Preparing Students in Pike County for a Complex Future

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Preparing Students in Pike County for a Complex Future
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President’s Message
Thomas (Tom) Odom, Oconee County BOE Chair and GSBA President

Leadership Matters!
Valarie Wilson, GSBA Executive Director

Newton County Schools Launches Innovative Plan to Eradicate Poverty
By Scotty Brewington

*What is the Portrait of a Graduate? Preparing Students in Pike County for a Complex Future.
By Scotty Brewington

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Failure to Govern: Bad Board Behavior Equals Poor Student Performance
by Ivan J. Lorentzen and William P. McCaw
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GSBA Annual Conference: The Vision Summit

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* Cover Photo courtesy of Pike County’s Portrait of a Graduate Program
I hope this message finds you well…. Much has been written and researched on the importance of professional development in education. It is important for Local School Boards, Superintendents, Principals, and Teachers. No matter who you are, how much an organization shines, one has to continuously learn and keep abreast of new research and proven practices to remain effective. As Winston Churchill once said, “Success is never final.”

We are well aware of the legal requirements of local school board professional development. GSBA provides support for this in a variety of ways. It also relies on its members to provide feedback to board leadership programs so new programs can be developed or the current programs revised.

But what of Leadership Development? It is impossible to frame this in so finite an article so I will pose as briefly as possible and conclude with questions for consideration.

As I mentioned at the June Conference this year, data I received from a Superintendent (who should know) indicated that there were 86 changes in Superintendent jobs over the last two years. No data was available for 2017. To me, this is a real challenge for continuity in school systems and in our state. There are a variety of reasons for this. Career moves, family considerations, board dynamics, status quo ineffectiveness, and others. In Georgia, a Superintendent’s average tenure is about 4 years. What does this mean for our state?

Principals also have a fairly high rate of turnover. A 2014 survey by the School Leaders Network found that half of new principals leave by their third year. In the 2012-2013 Principal Staffing survey, over 70% of the principals had been at their school for less than 5 years. There are indications that a school underperforms the year after the principal leaves. Combine that with the time it can take a new principal to regain the momentum, up to 3 years. Is continuity and leadership succession at issue?

Scholars have indicated, with remarkable clarity, that induction programs, mentoring, and developing a systematic approach to managing principal talent could be a way to reduce unwanted turnover and deliver quality candidates.

Accordingly, a few questions for thought and possibly some considerations for basis of future action.

- What is the impact of Superintendents or Principals moving around so frequently?
- Is there enough of a pool for effective candidates for Superintendents and Principals or should there be an expansion of leadership preparation in our state or local systems?
- Should leadership preparation be created outside of traditional university-based programs?
- What does leadership preparation look like in Georgia? Does our state have strong policies and procedures for leadership preparation? Do we have strong induction programs for key skills or are we as a state and universities simply credentialing?
- Have all the educational entities and state agencies been involved in that vision (if it exists) of leadership preparation?
- In developing policies and procedures for leadership preparation, what are the implications for our many rural school systems in leadership preparation?
- What do successful education leaders need to know and be able to do? More than ever before, these leaders must have a comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that impact student achievement.

I must mention that recent legislation set up in statute a Joint Study Committee on the Establishment of a Leadership Academy. This would be a possibility of an Academy to provide opportunities for principals, and others, to update and expand their leadership knowledge and skills. This is a worthwhile beginning and hopefully the realization that leadership development is important.

I remain hopeful that a unified, seamless, and simple approach to leadership development be important to the future of education in our state and local communities.

It is time to talk about it.
WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP PREPARATION LOOK LIKE IN GEORGIA? DOES OUR STATE HAVE STRONG POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR LEADERSHIP PREPARATION? DO WE HAVE STRONG INDUCTION PROGRAMS FOR KEY SKILLS OR ARE WE AS A STATE AND UNIVERSITIES SIMPLY CREDENTIALING?

TOM ODOM | GSBA PRESIDENT | FALL 2017 AGENDA
Leadership matters. More importantly, COURAGEOUS leadership matters more than ever before. Courageous leadership by school board members across this state, aligned with the educational leadership of superintendents, administrators, faculty and staff, is what does and will continue to define our public education system in Georgia. Leadership for school board members is more than being elected by your communities to approve budgets, hire, fire, and evaluate the superintendent, and approve policy recommendations; leadership for school board members means being accountable for ensuring the public education in a district meets the needs and emerging challenges of the district that results in and leads to high student achievement for every student.
So, what does that COURAGEOUS leadership look like? Why COURAGEOUS leadership?

Allow me to attempt to answer both questions by outlining the seven critical components of true leadership; decisiveness, awareness, focus, accountability, empathy, honesty, and inspiration. Please note, these are not the only components, but I daresay they are the most critical.

First, a courageous leader has to be decisive, meaning they are not afraid to make a decision once they have done the research and work necessary to make an informed decision. Many times those decisions will face opposition because external stakeholders have not been immersed in the research and data that led to the decision, so the COURAGEOUSNESS comes in when a board member sticks to their decision because they know it’s the right thing to do.

