

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Leadership and School Boards: Guarding the Trust in an Era of Community Engagement, 2nd Edition

by Laura A. Reimer

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In Leadership and School Boards: Guiding the Trust in an Era of Community Engagement, 2nd Edition, Dr. Laura E. Reimer provides a guide for school board governance premised on the notion that school boards play a unique and critical role in the preservation and promotion of democracy in North America. Reimer's work begins with a historical discussion of the evolution of school boards in North America. The author considers the original vision for school boards, in which commonly held values were perpetuated through school systems that understood the sacred trust between the educational institution and the student, and the duty owed by school boards to ensure the common good. Through local representation and the oversight of education in our communities, school board trustees possess the power to affect the future of our children and hence the future of our society.

Despite these awesome responsibilities, the author posits that modern trends have resulted in diminished confidence in school boards and their elected trustees. The last twenty years or so have seen an increasing number of amalgamations among boards, resulting in greater responsibility for smaller numbers of elected trustees. This trend has been coupled with the implementation of legislation and policy aimed at promoting the

centralization of education in many districts. As the author aptly identifies in her work, for many communities, larger constituencies and reduced powers have contributed to a decline in communication among school board trustees and the people they serve.

Reimer underscores the need for steadfast governance by school boards in light of the many influences that affect the modern-day work of boards. Reimer analyzes how, for example, pressure from various employee unions for improved working conditions, bureaucratic systems, and hierarchical structures, can result in a lack of focused efforts by trustees to achieve the democratic goals of the public education system. Similarly, administration may seek to influence trustees to make decisions that do not best serve the community, while outspoken interest groups lobby to achieve their often unattainable goals.

The great challenge arising from this environment, from my perspective as a school board superintendent, lies in the ability or inability of trustees to develop and sustain visionary leadership, inspired by a shared commitment to improved educational achievement and responsible stewardship of board resources that inspires trust in the community. As Reimer asserts, this type of leadership can only be attained through good and steadfast governance, which assures wise decisions that are responsive to the needs of students and the community. Good governance depends on the trustees' understanding of the difference between governing and administering/managing the school board through a clarity of roles and responsibilities of all board personnel as demonstrated by a board agenda that focuses on the district vision and governance matters as defined in board policy.

In addition to her identification of good and steadfast governance as a fundamental ingredient to effect board operations, Reimer also discusses the significant role of community engagement. Reimer suggests that community engagement is achieved through authentic, collaborative partnerships, and reciprocal relationships that place the school at the centre of the community, thus achieving informed policy development by trustees. Community informed and engaged policy development serves to preserve and promote democracy, and results in the increased relevance of school boards to their constituents.

Governing Democracy is a practical guide that follows a predictable structure within each chapter to guide the individual or team learning experience. Reimer effectively develops chapter content, and provides three salient questions for the reader's consideration, designed to promote reflection and to evaluate the effectiveness of the school

board's practices in light of the new learning. Each chapter examines a key element of school board roles, responsibilities, or operations, and identifies practices that best support the development of a responsive, ethical, and wise team of trustees. Reimer outlines the four main responsibilities of boards: to set and oversee results: to set directions for the district: to communicate to the public; and to build trusting relationships within and outside the school board. As the composition of school boards change with each election, this text could be used to facilitate a structured book study for trustees. Such an activity would provide an opportunity for discussion and a critical evaluation of the team's effectiveness as measured against Reimer's ideal. Additionally, students of education and the interested public would benefit from Reimer's discussion of good governance and trustee roles and responsibilities.

The author repeatedly emphasizes the importance of a shared vision that reflects the values and beliefs of the community to inform policy development and community-engaged governance. Through authentic and responsive consultation and collaboration with the community, boards can strengthen their organizations while working to achieve their goals. Accountability and transparency in the communication of decisions and the stewardship of resources will serve to strengthen the board's position when faced with challenges common to the political arena. In an era of educational reform, where change seems to be the only constant, Reimer's guide for school board governance calls for a renewed commitment to the realization of the powerful potential that a shared vision for a better future attained through good governance and community engagement can achieve for the benefit of our students and ultimately society. This book calls school board trustees to embrace the powerful potential of governance for the good of society, describing the role, contribution and influence of school boards as one of modern democracy's "hidden treasures."