

Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation

Wargo, E., Cantrell, R., McCaw, W. P., & Lorentzen, I. (2022). Rural School District Leadership and Governance: Eating Your Veggies to Stay on the Balcony. *The Rural Educator*, 43(4), 62-66. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1352>

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Rural School District Leadership and Governance: Eating Your Veggies to Stay on the Balcony

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Rural schools are many things to many people. They are the heartbeat of rural communities. Rural school districts are often the key public institutions in their communities that serve many purposes well beyond what happens in the classroom for adults and children alike. Rural school buildings are often used as polling stations, key disaster evacuation sites, sites for funerals, family reunions, weddings, and spaces for other community gatherings. Rural schools provide critical access to services such as nutrition and mental health counseling. Similarly, many rural districts are also the largest employers in their area meaning there are unique economic factors for rural school districts that differ from those in more populated areas.

All these conditions, and more, mean those with decision making power such as school board trustees and superintendents must navigate overlapping roles and intersectional identities when engaging in governance work. Rural school districts, even many consolidated districts, are generally smaller and tighter systems compared with their non-rural counterparts, meaning those holding formal authority and responsibility have closer relationships within the system (Wargo et al., 2022). Rural superintendents and school board trustees wear many hats with fewer individuals doing the work, requiring them to navigate various identities and roles. With small economies of scale, superintendents of remote rural school districts often serve as directors of athletics, special education, operations, and technology, while performing other duties such as teaching middle school math and shoveling snow. Similarly, school board trustees may assist coaching a sports team, help make costumes for a school play, or be a relative or close friend to employees of the district, meaning they also wear *multiple* hats.

On one hand, this closeness means those holding governance roles likely have more direct contact with their constituents, making building relationships,

seeking community support, and gaining perspective of stakeholders potentially easier. On the other hand, all of this overlap creates the conditions where roles and positions can be blurred, leaving those holding important decision-making power vulnerable to advancing individual agendas, micromanaging, getting distracted from wearing their big picture governance hat, and personal relationship strain.

For school districts to support excellence for *all* students, the superintendent and the school board must cohesively work together (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Caruso et al., 2015; Gore, 2015; Henrikson, 2021; Honingh et al., 2020; Lorentzen & McCaw, 2017a; Rice et al., 2000) and stay focused on the big picture (Lorentzen & McCaw, 2017d). We have seen in our work that if individuals in the system are not clear about the scope of their role or the hat they are wearing and do not have a common understanding about the importance of high expectations for *all*, disarray and lack of coherent governance negatively impacts their district (Lorentzen & McCaw, 2015; Wargo et al., 2022). So how then do superintendent/school board trustee teams function at high levels given this overlap and potential for disarray? Is it possible for those experiencing disarray to gain focus and begin to better understand how to govern differently? Recently, one school district in rural Idaho (further referred to as the Idaho district) has experienced phenomenal success. Insights from our research indicate the district is in a very different place than it was just a little over five years ago. It has a healthier budget, lower staff turnover, and higher student achievement. The governance practice of trustees and the superintendent supported this collective work. Below we share insights about their journey as they navigated doing the work in their rural context and developed resilient and consistent governance practices that support their ongoing improvement.



Figure 1. Stakeholders from the Idaho district reviewing data about their district and community

Getting Up to the Balcony

In 2017, the Idaho school district began working with university partners to better understand their district’s unique challenges as well as co-design solutions to these challenges (Wargo et al., 2018; 2021). Part of this work required taking a deep dive into district and community data which allowed stakeholders (including the superintendent, the board chair, and other trustees) to experience, as Heifetz (1994) described as “going to the balcony” from the “dance floor,” to gain distance from their everyday positionality within their district (see Figure 1). With university partners, the superintendent and trustees unpacked their district and community data and began to see a larger and more cohesive picture of the work that needed to be led; they were all as Heifetz & Linsky (2002) suggested, getting on the balcony together and understanding opportunities for improvement. Yet, individual board members still admitted that staying on the balcony and out of the day-to-day operations was not easy in their small system. Three of the five trustees had spouses that substituted in the district — most Idaho school districts, like many across the nation, have extreme certified and classified employee shortages.

Effective Governance is Balcony Work

School board/superintendent teams who follow specific governance principles support high student success (Johnson, 2012; 2013). School board trustees and the superintendents that support high levels of student success for all students have a common vision (McAdams, 2000) and use data to set goals and monitor progress (Lamont & Delagardelle, 2009). These key governance principles support staying out of day-to-day operations (which is the job of district employees) and staying on the balcony—a critical aspect necessary to support continuous improvement in small rural districts (Wargo et al., 2018). “Getting in the weeds” or micromanagement is an egregious error in governance that has been associated with low district performance (Lorentzen & McCaw, 2017b). Micromanagement on behalf of trustees distracts the team from the work necessary to support district-wide success for all students long-term, especially when trustees disagree and cannot come to a consensus and lead as a team. In small rural districts, managing disagreement and navigating relationships with those holding divergent opinions is very public work.