Second, a courageous leader is always aware of the issues, concerns, points of pride, any and everything that impacts the school district; the awareness speaks to their ownership of the good and the bad. Board members are COURAGEOUS when that awareness is questioned by those less informed.

Third, a courageous leader is focused on the core work of the school district; high student achievement and success for every child. School board members are focused when they are COURAGEOUS enough to ignore, or better yet not allow, the adult “issues” that get in the way of doing what is right for students to become a distraction.

Fourth, a COURAGEOUS leader is not afraid of accountability, of holding themselves accountable for what happens within the school district. As board members, we are COURAGEOUS when we prioritize the needs of the student over the needs of special interests or personal agendas; when we take action based on the voices of our children.

Fifth, a COURAGEOUS leader demonstrates empathy through the willingness to not only understand the circumstances of the students, families, and staff of a district, but to also create policy and support processes and beliefs that give rise to a culture and climate that values everyone. A COURAGEOUS board member stands up when outside forces threaten to compromise that environment in a negative way.

Sixth, a COURAGEOUS leader is honest at all times, even when the truth hurts. Board members are COURAGEOUS when the school district has failed a child or a group of children and they are transparent about the failure, owning the responsibility, and committing to get it right.

And seventh, COURAGEOUS leaders are always, ALWAYS inspirational, shining the light towards the future. COURAGEOUS board members shine their light most brightly when the future is uncertain, demonstrating a belief in the school district when others may question it.

At GSBA, we work every single day to equip you, our membership, with the training, advocacy, tools and support to COURAGEOUSLY lead your districts. GSBA understands that as board members you model the leadership you want to see within your districts, we stand ready to support you in all your efforts. ❑

Courageous leadership by school board members across this state, aligned with the educational leadership of superintendents, administrators, faculty and staff, is what does and will continue to define our public education system in Georgia.

VALARIE WILSON | GSBA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR | FALL 2017 AGENDA
Newton County Schools Launches Innovative Plan to Eradicate Poverty

By Scotty Brewington, Freelance Writer

The Newton County School System is taking a new, comprehensive approach to permanently eradicate poverty in the county.

The school system’s governance team – made up of its board of education and superintendent – has taken the lead in a bold new initiative to start the conversation about poverty and its impact on students in the classroom.

The Opportunity Community (OC) model is a national movement that provides structured ways for community members to better understand poverty and become more active in helping their neighbors overcome it. OC model was developed by Dr. Donna Beegle, the founder of Communication Across Barriers.

“We administered a cognitive test to kindergartners last year and found that as a whole, our students are coming to school with significant cognitive deficiencies,” said Samantha Fuhrey, superintendent of the Newton County School System, which has a poverty rate of around 70%. “We knew then that it was time to look beyond what happens in the classroom. This is not just a school issue – it’s a community issue.”

The revolutionary OC model takes a comprehensive approach to engage stakeholders across all sectors – business, social services, education, healthcare, justice and faith-based organizations – to take a fresh look at poverty and collaborate to make the overall community stronger.

“It is very hard to address a problem unless you know the cause of the problem,” said Almond Turner, chairman of the Newton County Board of Education. “This initiative will help us get a head start on the kids in our system and make them better students.”

Families living in poverty – whether as a result of generational, working class, situational or immigrant poverty – are identified as “neighbors” in the program. The OC model includes an education program designed to remove the shame and isolation of poverty by connecting “neighbors” with “navigators” who can help them.
Navigators are community members trained through the OC model who commit to using their networks to assist Neighbors in accessing the resources and support they need to climb (and stay out) of poverty permanently. Specialty Navigators are community members who work in organizations that provide resources and opportunities including colleges, hospitals, housing complexes and the court system. These Specialty Navigators agree to help Navigators and Neighbors navigate their systems.

Super Navigators are those who have experienced poverty firsthand and managed to escape it, and can now serve as trusted advisors to the Neighbor/Navigator relationship.

“Poverty doesn’t just exist in Newton County and it’s not attached to a specific race, sex, community or even rural schools. There are kids in schools all over Georgia and around the country coming to school hungry, without clean clothes or lacking sleep because they are bounced between households or are up late, caring for younger siblings,” said Shakila Henderson-Baker, member of the Newton County Board of Education.

“This initiative can help the community learn more about the barriers to educating our children and we are very excited about starting the dialogue.”

The OC initiative in Newton County began 18 months ago and is still in the planning and information sharing stage. The county has hosted several poverty awareness meetings, educating the community about poverty in Newton County, and has begun gathering contact information from interested community members.

The next step is recruiting volunteers, training Navigators and registering Neighbors to attend the official kick-off OC Conference in March 2018.

The model is designed to run on a one-year cycle and can be extended as needed. Conferences will be held annually, with a class of Neighbors “graduating” at the end of the program. These graduates are then invited to return and volunteer with the model or even become Navigators themselves.

Newton County is modeling their program after a successful program in Amarillo, Texas, and has partnered with a coach, Elia Moreno, of the consulting firm Communication Across Barriers, to guide them through the process. The goal is to kick-off the program with 50 enrolled Neighbor families that have been identified through the school system and community agency partners as good candidates. As the program evolves, Neighbor families may also be identified through other civic groups or faith-based organizations,” Fuhrey said.

