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The
GOVERNANCE
CORE 2.0

School Boards, Superintendents,
and Schools Working Together

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Governance Core 2.0.

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Introduction

Politics, Governance, and System Improvement

> "The most remarkable thing about our country is this: ordinary citizens control almost every major institution, public and private. . . . Does this make sense? What it makes is a democracy. We, the people, govern ourselves."
>
> Brickell and Paul (1988),
> *Time for Curriculum*

Is Brickell and Paul's observation from 35 years ago as true today as it was in the 1980s? Perhaps it is less true because we did not secure the operational involvement of more and more people involved in the well-being and learning of all students and those who seek their betterment in an ever-complex society. It is not too late—indeed it is essential—for us to find new forms of learning and development that will match, and even leverage, the challenges we know.

What if more than merely extolling the democratic principles underlying it, we considered how local education governance could, in every district, become an exemplar of highly effective decision making, leadership, and action? Effective, as in major improvements in the capacity of local entities to bring about significant measurable improvements in the learning and lives of all students under their watch and care.

We believe that most trustees want to make a difference in the lives of students and to improve the district and the system as a whole. Strangely, they get little help in defining and fulfilling this role. Paul Richman, former executive director of California's Parent Teacher Association, drew a similar conclusion when he told us:

> At a time when taking a coherent, system-wide approach to serving all kids and improving schools is more important than ever, effective governance is perhaps the least understood and most underutilized component for success and sustainability. School board members, superintendents, and their local communities especially need to understand and focus on effective governance. (personal communication, August 2018)

UNITY OF PURPOSE: DRIVEN BY A SHARED MORAL IMPERATIVE

> *Our vision is of a governance system—school board and superintendent—working together as a cohesive, unified team with a common vision driven by a shared moral imperative.*

A common vision driven by a shared moral imperative. That is what this book is about. Our vision is of a governance system—school board and superintendent—working together as a cohesive, unified team with a common vision driven by a shared moral imperative. This is a dynamic, powerful role for school boards. It assumes that governance is a basic function of the organization, an integral part of the system, setting the direction of the district, ensuring the achievement of strategic goals and the moral imperative, holding the district accountable, and providing leadership to the community. Most importantly, it is a governance system that fulfills its responsibility to all the children and the community it serves.

In the first edition of *The Governance Core* we wrote:

> The question of the improvement of local education
> governance comes at a critical time for society.
> There are signs that the world is facing formidable,
> seemingly impossible obstacles with respect to both
> physical and social climate. There is rapidly growing
> inequity between the rich and the poor in almost
> every country. Stress and anxiety among the young
> and old becoming more marked and affecting
> younger and younger children. Trust in societies is
> worsening. Schooling is also becoming less and less
> engaging for the majority of students as they go up
> the grade levels. Education cannot be expected to
> solve everything, but it is increasingly clear that it is
> the one social institution that has the potential to
> make a major difference for humanity in a troubled
> world. On the positive side we have new powerful
> education ideas that have the potential to deepen
> learning for all students, especially those that are
> most disconnected from life and schooling (see
> Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018). More than ever,
> we need effective core governance at the local level
> led by trustees and superintendents who not only
> work jointly with each other but form powerful
> partnerships with their schools and communities.
> (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, p. 2)

What we wrote in 2019 was true and still is true today. However,
the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Unattended inequities and
the failings of a public system that has been around for over
200 years were dramatically exposed. The pandemic did not
cause fundamental difficulties—it exposed them. The education
world changed dramatically. And that change has profoundly
affected governance. It has created new, unprecedented chal-
lenges, many of which fall directly into the governance wheel-
house. Coming out of the pandemic portal, educators and
parents faced a radically changed education landscape.

The physical school shutdown resulted in a pattern of regres-
sion in student learning and achievement across the country,

by as much as two years in some states. Many students suffered from mental and emotional stress, evidenced in classrooms as they readjusted to the learning environment. Teachers also suffered from stress as they confronted the changed educational environment in the classroom, feeling unprecedented pressure from political attacks that too frequently focused on classrooms and related to implementing district and state policies on masking and other safeguards. Add to this the fact that the specter of gun violence on school grounds causes almost all districts to conduct mandatory lockdowns on a regular basis. Teachers were also facing the external forces of book banning and challenges to curriculum as a result of culture wars focused on public education. It is not surprising, then, that teachers as well as principals and superintendents have been leaving public education in larger numbers than ever before. Many express concern that "they had not signed up for this." It's not that some versions of these challenges have been experienced by school districts over the past years; it's that everything has been happening all at once.

