

FLYPAPER

COVID-19's governance challenges for school boards

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The COVID-19 pandemic is creating management and governance challenges for organizations large and small, and school districts are no exception.

Systematically thinking about these challenges in terms of directors' five core responsibilities can help school boards meet those challenges.

A board's first duty is to set direction for the organization, which includes establishing the critical goals it must achieve and reviewing and approving management's strategy for meeting them.

COVID-19 has not altered districts' foremost goal, which is to graduate students who meet state academic standards. What it very likely must change is districts' strategy for doing this.

They'll need to place much more emphasis on remote learning. But there are three critical reasons for this, beyond the obvious one—namely that, due to continuing uncertainty regarding virus transmission and infection rates, some or all schools may not open anytime soon.

First, even when schools do open, some children may not be allowed to attend in person for a variety of reasons, including continuing health concerns or nervous parents who may prefer their children stay home and stick with remote learning.

Second, some families may have discovered that their children enjoy remote learning more—or are learning more—than in traditional classrooms.

And third, COVID-19 is unlikely to be the last pandemic that we face. Researchers have repeatedly warned that both the H7N9 and H5N1 types of influenza remain just a few genetic mutations away from one day becoming serious threats.

Along with technical and technological considerations, remote learning raises myriad strategic issues for districts.

For example, I have seen that use of multiple curricula within a district has been an obstacle to the fast rollout of remote learning. So too has the wide range of staff skill sets. With a common curriculum and revised staffing plan, the master teachers who are most skilled at remote learning can teach a large number of students, while other teachers can spend time addressing deficits with individual or small groups of students.

A related issue is how best to incorporate the use of third-party online resources to address students' personalized-learning needs, such as those provided by Khan Academy, other districts, and charter schools.

A board's second enduring duty is to allocate resources to support the efficient and effective implementation of the district's strategy.

As Marguerite Roza from Georgetown's [Edunomics Lab](#) has emphasized, the impact of COVID-19 on district revenues will likely be severe and lasting, due both to depressed tax collections and to sharply increased demands on other parts of local and state budgets.

Changes in strategy will also have significant implications for resource allocation. Increased use of online learning (either remotely or as part of school-based blended learning methods) will significantly affect districts' future staffing, training, technology, and facilities requirements and budgets. And every district will need to allocate far more resources than before to meet the remediation and catch-up challenges that many children will face.

Boards have an important role to play in meeting these new resource allocation challenges, especially because district management teams are likely to propose traditional responses, like closing schools and across-the-board departmental spending cuts.

Boards should challenge management to go beyond routine cost cutting and take a much deeper look at the activities their districts perform, including how much they cost and the value they add to meeting the district's key goals—which will also be in flux.

This deeper look may require outside experts, but that's almost always money well spent.

Boards also need to consider how the financial impact of COVID-19 on districts (including the impact on pension funding) may affect their access to the bond market and other external financing sources. Initiatives such as activity-based cost analysis that cut overheads while increasing effectiveness and efficiency are likely to be very well received by investors and voters alike.

A board's third core duty is to provide risk oversight. Crucially, this must go beyond reviewing the management of operational and insurable risks. It must also include identifying and assessing risks to the success of the district's strategy.

On many boards, this duty receives little attention. COVID-19 is a painful wakeup call that school districts, not just private firms, also face strategic risks that can have a hefty impact on the achievement of their goals.

The board's fourth duty is selecting and evaluating the performance of the district superintendent. As with private and non-profit sector leaders, many superintendents are struggling today to meet the unprecedented challenges that they face.

In the near term, boards need to monitor stress levels on district leaders and offer coaching as needed. In the medium term, however, poor performance in the face of this crisis will cause some boards to change district leadership.

Boards also need to be alert for violations of internal controls and policies by managers under extreme pressure. Their intentions are usually fine, but control and policy violations set dangerous precedents, may have unintended consequences, and can create liability and litigation exposures.

A board's fifth duty is reporting results to various stakeholders in an accurate and timely manner.

In crisis situations, speed and transparency are critical and must avoid bland assurances that "we have this under control" and "things will be fine when COVID-19 has passed." Most people know that neither of these is likely to be true, and that we still face major uncertainties about the timing of school re-openings, as well as student attendance and learning gaps when they do.

Research has repeatedly shown that what people seek in crises is a combination of truth and hope, including opportunities to create a better future. A board needs to acknowledge that its district is struggling to meet the new challenges they face. But directors also need to convey their confidence that these challenges will be met, even if that means that some things in the district will be different—and hopefully better—in the future.

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