



# A Season of Leadership: DEVELOPING DEEP ROOTS

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The storm was one of the worst in recent history and everywhere the damage was horrific. Many of the graceful Norwegian pines and Blue Spruce trees that lined the street were lying over on their sides, reminding me

of a childhood game of pick-up-sticks by the way they were upended on the ground on top and round about each other. Cleaning up the mess would be a huge task and there was no salvaging the trees. They had been really quite beautiful, but they were no match for the strength of the storm winds that had assailed them. In the midst of all that damage, my attention was drawn to a lone tree adjacent to the downed pines. It was a mature oak, every bit as tall as the pines had been but whose outstretched branches made it much larger in circumference.

I noted that a few small branches lay at its base and there was some evidence of minor wind damage in the canopy, but for all practical purposes the damage was superficial and nothing that would leave long-lasting scars on the stately oak. It had withstood the storm and the accompanying wind that had devastated the pine trees next to it and now it stood in stark contrast to the damage all around.

What had made the difference? Was it just a coincidence that the oak tree survived when the pines had fallen? Not likely. What allowed the oak to stand firm and fast during the storm was not about anything that was readily visible, but what was largely unseen. When the pines had bowed over, their shallow root systems that were just under the surface of the soil were upturned as well and, while that root system was sufficient to feed the pine trees and provide the necessary water and nutrients allowing them to grow into the noble specimens they had been, it was not adequate to keep the pines anchored upright against a strong wind. However, oak trees are

known for having an ample root system that runs deep and firmly anchors them upright, enabling them to stand in firm defiance to the strongest of winds.

From personal experience as a board member and from my years working with school boards throughout the state, the comparisons between school board members individually and school boards collectively against the story of a storm's aftermath are profound. Board members who are grounded in the tenets of governance oversight and school boards that operate in that capacity and from that perspective are able to withstand even the most severe circumstances, confronting them confidently and with prevailing certainty. While it is impossible to come away from every calamitous circumstance completely unscathed, the superficial damage is seldom long lived and reputations may even be emboldened for having persevered in the face of adversity.

Although these are perhaps obvious comparisons and conclusions from drawing analogies between the storm aftermath, school boards, and their members, what is not so clear is how members and entire boards develop deep organizational roots? What is necessary to adequately prepare for the worst of events and move through them emerging stronger than ever? What keeps some boards and their individual members anchored when others retreat or fold entirely under the sustained weight of governance?

Those are great questions and the answers are more complex than anyone might wish. To be a great school board member is different than being a great school board. While the similarities in the answers to both are unmistakable, they are not necessarily congruent.

Greatness is not accidental. To be true, an aptitude for greatness helps, but only to whet the overwhelming desire that drives an individual or entire board to achieve a level of performance that inspires confidence in leadership and trust in judgement. It is not enough to merely want to be great; it must be the overriding goal.

So, what does it mean to be great? How do individual members become great? What makes an entire board great?

It begins with a member's personal objective in becoming a board member. Every board member must realistically and honestly ask themselves why they wanted to be a board member in the first place, or why they remain. The answer to that question is crucial and ultimately determines whether being a great board member is possible. If being a board member is anything other than responsibly pursuing the best educational opportunities for all children in the school district, chances are greatness is not in your future. Oh, you may not do much damage if that is not your driving ambition, and, in fact, you may be instrumental in decisions that are beneficial to your district. However, while sincere motives do not insure greatness, greatness is only an idle ambition of those who think otherwise.

Motive is a crucial ingredient, but good intentions are not enough. A good intention without supporting action that effectively transforms intent into its anticipated result means nothing. Consequently, good intentions must always emanate from a solid institutional foundation representing the core beliefs and values about education in a local district. However, it is not a *Pollyanna* view of education we are considering; it is a realistic picture of the educational values of a district; what is important to them; what will not be compromised. When values and beliefs are coupled with purpose and a vision of a desirable, future state, motive is never a question.

Next, operating from an informed platform is essential. What you believe is not important; what you *know* is. Great board members are *informed*. They do not operate in a vacuum, or from opinions reflecting what makes sense in the moment, but from sources that accurately reflect the current state of public education and the issues it faces and by taking advantage of professional development opportunities that provide additional resources from which they can speak knowledgeably and authoritatively on current governance issues. Informed members are not easily swayed by the court of public opinion, but rely on data to form their positions, even when the data reveals a course of action they would otherwise not consider.

Establishing clear and reasonable expectations are important ingredients, but expectations that are personal are different from

those representing the combined expectations of a group. Personal expectations keep members grounded, but expectations established by the board provide the direction and focus of the entire corporation. Plus, if all board members share a common motive for board service and if they are likewise informed and knowledgeable, expectations carry greater weight. These expectations are more than idle expressions of tasks or initiatives to be performed and they are more than suggestions; they are representative of intentional activities that must be grounded by performance against distinct deliverables that validate their accomplishment.

Pure objectives, a solid institutional foundation, the dedication to and pursuit of professional development, and clear expectations are all important attributes shared by great board members. When an entire board (not just a majority of its members) collectively adopts and practices those attributes as a single unit working in concert to provide effective governance oversight, school districts excel. When an entire board practices those tenets of greatness, deep governance roots develop. It takes a lot to move a board grounded on solid governance principles. When members are not swayed by every breeze that blows or upended by the occasional storm, the ensuing steadfastness to sound governance practices instills confidence, builds trust, and earns the respect of community stakeholders and school personnel.

The certainty in all of this is that storms *will* come. High winds will occasionally buffet your school district and those winds may come from within, as well as without.

Even the very best school boards can fall prey to a season of storms. The question is will you and your board be equipped to weather those tempests and not just survive them, but emerge even stronger?

Deciding to be ready is just the initial step. That decision must be followed by intentional activities to prepare individuals and entire boards to meet future challenges. Your preparation is the equivalent of *developing deep roots* and the conscious choice to be prepared is one of most important leadership decisions confronting individual board members and entire boards today. 