School district leadership and governance is not a solo act. Yet, without a clear and shared understanding of a vision for success outlined by

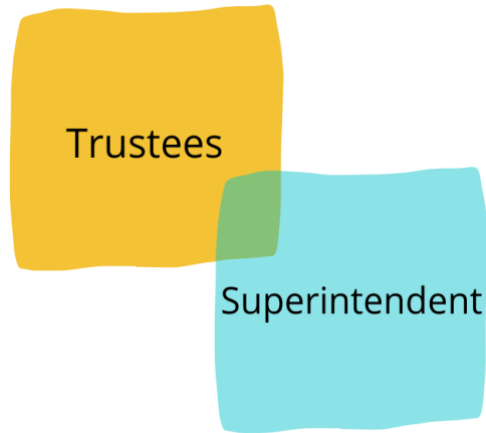


Figure 2. School District Governance Team, adapted from Lorentzen (2013) with permission

specific goals, it is difficult for school board trustees to not meddle in work beyond their purview in ways that detract and strain the district and at times, negatively impacting student achievement and school culture (Lorentzen & McCaw, 2017a; 2017b). For example, we have witnessed superintendents of districts with thousands of kids dropping everything to take a phone call from a trustee about an issue related to one student that could have easily been solved if the individuals directly involved had talked to each other.

To complicate matters, small rural districts have fewer individuals to do the work impacting leadership behavior (Bredeson et al., 2011). Each superintendent and school board trustee brings unique strengths and perspectives to their team. Together they comprise the district's governance team; however, to effectively govern, both trustees and superintendents need to know what is shared and what are distinct and sole responsibilities (see Figure 2).

For school board trustees, like those in the Idaho district, being embedded in small communities means they have less separation between roles as key decision-makers who hold formal authority, power, and responsibility, and other aspects of their identity. As part of the data review discussed above, school board trustees and the superintendent in the Idaho district reviewed results from a self-report style survey taken by trustees (the Board Self-Assessment Survey© developed by the Washington State School Boards Association). Using these data to help have hard conversations, they learned they needed to better align their governance work to support continuous improvement and stay on the balcony, holding high

expectations for every student in the district. Related to this important big picture work --and one function that *only* the school board can do -- is hiring and evaluating the superintendent (Lorentzen & McCaw, 2017c).

In the Idaho district, the superintendent and trustees worked together to assure the evaluation of district employees was directly connected to the district goals. The superintendent worked with the board to identify his goals, then he gave his goals to the principals as a starting point for them to determine their goals. Principals then conveyed their goals to teachers as a starting point for them to determine their goals. This goals-built-from-goals system created linkages and conditions for everyone in the district to own their improvement, while at the same time assuring goal alignment throughout the district.

Staying on the Balcony

Although the trustees of the Idaho district had received some school board training from outside consultants over the years, in 2018 the superintendent began helping the trustees put much of what they had learned about school governance in high performing districts into action with a continuous and structured approach. Understanding the common characteristics of effective school board governance is one thing, enacting it is another. Once the board and the superintendent had a clear and shared understanding of the district's goals and evaluation processes linked to these goals, the governance team systematized communicating progress towards the goals at monthly board meetings. And in doing this, added an element of transparency for the community.

At the start of each monthly school board meeting, after necessary routine pieces like the pledge of allegiance and approving the consent agenda, the two principals (the middle and high school are combined) updated the board and public about their ongoing work and progress towards the goals. This proactive approach served the district very well. It set a rhythm for communicating progress to the school board trustees and the public and, in many ways stopped the rumor mill.

After the principals' reports, the superintendent would deliver his report using a similar clear and consistent approach. Here, each month, the superintendent would prepare not only updates on key district level operations related to district-wide goals but also provide bite sized insights about school district governance.

Veggies with Every Meal: Bite-sized Board Training

School board members are volunteers who in most cases have a lot on their plates and wear many hats besides that of district trustee. One way the superintendent of the Idaho district respected his trustees' time was to serve up 10-minute bite-sized bits of training as the first part of his report to the board during monthly meetings. "You have to eat your veggies with your meal if you want to stay healthy" he joked when describing his approach to

sneaking in information about how high performing districts govern.

Over the course of several years the board visited and revisited characteristics of high performing governance teams, studied chapters in school governance books, and reviewed Idaho policies which outlined their work in short ten-minute chunks during board meetings. Often the superintendent would pair these bite-sized learning opportunities with what he needed to communicate in his report. For example, when the district (like most during the Covid shutdowns of 2020) needed to consider how to reopen, the superintendent reviewed state and federal policies associated with re-opening. Not only did this prove to be very effective at reminding board members to stay on the balcony and out of the weeds but it also communicated to the larger community that everyone is always learning in the Idaho district, including the trustees. Although training your bosses might seem awkward, over the years trustees welcomed this systematized training as it helped them maintain boundaries and make hard decisions. Rural school governance is vitally important work. The changes that took place in the Idaho district are replicable with focused collective action, trust, and time. By staying focused on the right work, governance teams can and do support school districts and communities to overcome great obstacles and thrive; for that, everyone "needs to eat their veggies," even school board trustees.

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Suggested Citation:

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