“Our goal is to set up Neighbor/Navigator relationships that will, over time, create a network that crosses from one side of our community to the other,” said Fuhrey. “We have the ability to change the lives of many families and children in our community. Everyone is trying to figure it out together and we agree that the Opportunity Community model is the way to get there.”
The Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) won the Pinnacle Award from the Gwinnett Chamber for non-profit small business of the year. Valarie Wilson, GSBA Executive Director, accepted our award on behalf of the Association at the Gwinnett Chamber, Pinnacle Small Business Awards luncheon, on October 12, 2017. We wanted to thank each and every one of our districts for your support. We do what we do each day for you all but most importantly for the 1.7 million public school children in the state of Georgia.
During his 13-year tenure as superintendent, Dr. Michael Dun- can felt things were going well for Pike County Schools. Grad- uation rates were up 25%, there had been a 300% increase in dual-enrollment, standardized test scores were high and more kids than ever were taking advanced placement classes.

But in 2012, Duncan reached out to the community to see if they thought the school system could do even more to prepare students for a dramatically changing world after high school. The answer was an overwhelming “yes.”

“We took an opportunity to really reflect on who we are as a school system,” said Duncan. “Our teachers had been working very hard to engage the state accountability system and we were doing a great job as far as test preparation goes. But we just didn’t feel like we were adequately preparing students for life after public school.”

The school system engaged with the community for over a year, asking students, parents, teachers, employers and more one simple question: What should we do to prepare students for a very complex future?

For many students in Pike County, their path after high school will be very different than that of the older generation’s. Most likely, it won’t ensure a job right after graduation that leads to a comfortable pension.

“We started having lots of conversations and not one person mentioned test scores,” said Duncan. “We had all of these fantastic metrics, but the community never showed much interest in that. What they wanted was for their kids to be able to think independently and be equipped with the skills they need to go into the workplace and tackle any challenges presented to them.”

The school system engaged with the community for over a year, asking students, parents, teachers, employers and more one simple question: What should we do to prepare students for a very complex future?

The goal is to begin building these competencies at the Pre-K level through a new and innovative instructional program. The Portrait of a Graduate program will be a part of every grade, Pre-K through 12th, and will define what parents should
expect from a culmination of 13 years of education with Pike County Schools, Duncan said.

“We made the decision to reframe the conversation from a focus on test scores to using the state standards as a vehicle in which we can develop these competencies,” Duncan said. “We created a theory of action. This is what the community wants from us. This is what we believe as a school system, and this is why we do what we do.”

Conceptual teaching plays a big role in the Portrait of a Graduate methodology. Teachers aim to teach students concepts that can be applied to a wide range of situations, allowing students to become problem solvers rather than simply memorizing facts.

“Authentic assessment is a huge part of the program. It’s not just about what you know but what you can do with what you know,” said Duncan. “That is where the combination of content and competency come together and allow students to engage and apply the concepts they have learned.”

**Measuring the Impact**

For over two decades, Pike County has been rich in vision, if not in resources. The school system has consistently had one of the lowest per pupil expenditures in Georgia.

Since the Portrait of a Graduate program began, teachers have been working to redesign the K-12 curriculum complete with authentic assessments. Graduation rates and standardized test scores have maintained steady, though Duncan expects to see dramatic gains on the state assessments and more over the next two to three years.

Just last month, the school system launched a new website – pikeportraits.org – featuring a series of short video stories that show the program in action. Teachers can upload videos from the classroom to show activities students are doing every day to support the Portrait of a Graduate competencies.

Duncan acknowledges that though the changes have been dramatic, completely transforming a school district will take consistency of vision and leadership at all levels. It will also take time.

“This is a journey, not a destination,” he said. “Right now, we are in the deep throes of implementation. We have the house built – now we have to move into it. We are engaging kids in a very authentic way and believe we are close to seeing some fantastic and very effective outcomes.”

**Secret to Pike County’s Success**

Pike County Schools consists of a Pre-K, primary, elementary and middle schools, in addition to a ninth grade academy, as well as a traditional and online high school.

Duncan credits the success of the Portrait of a Graduate program to the school system’s stable board of education, district leaders and teaching staff. Teacher attrition in the district has stayed around 2% per year.
“Scalability of a program like this is a real challenge. Having a unitary system with one feeder program has been very beneficial and has allowed us to create alignment quickly,” Duncan said.

When developing the new curriculum, for example, it was possible to get all of the science heads together around the table to ensure the tasks aligned across all grade levels, said Duncan.

This freedom to be creative with classroom instruction is also exciting to teachers.

“I think the direction Pike County is going to get students and teachers to think critically and solve problems creatively is exactly what we need,” said Mark Jones, who is in his 20th year of teaching and 11th year with Pike County. Jones teaches AP Government and AP Economics and was voted the district’s Teacher of the Year last year.

“I always tell my kids – I can’t teach you everything that will show up on an AP exam, but I can teach you the basics and how to think,” Jones said. “If you learn that, you can solve anything they ask.”

