Study Guide to Accompany

*Improving School Board Effectiveness—A Balanced Governance Approach* Edited by Thomas. L. Alsbury and Phil Gore

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**Study questions: Part I: Research Supporting a Balanced Governance Approach**

Introduction: A Call for Balanced Governance by Thomas L. Alsbury

1. Taken the variety of school board structures in the United States, compare the Michigan model to other structures, including your own school board structure.
2. Describe the vision of your school board and how it is reflected in the school board actions. Give examples.
3. Figure 1.1, page 7, shows a *Balanced Governance: The School Board Structure*. Where would you place your school board structure on this continuum of balanced governance? Why? Discuss your answer in terms of structure, roles and functions, policy writing and community relations.

Chapter 1: Board Leadership That Matters Most: Lessons Learned from the Lighthouse Studies by Mary L. Delagardelle

1. How do you think the concept of proximity varies in a large versus a small school district? Why?
2. The author lists the six factors the Lighthouse study found to be contributing to the success of a district (p. 19). Although there appears to be agreement about the importance of these conditions, large scale presence of these conditions is still lacking. What factors do you think contribute to this?
3. Table 1.1, page 20, lists *Key Actions of the Board using the Lighthouse Approach: An Example of a Balanced Governance Model*. Of the seven key actions which one do you see being used at your own school board? How? Do you see the results of the use of these actions at your district?

Chapter 2: Transforming Beliefs into Action: Board and Superintendent Teams Working Together by Tom Shelton

1. In recent years, has your school board experienced a more active role to be played in the management, operations, and personnel of your district? How has that been played out?
2. How do you see the vision of your school board reflected in the work of the board?
3. Figure 2.1, page 37, is a *Survey of School Board Behaviors linked to High performing Schools*. Task: After reading the article, school board members take the survey
individually and then discuss the results. Summarize the outcomes and make
conclusions using the graphic, figure 2.2, page 40.

Chapter 3: School Boards in Their Environment: Balancing Brokerage and Closure by Argun
Saatcioglu

1. What is the difference between Closure and Brokerage; give examples. What brokerage
ties does your school board maintain? Why? How?
2. Figure 3.1, page 46, shows a Matrix Comparing Closure and Brokerage on School
Board. Where would you place your school board? Explain.
3. Using the School Board Closure Rating Scale, figure 3.1, page 47, discuss how each is
apparent at your school board and diagnose which one needs work. Page 49 lists four
ways to improve trust on a school board. Discuss an action plan to improve for the
one(s) selected.

Chapter 4: How Board Governance Practices Affect Student Achievement by Ivan J. Lorentzen
and William P. McCaw

1. “Therefore, it is the duty of school board members to recognize and understand their
influence in supporting student learning. The actions boards take, or fail to take,
combined with the issues they choose to address, affect the entire school district. When
the political or personal motivation of a board member trumps the larger educational
concern, or when the board fails to provide suitable leadership and governance, student
achievement can be harmed. However, when the board acts appropriately, students
benefit” p. 54. What stands out for you in this quote? Why? React to this statement
and, if possible, discuss your own board and school district examples.
2. What is the difference between the five standards of the Washington State School Board
Standards (p. 55) and the seven elements of effective boardmanship from the Montana
Study (p. 56)?
3. How is the Balanced Governance approach practiced individually and collectively by the
board members? Relate the boardmanship practices to your own board.

Study questions: Part II: Putting Balanced Governance to Work

Chapter 5: What Board Members Need to Know: Assessing Leadership by Mark Levine and
Paul Van Buskirk

1. What is the MHL assessment tool designed to survey? Why is it regarded to empower
school board leaders to improve board governance skills and raise student
achievement?
2. What were the findings of the multistate studies? P. 71
3. As an outcome of the multistate studies, an effective board training program to improve
student achievement was described. The training program has six sequential modules.
Which of the six modules appeals to you and why? Are there any you would recommend for your own board?

Chapter 6: Elements of School Board Success: A Comprehensive Board Assessment Tool for Systemic Improvement by Thomas L. Alsbury and Betsy Miller-Jones

1. Ten Elements of Success are noted as school board standards and characteristics found in highly effective school boards (from the Oregon School Board Association). They are divided into five Technical Elements and five Adaptive Elements. How do the technical elements differ from the Adaptive Elements?
2. Study and discuss the ten elements. Which of the elements are used in your board goals? Which jump out as elements worth implementing and supporting for your district?
3. Have you seen a change or shift from including technical elements to more adaptive elements? Why? How has this influenced your work as a board member?

