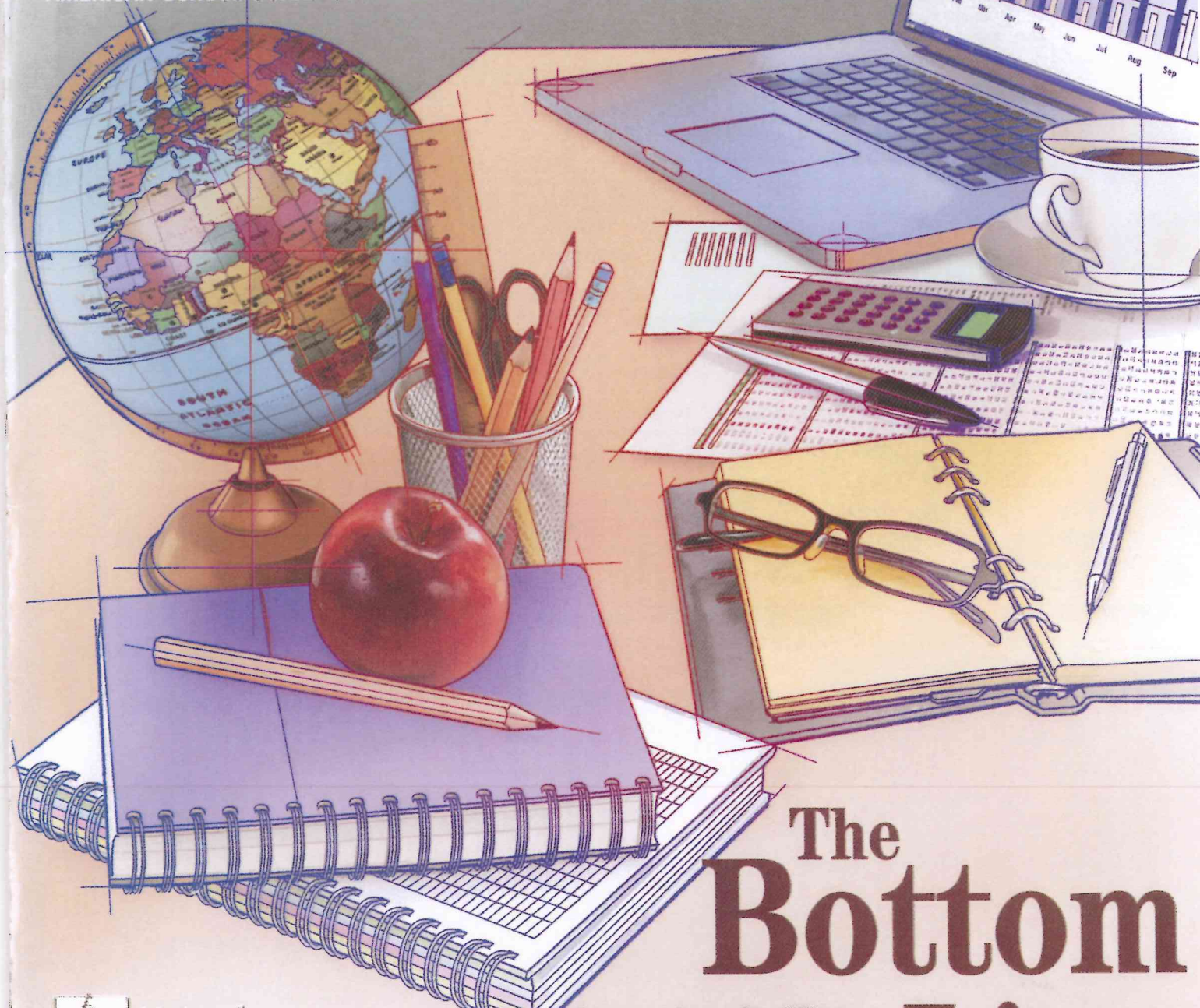


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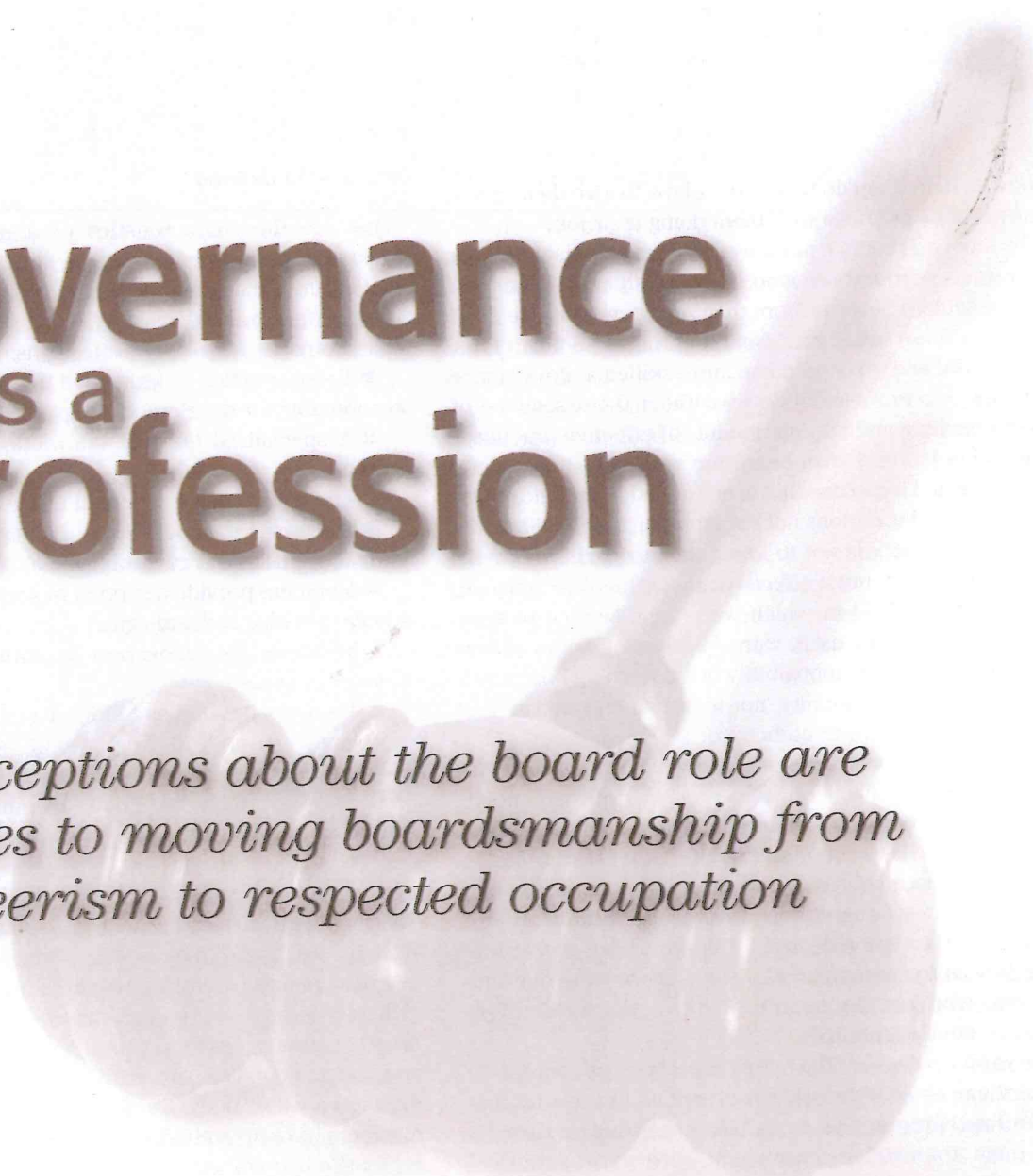


The Bottom Line

Running schools 'like a business' is not always possible, but you can learn a lot by focusing on outcomes