The vast majority of the juniors and seniors Jones teaches go on to attend college. Close to 100 students take the AP exams in his classes each year. He says that it is a student’s ability to think and problem solve that results in the highest AP scores – not just memorization or simply teaching to the test.

“I am thrilled that Pike County is going in this direction,” said Jones. “That’s what public education should be doing so that when students leave our school they are prepared for the next step.”

As part of the initiative, Pike County’s high school teachers are teaching five out of seven periods now instead of six to give them more time to plan their lessons. There has also been a lot of professional development opportunities offered to teachers.

“No test scores or school rankings compare to what she said,” said Duncan. “The goal of Portrait of a Graduate is to prepare our students to navigate the complex world we live in so that they can tackle any challenge they face when they leave us. They will be equipped to go out into the world and be successful.”

As seniors at Pike County High School, Courtney Bagwell and Nikki Dodson interned at the University of Georgia’s Food Product Innovation and Commercialization Center. As interns, they developed two gourmet chocolate milk recipes for a Georgia dairy.

Paired with a mentor professor, they researched production methods, experimented with ingredients and even performed taste test surveys. Following their internship, both enrolled as freshmen at UGA the next fall.

Pike County caught up with Bagwell during her freshman year and asked her what she thought about her high school experience – as part of one of the first classes to benefit from the Portrait of a Graduate initiative. She said that the biggest benefit was the fact that she didn’t feel stressed or pressured in college because she was well prepared.

“Portrait of a Graduate
Though there are no hard metrics to point to yet, the biggest indication of success in the Portrait of a Graduate program is the students themselves.
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Reading is Indeed Fundamental

By Angela Palm,
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For most of us, reading is almost as natural an effort as breathing. We read labels for the best price and the right ingredients. We read agreements, decipher doctor’s orders, follow news stories, keep up with our favorite teams, and sometimes just relax with a good book. A 2017 report by Deloitte, the State of Literacy in Georgia, however, notes that 1 in 6 Georgia adults – over one million people – can’t do those things as easily since they have low literacy skills and function below a fifth grade level.

Nationally, 1 in 5 adults are functioning at that level. The average reading level among adults in the U.S. is eighth to ninth grade, according to a Harvard report. If you prefer numbers to percentages, ProLiteracy reports that more than 36 million adults in the U.S. can’t read, write, or do basic math above the third grade level. 30 million adults in this country read at or below the fifth grade level; 63 million read between the sixth and eighth grade level.

Functionally, literacy is defined in terms of skills rather than grade level. The U.S. Department of Education defines literacy as “understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in the society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” The Georgia Literacy Task Force defines it with more detail as “the ability to speak, listen, read, and write, as well as to view print and non-print text in order to achieve the following:

• to communicate effectively with others,
• to think and respond critically in a variety of settings to a myriad of print and non-print text, and
• to access, use, and produce multiple forms of media, information, and knowledge in all content areas.”

The impact on children is multi-fold. Children whose parents have low literacy skills have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading level. 58% of Georgia’s adults functioning at this level are employed in construction, manufacturing, restaurant, and retail jobs (Deloitte). As jobs evolve into requiring higher level skills, these adults will be left at the lowest paying levels or without jobs unless they receive additional training. Many of these jobs are also seasonal or dependent on the consumer confidence in the economy which leaves the families in an uncertain place economically. When the family struggles, students struggle. These adults would struggle with helping their children with homework and probably with communicating with teachers.

When students took the 2017 Milestones assessment in English Language Arts, 36% of the third graders scored at the proficient level or above; 38% of the 5th graders scored that high; and 42% of the eighth graders. These grades are all considered “gateway” years for readiness to learn at the next level. In none of those grades are a majority of the students scoring high enough to show readiness for the next level.

There is a strong emphasis on getting students to reading on grade level by the end of the third grade because traditionally fourth grade is the transition from “learning to read to reading to learn.” They must begin to use their reading skills to gain knowledge in content areas, to think critically about the material they are reading, and to put information into a context.

According to the Children’s Reading Foundation, up to half the printed fourth grade curriculum is incomprehensible to students who read below grade level. The 2015 NAEP assessment found that 59% of Georgia fourth graders scored below proficient. 58% of the fourth graders scored below Proficient on the 2017 English Language Arts Milestones assessment. If the Children’s Reading Foundation is correct, then almost 60% of our fourth graders could not comprehend up to half the curriculum which would leave them with far less content knowledge than they need for fifth grade.

A Yale study estimates that 75% of those who are poor readers in third grade will be poor readers in high school. Georgia students did not score quite that badly in the eighth grade NAEP assessment in 2015, but 67% did score below proficient. From the Milestones number above, you can see that 58% of the eighth graders scored below Proficient. Based on those numbers, the majority of students headed to high school will struggle. The National Research Council found that students who are not at least “a moderately skilled reader” by the end of third grade are unlikely to graduate from high school. Students with low literacy achievement also tend to have more behavioral and social problems according to the research.

