The Post and Courier

CCSD trustees changing how they run their meetings. Here’s how that looks in other cities.
September 14, 2022
By Devna Bose dbose@postandcourier.com

Charleston County School District trustees want to change the way they run their meetings, but the process has created some confusion and concern in the community.

CCSD school board meetings typically cover everything from academic performance to safety recommendations to student transfer requests.

Now, board members want to make academic performance their sole priority through a model called student outcomes-based governance.

The education coalition Council of the Great City Schools and their national school board governance leader AJ Crabill has helped school districts across the country adopt this framework, and it reportedly yielded strong results.

But local parents and education advocates have complained that the framework gives the superintendent too much power.

By reducing what the board takes on during meetings, more responsibilities are given to the superintendent. Though the board will continue to discuss non-outcomes-based matters privately and continue to publicly vote on what comes before the board, their public meeting time will be mostly devoted to student performance.

In Charleston, some community members are concerned because this overhaul is happening right before the November election when every school board seat is up for grabs, and while temporary Superintendent Don Kennedy is in power. (The board expects to have a new superintendent in place by March.)

Other community members have pointed out that they don’t understand what the phrase “student outcomes-based governance” means.

Board members Lauren Herterich, Kristen French and Courtney Waters on the governance ad hoc committee have spearheaded the process in Charleston.

“It’s about the students,” Herterich said. “And until we specifically focus on the students and stop letting adult issues cloud that focus, we’re never going to close these gaps.”

Herterich admits there have been communication shortcomings during the framework’s adoption — but the mission remains the same. And she stressed that the new framework will allow the board to hold the superintendent accountable for directly impacting student performance.
“This is not a process of giving the superintendent complete control,” Herterich said. “This is a process of focusing on students and governing like a board should govern.”

The Charleston board started the overhaul at its July 18 meeting, in which it voted to begin splitting the district’s policy manual into two — one board policy manual that the school board would be in charge of, and the other a district policy manual under the jurisdiction of the superintendent.

“When we came in as a board, the goals didn’t align with outcomes,” Herterich said. “The gaps kept getting bigger, especially with COVID. That was the premise of us starting this.”

Following the adoption timeline, Kennedy provided his goal recommendations at the board’s most recent August meeting, which included prioritizing reading and math performance.

While the board reviews his recommendations, the next step in the process for Charleston is setting up community meetings to take place in September. The meetings will each be led by two board members, and people can share their thoughts on what they think should be priorities for CCSD.

Then, the board will decide on three to five goals to focus on, which will likely include reading and math goals, and three to five guardrails, or sub-goals, to keep an eye on.

The timeline continues until June, according to a document provided in the Aug. 22 meeting agenda.

Additionally, the 34 candidates running for school board this November are strongly encouraged to attend upcoming governance training and listening sessions. At the meetings, they can share their thoughts on the governance model and get training to prepare for when they take their seats at the podium.

Crabill and the Council of the Great City Schools did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The framework is called a product by Charleston board member Cindy Bohn Coats, who said she doubts it can be applied to districts of different sizes in different areas with different needs.

Herterich says it’s just a blueprint to follow.

Midland, Texas
Midland ISD in Texas was in rough shape in 2016 when Crabill, the then-Texas deputy commissioner for governance, strode into town.

He was there to help Rick Davis, the board’s president at the time, with the region’s underperforming schools. In 2016, the district had nine failing schools.

Midland Independent School District became one of the first school districts to adopt student-outcomes based governance, or Lone Star Governance, as it is called in Texas. Davis learned during his training that two of the most important things to do were to set realistic goals and establish clear ways to measure progress toward those goals.

Before Lone Star Governance, Midland had 15 to 20 goals they wanted to achieve.
“In education, as in any other organization, if you have that many goals, you’re not likely to achieve any of them,” he said.

Afterward, Midland ISD cut its goals down to three to five — the same range Charleston is aiming for at the end of its process.

The trainings emphasized that the role of the school board is to represent the vision and values of the community, Davis said. In contrast, the role of the superintendent is to lead the professional educational staff of the district.

By January 2017, the Midland board members participated in a three-day retreat in which they set goals and their progress measures.

“That was a real paradigm shift for us,” Davis said. “It was, in many cases, the first time where we actually sat side by side, rolling up our sleeves and working together instead of getting reports from the podium.”

Those goals went into effect during the 2017-18 school year.

During the time the board was starting to adopt the Lone Star Governance, the district was looking for a superintendent. That spring, as they interviewed candidates, they also made sure they had a copy of the board’s Lone Star Governance plan.

But things didn’t always run smoothly. The district did hire a superintendent in 2017, but he was fired within three years. Davis said the framework made it clear that the former superintendent wasn’t reaching the student outcomes goals. And the district’s rating was still low, averaging around a C-.

Midland ISD knew the next superintendent they brought in had to be completely on board with the new governance model.

The board hired Angelica Ramsey, who was appointed Midland ISD superintendent in February 2021. During her time in Midland, she reorganized administrative staff, added reading specialists and adopted a new calendar with breaks in the fall. Despite the pandemic, the district is now a B-rated district, up from its C-rating in 2019.

“Lo and behold, it was the first time we have hit every goal,” Davis said.

This year, Midland ISD only has two failing schools, the lowest number in more than a decade.

Charlotte
Just over the South Carolina border, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, which leads one of the largest school districts in the country, started its transition to student outcomes-based governance in the spring of 2021.

Board members underwent months of training with the Council of the Great City Schools in which they learned how to tell the difference between all of the terminology — inputs, outputs and outcomes. Everything not directly related to student outcomes was struck from their main priority list.
“Student outcomes are a measure of what students know or are able to do,” Chair Elyse Dashew said. “It’s as simple as that. It’s not about how good their lunch is, or class size. Those are important things to measure and pay attention to, but that’s not a student outcome.”

Fast forward about 16 months later, the Charlotte board is nearly done implementing the new framework. It has made a world of difference, according to Dashew.

“It’s really driving a sense of urgency and a sense of clarity and a sense of teamwork because everybody’s on the same page,” she said.

Prior to the framework’s adoption, the Charlotte school board members spent about 3 percent of their time talking about student outcomes, Dashew said. This year, they’re going to hit their goal of 50 percent.

“Busy work” has been designated to the consent agenda, which is usually approved without fuss, and the board no long peacocks around the important issues, like student performance. One of Crabill’s repeated reminders has stuck and spread throughout the district: “Student outcomes don’t change until adult behaviors change.”

“When I visit principals, they say ‘thank you’ for the first time in a long time,” Dashew said. “It is like a mantra throughout the district. Everybody knows the goals and guardrails, the community seems to know it.”

That has also worked against the board — because of its transparency throughout the process, community members show up at meetings and use the board’s data points and language to criticize it.

Dashew is just glad that the process has been made accessible to everyone, and that Charlotte is engaged, she said.

“People still come to our meetings and tell us we’re doing a terrible job, and that’s OK,” she said. “As long as they’re focusing on what matters.”

The results of the governance change will show this academic year. While Dashew expects they’ll still have a considerable amount of work to do, the board will be guided by its goals.