> *How these challenges are met will be determined by the effectiveness of the governance system in the district. This is what this book is about, that the governance core presented in this second edition will provide the framework and direction to address these challenges.*

These events are major system challenges. As such they are clearly the responsibility of district governance: school board and superintendent. How these challenges are met will be determined by the effectiveness of the governance system in the district. This is what this book is about, that the governance core presented in this second edition will provide the framework and direction to address these challenges.

The US Department of Education issued a strong statement in 2023: "All students deserve learning environments that are

safe, inclusive, supportive, and fair. Schools can keep their school community—including students and school staff— safe while ensuring every student is included, supported, and treated fairly" (p. 3).

We wrote the first edition of this book because we believed there is an urgent need for better and markedly more effective schools districts. Trustees, superintendents, schools, and communities working together can generate this new social presence and power. Oddly, there was (and still is) very little written on district and school governance—a crucial oversight in our assessment.

We made the case that little attention has been paid to the study and improvement of school district governance. The education research and reform community have seriously neglected the potentially powerful role of governance in sustaining long-term improvement. People seem to think that "it is what it is." Too often given actions have become stereotypes whether justified or not: individual trustees are often cast as the bad guys, boards as a whole are seen as part of a bureaucracy that is removed or unable to act responsively, and superintendents are cast as victims of meddling and micromanagement. In this way superintendents are absolved of building genuine working relationships with their boards, and we end up with variations on we–they relationships, with the best case scenarios from superintendents being "my board is great; they leave me alone to do my job."

UPDATES IN THIS EDITION

In *The Governance Core 2.0* we take a different tack with local school boards and their trustees and superintendents. We go to the core, the basic foundation of understanding local efficacy: the mindset of high-performing trustees and superintendents carrying out the critical function of governance, the cohesion and synergy of boards working together to overcome the challenges, and the structure that creates a foundation to support both.

The Governance Core 2.0 represents a significant update from our 2019 book.

- Here we focus specifically on both the challenges to governance post-COVID and the opportunities for significant positive change.

- We emphasize the critical, essential role that governance—the board and superintendent—plays in leading the school district through the challenging and difficult education landscape post-COVID while maintaining laser focus on achieving the moral imperative and creating pathways to high standards of achievement and well-being for all students.

- We take the basic foundation of *The Governance Core* published in 2019 and drill down to how specifically the governance system works to meet the challenges of 2024.

- We reorganize the basic elements of the 2019 book into three foundational pillars (governance mindset, coherence and synergy, and governance infrastructure) that are necessary for effective governance in these difficult times.

- We provide new and specific examples of how, within each pillar, an effective governance team works to provide strategic direction, stability, and focus.

- To this edition we added Suggestions for Implementation to better guide readers in applying the lessons in the book.

We believe that school boards are vastly underutilized at precisely the time when they are most needed. We hold another fundamental premise that we will position in the course of this book: the vast majority of school board members want to improve the public education system. But the irony is that the neglect of the critical role of governance by the broader education community has made ineffectiveness a self-fulfilling prophecy for all too many districts. Many school board associations have done a good job in providing training programs for trustees but their capacity and ability to reach all school boards in any given state is limited. Our approach is to get at the heart of how to maximize unifying

action of boards and superintendents together. Governance is needed that will benefit all students, all teachers, and in turn parents and the public. Our point: we are in danger of squandering this potential because *we have almost totally neglected the vital function of school board governance within the larger system of education change.*

POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

> *There is great danger that boards are becoming battlegrounds for the culture wars that have dominated so much of the national and state-level debate.*

There is great danger that boards are becoming battlegrounds for the culture wars that have dominated so much of the national and state-level debate. Boards were created as nonpartisan bodies for a reason. It has been a long-held view that public education is not the place to inject political party agendas and ideologies. However, new developments are seriously challenging this status quo. The erosion of the separation of political party and educational pedagogy is a new and powerful challenge to public education in the United States.

> Forty-one states currently require nonpartisan local school board races, the product of historical efforts to separate education governance from divisive politics. Four states currently have partisan [tied to official political parties] school board races. Three more allow some form of partisanship. Bills proposed in six states this spring would require or allow local school board candidates to declare a party affiliation on the ballot. (Blad, 2023)

In addition, six states had bills in 2023 that would require or allow local school board candidates to declare a party affiliation (Ballotpedia, 2023).

Concepts of politics and governance are tricky because they have wide and varying definitions. Some definitions refer to politics as the art of governing; others refer to it as competing power struggles. Playing politics or office politics, or blatant attempts to get and keep power, conceives of politics as negative. Overall, we are going to define politics as holding and using power, which by itself does not mean that you can get things done just because you have power. Governance, on the other hand, concerns the day-to-day running of government. So, bear with us and think of "holding and using power" as politics, and "exercising authority on a daily basis" as governance. For the sake of clarity and to get to the solution—good politics and good governance—we need to contrast the two elements as they play out in real conditions.