The Annie Casey Foundation has found that the “readiness gap” particularly for children from low-income homes fuels much of the achievement gap that assessments spotlight.
The Foundation defines readiness as “being in good health, having the support of a strong family, feeling safe, and having positive social interaction skills, language skills, the motivation to learn, emotional and behavioral self-control, and physical skills and capacities.” That is an extensive definition and schools have a limited impact on several of the elements. It is, however, one way to think about the issue in more concrete terms.

So what’s a school board to do with all this information? Know your students and community. Averages can be misleading. Your average student performing at a low level may be much smaller. Or it might be higher. There may be particular subgroups of students that need extra support. What resources are available for struggling readers? Are there interim checks in place to help get them to grade level? What resources are available to increase adult literacy? Has the district formed partnerships with other groups addressing the issue?

How does the district and community demonstrate the importance of reading? Children need to see adults reading and using the information. Consider the definition of the readiness gap above. Which elements do the district and community try to address?

How can you use this information to improve communication with parents and community members? Every profession has its jargon and acronyms and education is no exception. Talking about scope and sequence, scaffolding, pedagogy, formative assessments etc. will not be helpful to many. That does not mean educators need to talk down to anybody; it just means we all need to make sure we are speaking the same language.

Georgia has a strong focus on child and adult literacy. The Governor, the First Lady, and the General Assembly have all made reading on grade level by the end of third grade a priority. Gov. and Mrs. Deal started the Get Georgia Reading campaign three years ago. The goal is that by 2020, all third graders will be proficient in reading. This summer the Governor’s office set up the Words2Reading website as a resource for families, caregivers, and teachers. The Department of Education has also been at work on this issue with the Striving Readers grants and other programs. The Georgia Literacy Commission, a partnership effort of the Georgia Chamber, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, and Literacy For All, was launched in June. Literacy Action, Inc. and other organizations focus on adult literacy.

There are a number of efforts underway but one of the most important is in the classrooms each day. As you look at ways to improve the opportunities for students in your district and how to best use your resources, keep in mind that, according to the spring 2017 English Language Arts assessment:

- 87,146 third graders were not on grade level
- 82,379 fifth graders were not on grade level
- 53,604 eighth graders were not on grade level

How many of them are yours?

Please note, I am aware of the arguments over the appropriateness and validity of various assessments, cut scores, and ratings. Assessment results provided here are those used by the state so it is best to be aware of the results. The intent is to focus on where our students appear to be and the challenges to increasing the literacy level of all Georgians.
The Georgia Constitution provides in relevant part:

Except as specifically provided in this paragraph, sovereign immunity extends to the state and all of its agencies. Sovereign immunity of the state and its departments and agencies can only be waived by an act of the General Assembly which specifically provides that sovereign immunity is thereby waived and the extent of such waiver.

Georgia Const. 1983 Art. 1, Sect. 2, Par. 9(e). Thus, the Constitution provides absolute sovereign immunity to the “state and all of its agencies,” including school districts, for the large majority of legal claims under state law. This year the Georgia Supreme Court was faced with the issue of whether this constitutional protection prohibits suits even where the allegation is that the State, or a school district, has violated some other provision of the State Constitution.

The case, Lathrop v. Deal, has nothing to do with education and arose as a challenge to an abortion statute passed by the General Assembly in 2012. Some doctors sued 20 different state officers in their official capacity. Under the law, such suits are not against the individual but are the same as suing the State itself. When the State claimed sovereign immunity, the doctors countered that they were not seeking monetary damages, but just an order that the statute as passed violated the State Constitution. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court traced the doctrine of sovereign immunity back to before the Revolution, finding it “imbedded in the common law or England.” Recognizing that in modern times, the rationale put forth for doctrine is the idea of protecting the public purse, the Court instead traced its origins to the idea that the king, or now the sovereign State, can “do no wrong,” or at least cannot be sued for violating laws when it has the responsibility to make the laws.

For purposes of this article, the important conclusion of the Court was that the State, or political entities of the State, cannot be sued, unless the law waives immunity and gives permission for the State to be sued. Much of the opinion then turns to the question of whether public officials could be sued in their individual capacity if it is claimed that they are violating the Constitution, even if the alleged violation is a result of following a law passed by the State itself. This forced the Court to focus on paragraph 9(d) of the immunity clause in the Constitution which provides for immunity for employees of the State unless they act with malice or intent or negligently violate a ministerial duty. Ultimately, the Court concluded that this clause did not bar a suit against individuals seeking “prospective” relief, that is an injunction not to violate the Constitution in the future or to find that a particular statute violated the Constitution on its face. While non-lawyers may well find it awkward or even unfair that an individual office holder or employee can be sued when the entity that employs them cannot, the Court found that to be “a cost of sovereign immunity” and suggested
that the remedy was for the General Assembly to pass a law waiving immunity for constitutional claims.

This leads to another case that the Supreme Court has recently agreed to hear that more directly addresses the issue of official immunity. Barnett v. Caldwell involved a tragic, nightmare factual scenario. Teacher leaves the room, asking the teacher next door to listen out for her class. While she is gone, two boys get involved in horseplay, one falls on top of the other and the boy on bottom breaks his collar bone which somehow cuts a major artery and the boy dies. As noted above, the school district is immune from suit and liability so suit is filed against the teacher, claiming that she violated a ministerial duty. The attempt to find such a duty relies on the employee handbook which reads: “Students are never to be left in the classroom unsupervised by an APS certified employee.” Of course, the handbook does not specifically address how the teacher is to supervise the classroom, nor does it explicitly state that the teacher cannot leave the classroom if another certified employee is “supervising” or what being “unsupervised” even means. Given these issues, the Georgia Court of Appeals followed a long line of previous cases finding that the supervision of students always involves a discretionary duty.

