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St. Paul school board weighs new approach for meetings to focus on student outcomes

Some board members want to focus narrowly on student outcomes, but the teachers union and others worry the board will ignore other important issues.

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St. Paul school board members plan to adopt a new framework for doing their jobs, which calls for shorter public meetings and a narrow focus on improving student outcomes.

But some worry that by zeroing in on achievement, board members will stop paying attention to all kinds of important issues that may come before the board.

The model, Student Outcomes Focused Governance, was created by a nationwide group of superintendents and school board members from the **Council of the Great City Schools**, of which St. Paul is a member.

Board chair Jim Vue and vice chair Jessica Kopp completed eight months of training on the approach last year and have been pitching the model to colleagues since returning from a council conference in October.

“We celebrate students when they show up (to board meetings), but we’re not talking about how well they’re doing or not doing in this district,” board member Zuki Ellis said. “I don’t feel good about the things I’m seeing in this district. I need us to do better.”

Superintendent Joe Gothard endorsed the model, noting that the board has given little attention to student achievement.

“When is the last time the board has asked me to present literacy data for St. Paul Public Schools ... and what I’m doing to improve it?” he said.

But the model has been a difficult sell for board members Uriah Ward, Halla Henderson and Chauntyll Allen.

In his first year as a board member, Ward persuaded the board to pass a resolution that will stop the district from investing in the fossil fuel industry. He’s also taken an interest in reducing class sizes, improving school safety, growing enrollment and shaping the district’s budget.

“The SOFG framework says I shouldn’t have done this work,” Ward wrote in a letter to colleagues.

Measurable goals

The council’s framework instructs the board, in collaboration with the superintendent, to set measurable goals focused on student outcomes, such as making gains in math and reading and staffing low-performing schools with quality teachers and principals. The board is expected to monitor progress on those goals often and to set guardrails to help the superintendent meet them.

“Student outcomes don’t change until adult behaviors change,” [the model’s manual reads](#).

A suggested rubric says the board will have mastered its focus on student outcomes if it spends at least half the time during public meetings monitoring goals and if only board work is discussed or acted on during those meetings.

The rubric also says board meetings should last no more than two hours, with no more than three topics up for discussion, and that there should be minimal board policies.

Criticism

Ahead of a planned vote next week on a contract for full board training, Ward on Tuesday offered recommended changes to the rubric to remove content he found objectionable.

“I don’t see myself accepting coaching about how to do my job poorly,” he said.

The board held a retreat last month where council facilitators trained them on Student Outcomes Focused Governance over two days. Next week, the board will consider a contract for additional training and support, paid for with federal pandemic recovery grants. Following extensive community engagement, the board would seek to draft its goals and guardrails by November.

Allen expressed concern about the timeline for the new model, noting that as many as four members would be leaving the board just as the goals are being written. She suggested the board, with help from district residents, come up with its own framework for board operations that makes room for a range of issues to come before the board.

St. Paul residents, Allen said, “want input on a lot of things, and the way this is structured prevents that, and that concerns me.”

Kopp and Vue insisted the board could modify the framework to make it work for St. Paul, and that they would still weigh in on matters like student safety and transportation.

Kopp pushed back against the suggestion that the board create its own framework.

“How long are we satisfied with kids not meeting their full potential?” she said.

Teacher opposition

The St. Paul Federation of Educators is among the model’s critics.

The teachers union has used its candidate endorsement process to advocate on a range of social justice issues with no direct line to student outcomes. Those include urging nonprofits to make payments to the government in lieu of property taxes and getting local governments to stop doing business with banks that engage in predatory lending and foreclose on the homes of families during the school year.

The union said that under the new governance model, the school board “would willingly surrender their ability to hold the district and the Superintendent accountable on issues like student safety, budget decisions and enrollment. It would turn our publicly elected school board into little more than a rubber stamp.”