some superintendents). But the irony is that the

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neglect of the critical role of governance by the broader education community has made ineffectiveness a self-fulfilling prophecy for all too many districts. Many state school board associations have done a good job of providing training programs for trustees, but their capacity and ability to reach all school boards in any given state are limited. Our approach is to get at the heart of how to maximize unifying action of boards and superintendents together. That will benefit all students and all teachers (and in turn, parents and the public). Our point: we are in danger of squandering this potential because *we have almost totally neglected the vital function of school board governance within the larger system of education change.*

POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

The concepts of politics and governance are tricky because they have wide and varying definitions. Politics for example can have a positive, neutral, or negative meaning. Some definitions refer to politics as “the art of governing”; others refer to it as competing power struggles. Playing politics or office politics, or blatant attempts to get and keep power conceive of politics as negative. Overall, we are going to use it as meaning “holding and using power” which by itself does not mean that you can get things done just because you have power. Governance, on the other hand, concerns the day-to-day operation of government. So, bear with us and think of “holding and using power” as politics and “exercising authority on a daily basis” as governance. For the sake of clarity and to get to the solution—good *politics* and good *governance*—we need to contrast the two elements as they work out in real conditions. Let’s step outside the United States to Quebec, Canada, and to Mexico, both of which have had recent elections.

In October 2018, the people of Quebec elected a new provincial government with a strong majority choosing “right of center,” a party that had never held power—the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ, “coalition for the future of Quebec”). Uncharacteristically, as the party’s new elected leader, Francois Legault appears to have chosen governance along with politics when he first welcomed his new members of parliament:

Politics: Holding and using power

Governance: Exercising authority on a daily basis

Our team must now create a government for Quebecers not a CAQ government. We will form a government for all Quebecers . . . We must also represent people who did not vote for the party, to put aside partisan considerations and act with the higher interest of Quebec in mind. (Authier, 2018)

Maybe this is good politics, but for us it also represents potential good governance (which remains to be seen in practice).

A few days later, the *New York Times* published an article about Mexico's president-elect Lopez Obrador titled *Faced With Reality of Job, Mexico's Next President Scales Back Promises* (Malkin, 2018). Lopez Obrador had been elected in July 2018 on a strong left-wing agenda of "battling corruption, soaring violence, and tackling entrenched inequality." He now faces (in our terms) the reality of governance. As one observer commented, "he is seeing Mexico with different eyes for the first time" (Malkin, 2018). Tackling Mexico's deep-rooted problems requires more than power and goodwill. In short, exercising power will not be sufficient; success will also require building a system of good governance in a country with long-standing weak infrastructure.

Fortunately for us, we are not trying to solve Quebec's or Mexico's problems, but the situation for local education governance is similar in kind. For the sake of argument and with slight exaggeration, we compare politics and governance in their negative and positive forms.

Politics Without Good Governance

- Peaks before, during, and just after elections
- Caters to special interest groups
- Often superficial: bumper-sticker style
- Can be sincere but weak on implementation
- Harmful when lacking good governance
- Limited lasting benefit

Politics With Good Governance

- Politics dominate during election
- Builds capacity relative to the core agenda

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- Recognizes that government is for all of the people
- Long-term as well as short-term perspective
- Implementation versus adoption mindset

Our main goal in this book is to spell out what good governance consists of at the local district level so that well-intended politics can combine with the governance core to produce education results never before seen. We have one other major point that takes us back to the quote from Brickell and Paul at the beginning of this chapter. We need to update the meaning of “what makes for good democracy” in education. For us it means combining politics and good governance to achieve *system improvement* at both the local and state levels and in their interactive relationship. This is the essence of our book: *Good politics plus good governance wrapped in a systems perspective is the future of public education* (see Figure 0.1).

We are unabashedly forward about our solution: there needs to be a fundamental change in the culture and mindset of superintendents and board members in terms of how they see their roles and role relationships. Moreover, we predict that existing and future incumbents of these roles will embrace the new situations that we outline in this book once they experience and understand how they could operate differently in practice.

Figure 0.1 The Future of Education

The Future of Education



Within this new mindset, we integrate Fullan and Quinn's (2016) parallel work in *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action*. The coherence framework has become enormously popular among school districts seeking greater focus in their work. Yet the concept of "coherence" had barely found its way into governance discussions (two exceptions are the excellent work of the California School Boards Association and the Iowa School Boards Association), but even these examples did not go deeply into coherence in school board governance.

HOW THIS BOOK IS STRUCTURED

Part I contains four chapters that form the foundation of what we call *Mindsets for Efficacy*, which lies at the heart of the shift in culture we advocate. The chapters in turn examine the following: (1) the "Moral Imperative and the Governance Core"; (2) the "Trustee Governance Mindset"; (3) the "Superintendent Governance Mindset"; and (4) "Welcoming New Trustees."