In recent years, there have been several cases where the court of appeals did not find that an act by a school employee was a discretionary duty, only to be reversed by the Georgia Supreme Court. Thus, it was surprising when the Georgia Supreme Court agreed to review this decision. Many board members will remember that Governor Deal recently had a law passed expanding the Court to nine members rather than its historical seven. Two of the existing justices dissented from the decision, indicating that the opinion should not be reviewed.

Because of the importance of maintaining the protection of official immunity for teachers, other staff, administrators and even board members, GSBA, together with GSSA, has filed an amicus, or friend of the court, brief urging the higher court to uphold and affirm the decision of the court of appeals. In the brief, GSBA urges the Court to review its recent holding in Lathrop. In discussing official immunity in that case, the Court noted that: “In developing the doctrine, the courts saw it as a practical one, essential to the encouragement of good government…. [I]f an honest mistake would expose a public officer to personal financial ruin, it ‘would be difficult to get responsible men to fill public office.’ There also was a concern that, if public officers were too exposed to liability for monetary damages, they might be too timid in exercising their lawful discretion for the public good, and their official decisions might become compromised, quite understandably, by their personal interest in avoiding liability.”

The ultimate decision of the Supreme Court will have a substantial impact on school districts. Hopefully, the full protection of official immunity will be upheld. In the last several years, other court decisions have made litigation over the issue of whether in a particular case the duty involved is discretionary or ministerial much more costly, but in most cases the ultimate outcome was a finding of a discretionary duty and thus protection for the employee. If the Court should use this tragic case to redefine the substantive protection afforded by the Constitution to employees and officials, districts can expect many more lawsuits, much higher insurance premiums and much more of the disruption that litigation brings to a school or district.

GSBA’s filing of an amicus brief in this case was funded by its Legal Defense Fund which school boards join with a small separate charge. Decisions about participating in cases is made by a committee appointed by the President of the Association. All school districts in the state benefit from this advocacy effort. If your Board has not participated in the past, perhaps it will reexamine that decision in the future. More and more advocacy includes our judicial as well as our executive and legislative branches of government.
Summit is proud of our continued Platinum Sponsorship of the GSBA and our partnership with Georgia School Districts to upgrade and maintain their educational technology solutions.
Editor’s note: As a follow-up to the TASB XG Summit held in January, this is the third of a four-part series of articles on school board performance and its impact on student success, written by education management expert and psychology professor Ivan J. Lorentzen and educational leadership professor William P. McCaw.

Since public education in America is under state and local control, school boards take pride in exercising their independence. This allows boards to tailor schools to reflect local communities. This also produces significant disparity among school districts. However, many aspects of schools are remarkably similar. Third grade is pretty much the same everywhere. So is teacher and administrative training and certification.

But school board membership is different. Since board members come from all walks of life, it is not surprising that their opinions vary widely regarding how a school should function, how a board should behave, and what issues should be addressed.

Today, a growing research effort is producing reliable data about the kind of boardmanship related to higher student achievement across the district. Boards that govern districts with higher achievement scores are best described by the essential elements detailed in the Board Self-Assessment Survey (BSAS) (see April 2017 Texas Lone Star, page 8, for specifics). Boards and the districts they govern that have yet to address low student achievement continue to be derailed by errors in
We Believe in Public Education

Recent research has begun to identify specific behaviors that serve to distract school boards from their primary mission of improving student achievement.

What Some Critics Are Saying

School board critics have a long list of grievances about the failings of public schools, reserving particular blame for school boards. Former US Secretary of Education William Bennett once accused the public school bureaucracy of resisting change in order to maintain the status quo. He referred to the leaders of public education as the “blob” (bloated educational bureaucracy) and called for reforms to “shrink the blob.” He advocated putting education in the hands of corporations, city mayors, or private enterprise, which he thought were more efficient entities. Districts that have experimented with such reforms, however, report mixed results in terms of financial efficiency or improved achievement scores.

In 2003, Paul Hill, founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, identified one particularly troubling way in which individual board members can cause mischief. Not only do board members have the power to disrupt schools, he wrote, they often gain personally from doing so. This gains favor with special-interest factions within the community. Such behavior by one member breaks down the self-restraint of other board members, who themselves begin initiating their own, not the district’s, agendas for change. Board members who engage in such actions must realize that their behavior is associated with lower student achievement.

In addition, Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, called school boards an “outrage” and advocated “putting this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery and moving on to something that will work for children.” However, the alternative structure designed to replace the publically elected school board that might produce better results at lower costs has yet to materialize.

Is it possible the critics are right? Are school boards partially responsible for low student achievement scores? Recent research has begun to answer this question.

