

ELEVATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES: **A SCHOOL BOARD IMPERATIVE**



By Terry Spradlin, ISBA Executive Director



Now in my seventh year as the executive director of the Indiana School Boards Association (ISBA), there has not been a more important Journal column to write than this. I strive to have a meaningful impact at ISBA in supporting our members and contributing to the success of K-12 public education. However, what keeps me up at night, or sometimes wakes me up very early in the morning, is that I want to have a profound and lasting impact on student achievement outcomes across the state in all 290 school districts for our 1 million Hoosier students. Recently I had an epiphany that I could do more—we need to do more to pursue excellent educational outcomes for all children. I want to keep a growth mindset and follow Jim Collin’s mantra of moving from “good to great” in all that ISBA can impact. I do believe that great things happen every day in our classrooms, but our shared goal should be to ensure that every student has an optimal opportunity for academic progress and success. That work is never finished and requires continued focus and determination. It is about our students that I find renewed energy, drive, and motivation to do what I do, and I feel quite blessed for the opportunity.

Is that a reason that you ran and continue to serve on your school board – wanting to have an impact on the quality of schools and educational outcomes in your community? What is your “why” today as you continue board service and as you enter the board room at each meeting? When was the last meeting your board discussed the corporation’s goals and student achievement outcomes? Do you collectively and regularly monitor progress on fulfillment of your strategic plan? Finally, are your board meetings focused on adult inputs, or student outcomes?

We’ve just completed another session of the Indiana General Assembly and much time, debate, and discussion occurred about student reading proficiency and absenteeism. Data suggests that we are not trending in the right direction in Indiana on either measure, although much of the performance decline was exacerbated by learning loss resulting from the pandemic and the move to virtual learning. Legislators contend that improvements are needed in our K-12 education system to have students’ college and career ready to grow jobs and the state economy, elevate educational attainment by Hoosier adults, and improve the quality of life we experience wherever we reside in the state. While we can debate and contest claims about the effectiveness of public education, is it wasted energy that distracts us from what’s within our control and energy that can be better directed on continuous improvement? What can we do as school board members, acting cohesively as school boards,

and as a statewide K-12 education management association to have an impact on the things where we have a role and responsibility?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

ISBA espouses tenets of model board governance in many publications and resource manuals. Generally speaking, we specify that school boards have four core duties: 1) adopt policy required by state or federal law, or recommended by ISBA or your legal counsel; 2) Provide superintendent oversight through effective communications, collaborative relations, and annual reviews; 3) Contribute to the development and adoption of an annual budget and provide oversight, transparency, and accountability for the financial assets of the school corporation; and, 4) Goal setting through strategic planning with vision and mission statements, core values, and goals to focus on student achievement outcomes.

All important duties, but without a focus on goal setting, we become too focused on adult inputs like HR decisions, facilities management, business operations, etc., and not focused on students. When talking to board members that experience board ineffectiveness, conflict, or strife, I ask whether time is allocated on the board agenda to discuss student achievement outcomes and how often? Let us not forget the ISBA Code of Ethics statement, “It’s about the kids! A school board member should honor the high responsibility that membership demands by thinking always in terms of children first.”

GOAL SETTING THROUGH STRATEGIC PLANNING

Goal setting requires intentionality, tenacity, and focus on vision, mission, and core values. The column in this edition of *The Journal* from ISBA President Becky Gardenour speaks to the importance of the school board’s role in developing, supporting, and monitoring the school district’s strategic plan. President Gardenour states, “For one thing, they create a forward-focused vision, which creates an increased sense of responsibility throughout the school corporation. She speaks about how a well-designed strategic plan helps school leaders align critical resources to support the strategies of the plan. She goes on to say, “A strategic plan should inspire and unite everyone involved and, hopefully, can lead to higher student engagement and improved teacher retention.” These aspirational outcomes are many times, as you have experienced, easier said than done.

