

These School Boards Wanted to Be More Effective so They Went to Harvard

By Stephen Sawchuk on August 1, 2019 12:35 PM

Nearly 100 school board members from 18 large districts descended on the Harvard Business School earlier this week to dig deep into a major existential question: how to be more effective stewards of their districts.

It's the start of a unique professional development program for a group that rarely gets a lot of training—school boards—and marks the beginning of a new relationship between the venerable university and the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large, mainly urban school districts.

The council has worked with its members on capacity building, including by offering on-the-ground technical assistance and consulting, but felt that it needed to couple that with broader, more conceptual work on leadership.

"We have worked with boards intimately for years, and sometimes a board can be a major asset to a system. And sometimes they can get in the way of the work," said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the CGCS, which designed the training in collaboration with Harvard. "It was pretty clear to us we couldn't improve things for students by leaving the governance part of this equation out of the narrative. ... And it was clear that with the high turnover we have of superintendents—and of board members for that matter—that we needed a more systematic way of improving governance systems in our districts so we could build some longevity and momentum into the reforms we're pursuing."

Much school board training consists of legislative updates, ethics rules, and state compliance on things like purchasing rules. Those are crucial topics, CGCS officials say, but don't get at the hard work of learning when to do something in response to an irate parent's call versus what's more appropriately left to the superintendent and his or her staff to handle.

It's a curious omission given how much K-12 talks about professional development for teachers, principals, and even superintendents.

"There are 14,000 school boards and we don't think about development at that level. We think about it at every other level in the school system. Where has it been for school boards and school board members?" said William Hite, the superintendent of the Philadelphia school system and a member of the CGCS's executive committee. He attended the training with five of his school board members.

Putting Together a Curriculum

To develop the program, formally called the Accelerating Board Capacity Institute, the Council teamed up with Harvard Business School's executive education program, which is perhaps best known for tailoring training to large businesses but also works with some nonprofit organizations. Faculty from the university's Graduate School of Education and its public policy school also helped shape the program and taught sections of it.

Harvard's famous case-study method formed a core part of the curriculum. The faculty chose a mix of case studies, some specifically focused on K-12 education, others on management in other fields. Participants were given binders of case studies and instructions weeks before they were due to show up. They were expected to have digested the materials and be ready to discuss them. In addition to large group work participants had a lot of time to work in small groups together—sometimes with their own board colleagues and sometimes in mixed groups—as well as "structured unstructured" time, where they could organically work on issues of interest, like school accountability or finance, noted John J-H Kim, a senior lecturer at the business school who led the university's role in the course design.

The program didn't focus on isolated skills, but rather on key questions: How do school boards align mission and goals? How do they lead for performance and results? How do they strengthen governance capacity?

So what does a case study look like? Michael O'Neill, a Boston school committee member, gave one example: a case study on whether to enter or not to enter a set of motorcycle competitions. That may not seem initially very relevant to education, but as it turned out, the circumstances of the case study ended up paralleling those of a major public tragedy: the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster.

"We looked at the decisionmaking we were pursuing and how similar was it to what the engineers in NASA were facing, and how groups can talk themselves into flawed decisions, which has a lot of relevance to boards," O'Neill said. "That's about group decisionmaking."

Future Goals

At about \$2,800 per person after CGCS subsidies, the program isn't exactly cheap, though that's far less than a similarly conceived case-study professional development program run for teachers that Education Week wrote about a few years ago.

It's potentially challenging for districts to make the case to the public for spending money on board members, a group that doesn't usually get a lot of training. But most of the attendees got approval from their districts to cover some or all of the costs. In one district, some business partners helped pay for it, while a handful of board members foot the bill personally. The Boston attendees, meanwhile, were paid by a local foundation that supports leadership.

It remains to be seen how the participants will put their new learning into action. But for his part, O'Neill said he'd already picked up one idea from colleagues in San Diego and Ft. Worth, Texas, that he plans to take home: a form that spells out the norms and behaviors on how school board members treat each other that all agree to sign, and that serves as the basis for quarterly meetings to discuss whether they adhered to those protocols.

The CGCS plans to offer another course next summer—tweaked slightly with feedback from this year's participants.