Governing ‘from the Mezzanine’

School boards should focus on district governance and not be involved in administrative leadership. It’s been said that the board governs the district “from the mezzanine,” where it steers the district forward while delegating administrative matters to the superintendent.

Hiring and evaluating the superintendent is one of the most important jobs of the board. Once the superintendent is hired, the board must clarify expectations for the district’s direction and then delegate leadership of the district to the superintendent. It is the superintendent who will decide how the district will get there.

Furthermore, principals lead the schools, and classroom teachers instruct the students. When everyone is clear about—and stays focused on—their primary responsibilities, the system works well. Boards, especially, need to respect how governance, as described by the BSAS, differs from administrative leadership.

The Problem of Micromanagement

The negative and harmful effects of micromanagement are often cited in the literature. Nicholas Caruso stated that “the greatest complaint by superintendents is that of the board micromanaging the administration.” Nancy Walser noted that “over and over . . . micromanagement—usually by one or two members of the board—was criticized by both board members and superintendents as their most common cause of frustration.” Micromanagement is a failure to respect the proper roles and responsibilities between the board and administration. Simply, when boards take on duties of the superintendent, the result is micromanagement.

Board Disarray

What happens to student achievement when board members disagree about what boards are supposed to do? In addition to identifying the characteristics of high-performing boards, the Montana study collected data on multiple members of the same
board and analyzed the amount of reported variation. When board members were in agreement concerning the roles and responsibilities of the board, they governed districts with the highest student achievement scores. Conversely, boards who had members holding a wide variety of opinions concerning their roles and responsibilities governed districts with the lowest student achievement scores.

The term “disarray” was used to describe such a board. One of the most important tasks of the collective board is to work toward consensus about what a board does and how board members should conduct themselves. Effort should be made annually to provide for board training in this regard. Effective boards work to keep disarray to a minimum.

**Avoid the ‘Killer B’s’**

Paul Houston identified the “killer B’s” as being distractions for both collective and individual board members. Boards that allow urgent issues such as buses, buildings, books, budgets, ballgames, and bonds to capitalize time, energy, and attention fail to focus on the essential elements of the Board Standards described in the BSAS.

Houston advises boards to focus instead on the “critical C’s”, such as connections, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices. The “C’s” capture the essential issues of boardmanship.

**Collective and Individual Errors**

Effective boardmanship can be examined in two ways: as a collective body and as individual board members. But it is only recently that the collective board, as well as individual board members, has been studied in relationship with student achievement.

**Errors in the board room.** David Lee and Daniel Eadens recently conducted a study of school boards across the country by examining video and audio recordings of 115 school board meetings. Their research established statistically significant relationships between certain boardmanship behaviors and low student achievement scores. These boards conducted meetings that could be described as: (1) being less orderly, (2) spending little time on student achievement, (3) not listening respectfully and attentively to the person speaking, (4) having members advance their own agendas, (5) having a poor working relationship with the leadership team, (6) having few members rely on the superintendent for advice/input, (7) having members, other than the chair, taking excessive meeting time advancing an agenda, and (8) being less focused on policy items. These characteristics described boards that governed districts with low student achievement scores.

**Errors by individual board members.** Being elected to a school board is one of the few occasions in our society where individual citizens with little or no background can quickly acquire power. Most school board members respect this responsibility and are content to sit back for a time and become familiar with typical proceedings. But there are exceptions. And it only takes one or two board members to cause problems for the district. There are several things individual board members should avoid. First, don’t be too forward too quickly—you are not automatically an expert on educational governance. Be careful not to micromanage the administration or faculty; take time to learn. Second, don’t be too detached. Sitting back, deferring to the administration and letting the district fend for itself is an abdication of your duty. Become appropriately engaged. Third, don’t make impossible or unrealistic demands on the district. Holding the administration accountable for increasing student achievement scores by 30 percent in one year is impossible, as is demanding your favorite sports team take the state championship. Collaborate with your leadership team—understand governance. Transformative improvement takes time and perseverance.

**Conflicting Perceptions**

Author Jamie Vollmer, businessman and former public school critic turned advocate and reformer, argues that school reform is usually not resisted by the school bureaucracy but by the community within which the school is embedded. He claims that teachers and other educational professionals not only know how to improve student achievement but are willing to implement the needed changes.

*article continued on page 30*
We want to invite you the 2017 GSBA/GSSA Annual Conference! This is a valuable professional development opportunity and we know it will help you in your commitment to our Georgia public school students, your school district, and an investment in your own professional growth.

This year our theme is “Vision Summit” and we are excited about the opportunity to collaborate with the Georgia Vision Project. As a state we have faced many changes in the past few years. In spite of these changes, both good and bad, we are still making great strides in improving the education of our children. The endless stories of creativity, innovation and encouragement are transpiring in Georgia’s school districts.

Whether you’re attending the GSBA/GSSA Annual Conference for the first time or you’ve been a regular attendee for a number of years, you’ll find outstanding program offerings focused on the mission to support and develop public school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality education for all children.