At an Urban Boards Alliance Conference in Chicago last summer, I had the opportunity to hear AJ Crabill, a proclaimed

“school board coach” talk about the importance of “vision and values” in guiding effective school boards. Mr. Crabill’s impressive resume includes prior service on the school board of Kansas City Public Schools and the board of directors for the Missouri School Boards Association. In his new book, “Great on Their Behalf,” he shares three key observations from his experiences and expert insights:

- **School boards better serve children when they remain focused on student outcomes, but many school boards are focused on adult inputs.**
- **School board training is necessary but insufficient to achieve this focus – ongoing coaching is required.**
- **The partner most ideally positioned to coach school boards across the gap between where they are and where they want to be are state school board associations.**

Mr. Crabill states, “Inputs are resources and activities invested in a particular program or strategy that are usually knowable at the beginning of a cycle and that are a measure of effort applied. In a school system, inputs are things like staff, books, programs, facilities, buses, and everything else that we invest resources in prior to the start of the school year.” While these items fall within the scope of board responsibilities regarding facility planning, transportation, and budgeting, a narrow focus on these things distracts boards from focusing on student outcomes. Ultimately, he contends, and I agree, that “student outcomes don’t change until adult behaviors change.” A framework is offered to help boards assess their status on being “student focused” to provide the school board with clarity about its strengths and weaknesses relative to being an effective school board (see: effectiveschoolboards.com/framework).

“Research is clear that boards that engage in professional development and work as a united team with their superintendent are more effective at focusing on student outcomes,” says Steve Horton, ISBA Director of Board Services. He goes on to say that “boards are less likely to be embroiled in issues and differences between each other if they are all focused on vision, mission, goals, and outcomes.”

STEPS TO BECOME A STUDENT-FOCUSED BOARD

Overall, I recommend a six-step process to ensure your school board becomes a student-focused board:

1. **Data analysis/data driven decision-making:** How are your students performing on key metrics in core subjects at each grade level? Has your board reviewed the former annual school and corporation performance reports, and the now

more sophisticated Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed (GPS) data dashboard produced by the Indiana Department of Education? Look to determine the current performance status and trends for the various metrics for your schools. Examine 3-5 years of data to see if performance is trending in the right direction. While the Indiana General Assembly issued several years of “hold-harmless” provisions in laws to forego inclusion of ILEARN scores in the A-F school accountability computations, the State Board of Education and Indiana Department of Education are working on recommendations for a new accountability system that will use the GPS system to gauge performance and progress while likely maintaining the A-F grade labels. Regular data analysis and decision making will successfully position your school corporation for what comes next and how your schools will be graded.

2. **Clarify priorities:** Have you ever heard the saying, “what gets measured, gets done”? Once you have examined student achievement outcomes and progress in your schools, it is time to set (new) performance goals with collaboration with your administrative team, building principals, and educators. It is best to align goals to a strategic plan, and as you regularly review the plan, goals can be modified or updated. Setting a few key goals to strive toward will help keep a focus on student outcomes.
3. **Instructional strategy deployment:** Next, a strategic plan should identify strategies, in this instance instructional strategies, to achieve the goals. Here, boards should actively seek, listen to, and support the recommendations of the administration on how to improve student achievement through modifications or improvements to current programs, curriculum, and instruction, or the need to pursue new approaches. Research-based, best practice approaches should be chosen that are proven to have success. Board members should ask questions to understand the strategies, their implementation costs, and timelines and expectations for measurable improvement.
4. **Alignment of resources:** Once a clear plan with goals and strategies has been adopted, boards then need to examine whether sufficient resources are dedicated to support the plan. School boards and district leaders should be able to articulate their fiscal decisions and be explicit on how district spending aligns with the district’s vision and mission. Budget alignment to a district’s educational goals and strategies is a critical element of a successful budget strategy, which in turn, is key to

reaching organizational goals. Bottom line, spend money wisely to support and fulfill the essential goals and strategies that are most important.