In Part II, *Governing for Efficacy*, we take up the challenge of integrating coherence and governance in four chapters: (5) "Governing With Coherence"; (6) "Governance Culture"; (7) "The Governance Job"; and (8) "Governance Tools."

Part III takes the perspective of *The Challenges Ahead* with the concluding chapter, "Rising to the Occasion."

Together the chapters map out a new, more powerful system that we call the Governance Core.

Finally, in this introduction we want to frame the directional solution by returning to one of Fullan's fundamental concepts, *right and wrong policy drivers*.

SHIFT TO POSITIVE DRIVERS

As Fullan (2011) states, a driver is a policy intended to make a positive difference in practice. A wrong driver is a policy that turns out not to make a difference and, in some cases, actually backfires. Fullan identified four "wrong drivers" (punitive accountability, individualism, technology, and ad hoc policies). The corresponding right drivers were capacity building,

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collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness (when most people realize and act with the system in mind).

Systems thinking represents a situation where people are concerned with their own role expectations, but also see themselves as part of a bigger picture. They realize that their responsibilities extend to contributing to the bigger entity and to learning from others. The result is greater satisfaction for individuals and greater efficacy for the system itself.

Sorting out right and wrong drivers is at the heart of effective governance. Our solution is to frame the agenda around the right drivers for local governance. Systems thinking mainly involves the capacity to see one's role in the larger perspective of what other factors and relationships might be determining actions and outcomes. Such thinking is based on the orientation: how do I carry out my own role in a way that I contribute to and benefit from the larger system locally and beyond? The positive and negative drivers described in Figure 0.2 provide content to this shift we will pursue in subsequent chapters.

The eight so-called negative drivers are by and large what we have now. They narrow the agenda, present endemic frustrations, and unwittingly hamper the work and impact of local governance. A shift to the positive drivers represents a change in culture, mindset, and behavior. That means it will not be easy. We devote the rest of this book to detailing what this change in mindset looks like and how to achieve more of it. Once

Figure 0.2 Governance Drivers

Negative Drivers	Positive Drivers
1. Focus on school boards	1. Focus on governance
2. Focusing on board behavior	2. Focusing on governance mindset
3. Board presentations (audience)	3. Engaging the board (owner)
4. Counting votes	4. Counting understanding
5. Tactical (operations) driven agenda	5. Strategic (goals) driven agenda
6. Damage control perspective	6. Proactive, forward-thinking culture
7. Care and feeding of the board	7. Supporting the governance functions of the board
8. Board-superintendent relations	8. Board-superintendent cohesion

board members and superintendents see and experience what it entails, it will become more attractive. After their constituents (teachers, students, parents), and their “bosses” (the electorate, and policymakers, elected or otherwise) also experience the success of the positive drivers, they will become both more excited about and committed to their own roles. Put differently, it is in the best interest of school board members and superintendents to become more effective in improving the lot and learning of all of those whom they are expected to lead. We do know that quality change stands or falls at the local level. If we want systems to change, as we surely do, we’d better enlist the power of local governance with its schools and communities.

Fullan’s work on examining wrong and right policy drivers led to the development of what would constitute a set of “right drivers for action.” The result was a framework based on the integrating concept of *Coherence* (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Coherence is not alignment. Alignment occurs when the main pieces are aligned, such as goals, finances, professional development, assessment, and so on. By contrast, coherence is the *subjective* side of alignment. In a nutshell, alignment is rational while coherence is emotional. To reach a “shared depth of understanding” people must interact on a continuous basis sorting out their differences and coming to a common understanding that guides and reflects action. It is this emotional commitment that leads to success.

We examine the role of school boards by turning to their most important and basic function, governance, while showing how the concepts *governance mindset* and *coherence* raise the clarity, status, and efficacy of the roles of trustees and superintendents. Governance mindset refers to the shared attitudes and beliefs that school boards and superintendents must develop and possess related to the action and manner of governing.

Coherence: The shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work

Governance mindset: The core understanding of the basic principles of governance: systems thinking, strategic focus, deep learning, and managing manner

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We trust that the reader is sensing where we are heading. In order to gain a shared understanding, trustees and superintendents must engage in the give-and-take of ideas. In short, they must *interact with purpose*. There are two fundamental characteristics at stake for effective governing. The first is that school board members and superintendents must continually develop a governance mindset individually and together to become a unifying force for fulfilling the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all students.

The second characteristic concerns the *content* of the governance mindset that, as we will see in subsequent chapters, consists of the moral imperative, systems thinking, strategic focus, deep learning, and manner. In this way, trustees and superintendents learn together to appreciate the big picture and the details that make the board effective or not. In the end, those with a governance mindset accomplish more—much more—for their local community and the larger system they serve.

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