We invited keynote speakers Coach Bill Curry to address the issue of equity and how his life has been impacted by it both on and off the playing field. We’ll also have John Couch, Vice President of Education at Apple, Inc., speak about his decision to take a hiatus from the global company to help use innovation to turn around a struggling school. Their thought-provoking presentations will stimulate your thinking and imagination as we prepare to begin a new year.

Be sure to visit the “new and enhanced” Exhibit Area which has been revamped thanks to your comments and suggestions. We’ll have many companies offering a wide array of products and services designed to help you and your students achieve excellence. There will also be student performances and student achievement examples presented. As you visit with the students, businesses and representatives, please thank them for their support of the conference.

Georgia’s 1.7 million public school students are depending on us to expand their educational opportunities. Together we will reach new heights in this endeavor.
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The deadline for regular conference registration is November 15, 2017. Registration fees increase after November 16. There are no refunds for cancellations received after November 15. Cancellations must be in writing and postmarked no later than November 15. A $70 handling fee will be charged for all cancellations.

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For more than 40 years, Bill Curry’s inspirational messages have mesmerized audiences. Using a commanding, passionate, and often humorous delivery, he connects with each listener, leaving a profound impression every time he speaks. Bill’s is an old-school message delivered with contemporary flair.

Bill was a two-time Super Bowl Champion and played in two NFL Pro Bowls. As an NCAA coach, Bill was named National Coach of the Year at Alabama and later became the first head football coach ever at Georgia State. As an ESPN commentator, he regularly shared his thoughts with a worldwide audience of millions. When Bill talks of discipline and success, his life experience is proof-positive of the effectiveness of his methods.

Throughout his career, Bill faced a wide range of mettle-testing adversities. His NFL career was cut short by a catastrophic knee injury. In Super Bowl III, Bill’s Baltimore Colts suffered a humiliating loss in the greatest sports upset of all time. Bill’s coaching career included mind-numbing lows and devastating tragedies. When Bill talks of perseverance and toughness, he speaks with an authoritative voice steeled by his personal experiences.

As Apple’s vice president of Education, John Couch has been responsible for driving Apple’s renewed success in the education market. He has over forty years experience as a computer scientist, executive and advocate for technology in education. During his current tenure at Apple, John has grown Apple’s education business to 9 billion dollars.

In 1978 he joined Apple as Director of New Products reporting to Steve Jobs. He was Apple’s first Vice President of Software and Vice President/General Manager for the Lisa division, Apple’s first Graphics User Interface computer. In 1985, he turned his focus to education at the Santa Fe Christian School where he created a business plan for the debt-laden private school into one of the first examples of how the creative use of technology can revolutionize learning in the classroom.

Under his leadership as Chairman of the Board, the school’s annual losses were annulled and the student body grew from 150 to 1000. The school’s rented facilities were expanded via the purchase of the 17-acre site, offering a range of world-class resources, including a fiber optic network of Macintosh computers.

Couch holds a Bachelor degree in computer science and a Masters degree in electrical engineering and computer science, both from the University of California at Berkeley where he was honored in 2000 as a Distinguished Alumnus.
For example, from a staff perspective schools could improve by (a) modifying the curriculum, (b) improving student motivation and preparation, (c) rethinking assessment, and (d) altering or lengthening the school calendar, among others. Such ideas are typically embraced by schools but are rejected by the community because of misinformation, misunderstanding, overall expense, and interference with family vacations.

But from the public’s perspective, schools could improve by (a) cutting the budget, (b) getting back to “basics,” (c) eliminating non-essential administrators, and (d) firing incompetent teachers. When misperceptions about public schools and how they function are ignored by the board, community support declines. Engaging the community is essential.

More than Public Relations

Developing and sustaining an engaging relationship with the community is a commonly ignored but essential responsibility of the board. Too often the only time the district engages the community is when votes are sought for a levy or bond. The chances of having a successful election decrease if the community is regularly ignored.

Thriving districts that enjoy community support and pass bonds make a concerted effort to continually inform the community about their schools, consult with the community on issues of importance, involve them in the decision-making process, and collaborate through the creation of advisory committees and focus groups.

It’s not difficult to connect with parents of students. But there is a large percentage of district taxpayers who no longer have children in the schools and who deserve attention from the board. Time during each monthly board meeting should be set aside to have a dialogue with a specific segment of your nonparent community to maintain contact with a wide variety of constituents. These are the voters you need. Maintaining an engaged community is a vital part of the board’s job.

Lessons Learned

What we learned is that:

• District governance is the job of the school board and is defined by the Board Standards.
• Board disarray and micromanagement are common characteristics of low-performing districts.
• Certain behaviors, by either the collective board or individual board members, can adversely affect student achievement.
• Ideas about how to improve student achievement often differ between educators and the public.
• Efforts to engage the community will improve understanding and generate support.

The fourth and final article in this series will discuss elements of boardmanship present in districts with the highest student achievement.

3. Hess, F.M. & Meeks, O. (2010); “Governance in the Accountability Era: School Boards Circa 2010”; NSBA, Thomas Fordham Institute, and IA-SB, p. 6; retrieved online.
9. Vollmer, J. (2010); Schools Cannot Do It Alone: Building Public Support for America’s Public Schools; Fairfield, IA; Enlightened Press.

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