- 5. Progress monitoring:** After the needs have been identified, goals set, and strategies deployed with dedicated resources, it will be time to monitor progress. Some data such as IREAD3 and ILEARN scores and graduation rates become annual measurements to review. If your school corporation uses diagnostic or benchmark assessments, that data can be reviewed with each interval of administration of those assessment tools. However, other data such as attendance can be examined more regularly, perhaps per grading period or semester. In addition, there are “on-track” indicators that boards can review such as the percentage of students earning a “C” or better, compared to those who don’t, in core subject areas each semester.
- 6. Goal attainment – celebrate!** As progress monitoring continues, acknowledge and celebrate incremental successes

that indicate movement toward goal completion. Certainly, once goals have been achieved, go above and beyond to celebrate students, recognize and reward staff, and share this good news with parents and the school community through newsletters, social media, press releases, and as agenda items at board meetings. This is an important final step in the process to complete to be a student-focused board.

ILLUSTRATION OF PROCESS

In September of 2022, and again in December 2023, ISBA joined with Dr. Katie Jenner, Secretary of Education, and the Indiana Department of Education to support the goal of a 95% passage rate statewide on IREAD3 by the spring of 2027. ISBA provided school boards with a sample resolution to consider adopting to support this goal. Let’s use this student-focused process to look at how a school board would engage to establish and monitor the goal of 95% reading proficiency for third grade students:

Over 60 years of K-12 design experience shaping the future with you!



VPS
ARCHITECTURE

George Link, AIA, LEED®, AP • (812) 423-7729 • vpsarch.com



1. **Analyze data to determine where your third graders stand with proficiency rates districtwide and by elementary school based on spring 2023 IREAD3 scores.** How do these numbers compare to last year and over the last 3-5 years? If a significant achievement gap is evident, then closing the gap between current performance and the end goal drives decision making in the next steps of the process.

2. **Set incremental or annual improvement goals over the next three school years that are reasonable and attainable.**
3. **Ask the administration for a plan outlining the strategies to reach the goal.** Some of these strategies will be to implement state laws on curriculum alignment and teacher training in the Science of Reading. Under Senate Enrolled Act 1 passed this session, school districts will also have to provide reading remediation and intervention through summer school programs for grade 2 and 3 students not on track to become proficient readers. The core instruction and intervention must be provided by teachers trained in the Science of Reading. The types of questions that board members can ask the administration include: Does your school corporation employ reading intervention specialists or literacy coaches? If not, are they needed and how would they help improve reading instruction? How many and what percentage of elementary teachers have been trained in the Science of Reading? When will all elementary teachers complete this training?
4. **The school board should then consider whether the school corporation budget is aligned with dedicated financial resources to support the plan, goal, and strategies.** The board should seek information on what state or federal grants are available to support training and implementation that the district will pursue. What additional funding is necessary?
5. **Once incremental or annual goals are set, and instructional strategies deployed, then it is appropriate for the board to seek status updates to monitor achievement progress.** Reports on the implementation progress of the strategies should occur with some regularity, perhaps quarterly or semi-annually, and IREAD3 performance data for grades 2 and 3 students should be reviewed when available from the state each year.
6. **Recognize schools, principals, teachers, and students for progress and goal completion at board meetings and school convocations or award programs.** Report to the public the progress that you make and the achievement of your big goal. Absolutely celebrate your success!

Public schools are “schools of choice” in Indiana as long as we provide students with a high-quality, well-rounded educational experience. School boards have a role to play in goal setting through a clearly articulated strategic plan. This will be hard work if done correctly, but the essential work will be meaningful and gratifying if we put kids first and they become graduates prepared to succeed. Let’s stand united in being student focused to profoundly elevate K-12 achievement outcomes in Indiana! 🎓



2024 CALENDAR AT-A-GLANCE

APRIL 15-30
Spring Regional Meetings
Statewide

JUNE 5
June School Law Seminar
Primo Banquet & Conference Center

JUNE 12
ISBA/IAPSS/IASBO Budget/Finance Seminar
Ivy Tech Conference Center

AUGUST 28
ISBA/IAPSS Collective Bargaining Seminar
Ivy Tech Conference Center

SEPTEMBER 23-24
ISBA/IAPSS Fall Conference
Indiana Convention Center

OCTOBER 28-NOVEMBER 14
Fall Regional Meetings
Statewide

DECEMBER 11
December School Law Seminar
Ivy Tech Conference Center

*For more information on ISBA meetings and locations
visit our website at www.isba-ind.org*