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Governance as a Profession

Misperceptions about the board role are obstacles to moving boardsmanship from volunteerism to respected occupation

Rick Maloney

Upon entering school board service, most of us are anxious to learn all we can about education and management. Because of this, we never seem to have enough time to attend all of the conference presentations on curriculum, instruction, community engagement, budget, and myriad other topics. After all, we reason, boards exercise ultimate authority over our schools and the work of our superintendent, so we should become as knowledgeable as we can about the business of education. When we stand for election, we highlight any knowledge and experience we have in education or management—or both—and voters believe we

are better prepared because of that background. This all seems quite logical. It is also quite wrong.

Two obstacles that keep us from improving our practice of governance are a misguided concept of the role and our isolation from fellow practitioners. Focusing on superintendent oversight deceives us into preparing for the wrong role, that of instructional and managerial leader, rather than that of governing board member, a role that few people (including many superintendents) fully understand. If we allow our superintendents to guide us in learning our board role, we allow ourselves to be misled; because they see our role only through the lens of an administrator, they “teach”

us how to help them do their job, or how to give them cover, or how not to interfere with them doing their job.

Because we practice our governance craft in isolation, or take our cues from those who do not really understand our role, we seldom become more than mediocre at it. We don't bother to learn with and from our peers. Some of us, through trial and error, become more skilled at governance over time, but we usually do so without the assistance of expert coaching and without models of effective practice.

As school board members, our role demands unique knowledge and expertise that is neither education nor management. Popular notions notwithstanding, a school board's main responsibility is not to know the intricacies of teaching, nor the latest, most effective management techniques. The specialized field in which we offer a service to society—our profession, as it were—is that of board governance. The primary responsibility of a governing board is to stand in for our community, not to act as elevated school administrators. Our unique body of knowledge, for which we alone are responsible to use, and which cannot be delegated to staff, combines our understanding of the community, including its dreams, values, hopes, and expectations, with a willingness to act on its behalf. Rather than trying to assume an impossible role for a part-time actor, that of administrator—one step up from superintendent—we ought instead to embrace and fulfill a more authentic role i.e., acting as the community one step down from our constituents, who are the source of our authority. And we should be good in that role.

Harvard professor Tony Wagner urges educators to model themselves after other professions in the way that they refine their practice. In an *Education Week* article, he asks them to imagine learning how to play a musical instrument, never having heard it played well, and practicing in isolation with no coaches available, all the while expecting to play beautifully. Drawing a comparison between this poor practice and the practice of teaching, Wagner urges them to transform teaching from a craft of solo practitioners into a profession, one whose members form a community of peers working together to improve and enhance their practice.

Board members too should consider Wagner's advice, but in the context of the governance role rather than in that of a teacher or administrator. We must, on behalf of our community, make judgments about the success of teaching, school leadership, and district management, but not as educational or managerial experts. We should respond to Wagner's challenge by transforming board service from a practice into a profession. Within the context of our role, we too can benefit from closely observing colleagues, sharing examples of the best practices, coaching one another—and in the process can transform our isolated governance craft from a collection of practices into something that more closely resembles a profession.

Profession defined

What are the characteristics of a profession? Abraham Flexner, in a historic 1918 report, laid the foundation for the modern medical profession, one that had an impact on the idea of "profession" itself. The Flexner report identified characteristics shared by professions:

- Responsibility is exercised by individuals who are accountable for their practice.
- A specialized body of knowledge exists and can be learned.
- The knowledge is practical as well as theoretical.
- Organized membership is dedicated to enlarging the knowledge base and governing itself.
- Members provide a service to society—in return, they receive prestige and authority.
- Members are recognized as authorities within their areas of expertise.
- Members develop and enforce certain ethical codes.
- Members control preparation, entry, and training processes in the field.

Let's review some key points within the context of our school board practice.