Chapter 7: Assessing Individual Board Members: A Self-Assessment for Improved Board Performance by Thomas L. Alsbury

1. Discuss the recent training of your board. What were the topics? Was the superintendent present? Have you seen a shift in the focus of the training?
2. The article focuses on stabilizing and destabilizing factors. Discuss Figure 7.1 Results of Destabilizing School Board Turnover.
3. The authors stress the importance of individual beliefs and behaviors of board members that can either stabilize or destabilize the board in general. Ten characteristics are identified to provide a guide individuals may use as a tool for self-assessment and reflection. Note: “further explanation on how to understand and apply the tool to improve board performance is necessary…” to explain the meaning of each characteristic. Task: Board members first read through the article; following, each board member read carefully through the Figure 7.2 (p. 95) Stabilizing characteristics for individual school board members. Ask the members to take notes and questions for discussion.

Chapter 8: Superintendent Evaluation: An Opportunity to Strengthen Board Practice by Phil Gore and Larry Nyland

1. The figure 8.2, page 110, is a Ranking of Factors Considered by School Board Members When Evaluating a Superintendent. How does the ranking relate to your board’s criteria when evaluating the superintendent?
2. The authors describe the importance of understanding the board members’ roles. How does your district provide a shared understanding of your role as a school board member?
3. How does the Figure 8.5 Promising Practices for Superintendent Evaluation relate to your board’s practices for the superintendent’s evaluation? How do the SMART goals on page 120 relate to the goals you have set for your superintendent?
Study questions: Part III: Putting It All Together

Chapter 9: The Panasonic foundation Experience: promising Practices and Lessons Learned from Work with Urban School Board by Andrew Gelber and Scott Thompson

1. The article states that “good boardmanship remains an uncommon phenomenon” and lists three probable reasons. What do you feel may be the reason and do you agree with the three reasons that are listed? Why? Include your own experiences.

2. “A board must articulate what it believes in and stand for.” Yet school boards have many policies handed to them by federal or state authorities that may not be aligned with the board’s vision. Can you give an example of that? Consider the eight questions that are listed on page 129 that the board should ask itself regarding policies. Which one do you use in your work as a board regarding policies?

3. “Conflict happens; it is unavoidable. The problem for boards isn’t having conflict among members’ views and opinions, it is how to manage the conflict so that the exchange of ideas is productive and leads to good board policies and actions” p. 138. How does your board resolve differences of opinions? Do you have a code of conduct to establish rules for dialogue, debate, and making decisions? How often is the code of conduct reviewed and updated?

Chapter 10: Learning the Work by Doing the Work: The Massachusetts District Governance Support Project by Dorothy Presser and Nancy Walser

1. The DGSP (District Governance Support Project) was created to support the New Superintendent Induction program (NSIP) to help new superintendents develop strategies and practices that will help them focus on and effectively address the issues that most affect teaching and learning in a district. Page 145, Work Products, states that a cornerstone of the training for board members was to informally discuss the work with each other. “We have never talked to each other outside a meeting”, mentioned one school board member. Do you see value in having informal meetings not necessarily in the format of a regular business meeting? Why or why not? What would it accomplish?

2. One of the developments of the work of the DSGP was to change the board’s evaluation of the superintendent every year based on a specific yearly cycle. The cycle begins with the superintendent presenting the board with a self-evaluation and a set of recommended SMART goals for the district upon which he or she will be evaluated (p. 147). What is your reaction to this type of evaluation and what were the pluses and minuses the board found? How does this evaluation compare to the evaluation your board uses to evaluate the superintendent?

Chapter 11: Lighthouse School Boards: Effective Boards Making an Impact on Student Achievement by Nicholas D. Caruso Jr. and Warren Logee

1. The original Lighthouse research project included two surveys given to board members, administrators, and teachers annually to assess the progress the board is making toward improving conditions and believes that must exist at high level to improve student
achievement. The project has evolved over the years as one of the most comprehensive study of the influence of school boards on student achievement. The article highlights the major work done in various states and its findings. What can we learn from the Connecticut Lighthouse story “You’re changing our culture!” What were the major challenges encountered in several districts in Connecticut?

2. What are the highlights of the Oregon’s Lighthouse Story? What is meant by distributing leadership?

3. Reflect on the final statement in the article: “Lighthouses are often found along ocean coasts to warn ships away from danger. In Oregon, Lighthouse school boards are beacons of hope found all throughout the state.”

Conclusion: School Boards matter for Student Achievement by Phil Gore

1. The conclusion by Phil Gore reiterates the Balanced Governance as a mindset and a framework for informed and intentional governance. How do you intend to use this approach? What change do you need to make if you were to adapt this model? How would you develop an action plan?

2. Throughout the book, the importance of the relationship between an elected citizen school board and a hired superintendent is highlighted as a critical factor in student success. What have your reflections been on this issue and how will this influence the partnership between your board and the superintendent?

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