

# Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

November 2018 Vol. 32, No. 7

Editor: Jeff Stratton

## Vision, mission and theory of action should be aligned

Your vision is why you exist. Your mission is your purpose: what you are trying to accomplish and by when. Typically, these are considered for the organization as a whole. They are best developed in conjunction with the board and should become the foundation of all work in the district.

However, this is only part of the equation. In an aligned system, the vision and mission of the district are aligned. So are the personal visions and missions of the team members. Your written vision and mission don't mean a thing if you don't live them daily with your actions speaking for you. Every student needs to be surrounded by highly effective educators. Being a fraud to children is a terrible crime!

As a test of personal visions and missions, I do an activity with many of the leadership teams I coach. I ask each member of the team to write down their personal vision and mission as an educator. When they've finished, I ask them this: If we put them all in a hat and pulled them out and read them, would their colleagues be able to match them with their vision? This often gets a few nervous laughs and even periodically a horrified look. In an aligned system, team members should be able to match personal visions and missions with their owners. After developing a vision and mission, the Board of Education and the leadership team should partner to create a theory of action. This is the strategic approach to improving student achievement. It should drive planning, goals, policies, budgets, and administrative actions. The theory of action should be a coherent agenda that is comprehensive enough to transform

both cultural and professional practices. Creating a theory of action is a weighty task and can be very difficult, but it's critically important for alignment and increasing academic achievement.

I have seen the theory of action described as a storyline that connects a vision and mission to strategy with clarity so leadership can use it to guide the team through the challenges of teaching and learning. It is essentially a series of connected statements: If the district leadership does A, then principals will be able to do B, which will be able to help teachers do C and help all students learn and achieve. High-performing districts not only have a districtwide theory of action; each division has a theory of action, as does every school and every individual in key leadership positions. All of them align to contribute to the achievement of common goals at scale.

*\*Dr. Peter Gorman is President and Chief Executive Officer of Peter Gorman Leadership Associates, where he assists superintendents and senior leadership teams through executive coaching and support. Previously, he was Superintendent of the Tustin Unified School District in California and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina. He can be reached at [pete@pgleadership.com](mailto:pete@pgleadership.com) follow him at @petercorman. ■*



Dr. Peter Gorman

## Expensive judgment against district, members of the board avoidable

The Montebello, Calif., Unified School District Board terminated its Superintendent Susanna Contreras Smith after she brought to light misconduct by the district's chief business officer. Contreras Smith sued for wrongful termination. The business officer had gained employment in the district using false letters of recommendation and by making false statements in his employment applications, Contreras Smith testified. Contreras Smith won a \$2.7 million judgment against both the district and two members of its school board. The case is *Contreras Smith, et al. v. Montebello Unified School District, et al.*, Los Angeles Superior Court, Case No. BC666775. School governance consultant and former board member Rick Maloney said a board needs to define and adhere to its role to avoid costly judgments such as this.

"The board should define the board's role, to ensure inclusion of limitations on that role," Maloney said. Perhaps this kind of role definition should occur at the state legislature level, he said.

"One such limitation should be to forbid participation by any board member in the selection of contractors," Maloney said. "This would not and should not preclude board review of the contracting process to ensure legality, ethical conduct, and prudence in awarding contracts."

Participation by board members in selection of contractors should be limited to review and approval, to keep an arm's length distance from the appearance or the reality of a conflict of interest, Maloney said.

"I like the opinion of governance author Jim Brown (The Imperfect Board Member), who advis-

es, 'The best boards keep their noses in the business and their fingers out,'" Maloney said.

From the trial documentation this board appears to have had their fingers in the business of running the district, which should have been fully delegated to their superintendent, then monitored, said Maloney.

"The board should not allow any individual staff member to contractually bind the district without the approval of the board, or--at some lower threshold--the superintendent," he said. Per the trial documentation, the chief business official of the district appears to have exercised that authority without the knowledge of the superintendent, Maloney said.

One of the values of having legal counsel is to keep board members out of legal jeopardy, Maloney said. "It appears that legal counsel was used, not for the purpose of cautioning the board on a potential abuse of its authority and violations of whistleblower law, but to help the board to do what a majority of its members wanted to do in blocking an investigation into misconduct and committing its own misconduct," he said.

"I regret that resources entrusted to the board to support children's education are to be diverted to plaintiffs due to the misconduct of multiple parties," Maloney said.

"The case should be highlighted in board training as a cautionary tale, and should be studied by legislators to determine if current state law is sufficient to limit the authority of school boards in exceeding what should be the limits of the board role," he said.

For information, <https://governance101.com/>. ■

---

### Board represents the community connection

A board does much more than meet a legal requirement. The board is a vital link that connects the district to the larger community. At the most basic level, the board represents the community to the district and vice versa. As a board member, your skills, connections, influence, and leadership are keys to making the district work. How do we measure up? Mostly "Yes" answers? Good job. Too many "No" answers? Maybe seek some board education from your state association.

1) All board members realize the purpose of the district?; 2) All board members are familiar with the history of our district and know its mission and vision?; 3) Our board members know the difference between the roles of management (the superintendent) and governance (the board's responsibility)?; 4) We recognize the board is the vital link to the community the district serves?; 5) All members realize that their commitment of time, effort and leadership on the board is key to the district's success? ■