Specialized body of knowledge

We can identify a body of specialized governance knowledge that distinguishes it from either management or education. For example, the following require a deep understanding in order to perform our responsibilities well: the source of a board's authority (its legal authority is derived from the state and the community), its corporate nature (a board only exists as a whole body, and only when convened; individual members have no authority), its voice (a board speaks indirectly, through written policy), and its actions (a board acts only indirectly, through the work of a full-time staff).

These characteristics distinguish a governing board from its chief executive, who, acting as an individual in a full-time role, can make decisions and give directions in person and in "real time," responding to situations as they occur. Between meetings, a board does not effectively "exist" and has no such capability. It must therefore restrict itself to long-term thinking, put its instructions in writing, and choose its words carefully, allowing for the broadest possible range of contingencies when directing the superintendent and the district.

Difficult entry

Most professions require demonstration of minimum essential knowledge and expertise before allowing entry into professional practice. School boards composed of democratically elected members have to pass an electoral test but not a licensing examination that certifies a minimally acceptable level of acquired special knowledge. Eligibility for practice usually demands only that a candidate be a citizen and eligible voter residing within specific geographical

boundaries, and not be employed by the school district. Once seated, board members in many states have no mandate for training. Although some states do require it, the requirement is met through attendance only—not by an outcome measure that demonstrates actual acquisition of special knowledge or skills. Democracies accept the inefficiencies inherent in “rookie” representatives because of the overriding value of authentic representation. It is a trade-off we are willing to make.

Increasing the knowledge base

Because professional bodies of knowledge are subject to continuous expansion and refinement, continuing education is necessary to keep up with the field. Board governance is no exception. Most professions require continuing education to renew licensure and continue practice.

Our nation's schools deserve professional leadership at the policy-making level, just as they deserve professionals in the classroom and in the superintendent's office.

State school boards associations offer workshops at annual conferences, but with the exception of new board member orientations (whose presenters are often professional administrators), such training seldom addresses the board's governance role.

Rather, it usually focuses on the work of staff, reinforcing the myth (promoted by administrators, and even by our associations) that boards should learn more about educational programs or management techniques. Look at the programming for our statewide or national board association conferences, and you will find teaching and administration to be the dominant topics. This myth can serve the narrow interests of administrators if the object is to intimidate boards into deferring to the “experts.” This ignores the fact that boards have their own areas of expertise, and it is shortsighted because an effective, professional board enhances the superintendent's effectiveness.

Following a code of ethics

Most school boards (and their state associations) have adopted a board operating protocol or code of conduct, and many follow a practice of revisiting and recommitting to that protocol every time a new member joins the board.

Some common features of such a code:

- Boards will freely engage in open debate and discussion before taking a vote.
- Each member will vote his/her conscience after hearing all sides of an issue.
- Board decisions speak for the entire board—i.e., the board speaks as one.
- Individual members support the legitimacy of board decisions, even decisions with which they may individually disagree.

Self-governance

Because of their members' elective status, boards have limited ability to police their own ranks. Even appointed board members have limited control over their colleagues. They can write policy that guides individual board member

behavior, and can review such policy whenever members stray. A board can employ embarrassment as a tool by discussing violations in open public meetings and can vote to disapprove a member's conduct.

It can even reorganize its leadership and change or revoke committee membership, but boards do not have the authority to remove or bar a member from practice. Only in limited circum-

stances (resignation, serial absenteeism, etc.) can a board replace one of its members between elections. Similarly, state associations have no power to sanction elected board members in the way that a medical board can revoke or suspend a physician's license.

This idea of board-as-profession is one that we can and should promote for the benefit of our community and our society. When a craft is as critical to society as the governance of schools, its practitioners should raise their level of practice by developing it into a profession. Despite a certain degree of friction between the democratic ideal of universal citizen eligibility for elective office and the professional ideal of high standards barring unprepared individuals from practice, we can and should transform school board service, as Wagner advocates, by adopting a professional model.

Our nation's schools deserve professional leadership at the policy-making level, just as they deserve professionals in the classroom and in the superintendent's office. ■

Rick Maloney is a member of the board of the Washington State School Directors Association. He has been a board member for 14 years.