> **Politics:** Holding and using power
>
> **Governance:** Exercising authority on a daily basis

Politics Without Good Governance

- Peaks before, during, and just after elections
- Caters to special interest groups
- Often superficial: bumper sticker style
- Can be sincere but weak on implementation
- Harmful when lacking good governance
- Limited lasting benefit

Politics With Good Governance

- Politics dominate during election
- Shifts to focus on governance after election
- Builds capacity relative to the core agenda

- Recognizes that government is for all the people

- Long-term as well as short-term perspectives

Our main goal in this book is to spell out what good governance consists of at the local district level so that well-intended politics can combine with the governance core to produce continuously improving education results. We have one other major point that takes us back to the quotes from Brickell and Paul as well as Richman at the beginning of this chapter. We need to update the meaning of "what makes for good democracy" in education. For us it means combining politics and good governance to achieve system improvement at both the local and state levels and in their interactive relationship. This is the essence of our book: good politics plus good governance wrapped in a system perspective is the future of public education. Moreover, participation in governance has expanded greatly—learning, well-being, and governance need to become interrelated, as we shall see in some of our best examples.

We are unabashedly forward about our solution: there needs to be a fundamental change in the culture and mindset of superintendents and board members in terms of how they see their roles and role relationships. Moreover, we predict that existing and future incumbents of these roles will embrace the new situations that we outline in this book once they experience and understand how they could operate differently in practice.

Within this new mindset we integrate Fullan and Quinn's parallel work in *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems* (2016) and *The Drivers: Transforming Learning for Students, Schools, and Systems* (2024). The coherence framework has become enormously popular among school districts seeking greater focus in their work. Yet the concept of coherence had barely found its way into governance discussions; two exceptions are the excellent work of the California School Boards Association and the Iowa School Boards Association, but even these examples did not go deeply into coherence in school board governance. New work on the "drivers" of system change has provided valuable new perspectives on governance.
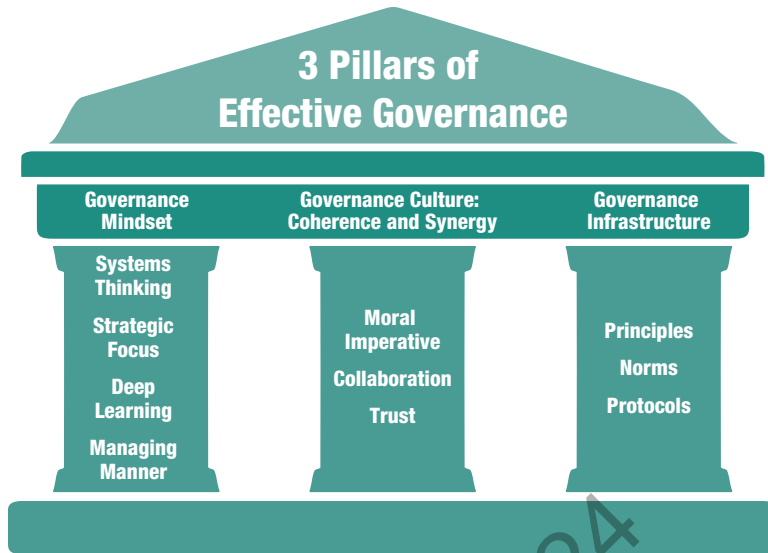
Taken together, the new developments focus on a new purpose for schooling—to help students develop global competencies (the 6 Cs: compassion/character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking). It immerses students as partners in learning with teachers, other students, communities, businesses, and other agencies. It gives students a strong sense of belonging and enables them to develop as effective in society and for society. It equips them to cope with and become successful in an increasingly complex world.

All of this represents a system change, which gives school boards a deeper role. In this work the drivers of the system can no longer be just the state and its policy. This shift puts new responsibility at the local level to be a proactive partner, with the flow of energy more bottom and middle up. We express this as *build the bottom* (local school), *strengthen the middle* (school districts), and be active in *pushing policy* as well as responding to it. Our point is twofold: it represents a worldwide problem and set of solutions, and it places new proactive system responsibilities on local governance. Quality governance becomes a local, state, and worldwide phenomenon!

Several of the detailed cases we feature in this book are based on our work in California and beyond. Fullan and Quinn (2024) report on five case studies from Australia, Canada, the United States, Uruguay, and related work. The focus on governance is a worldwide phenomenon.

HOW THIS BOOK IS STRUCTURED

Like the first edition, this book is divided into three main parts. However, in *The Governance Core 2.0*, the parts are now envisioned and reorganized as pillars—each one a foundation upon which effective governance stands. The pillar metaphor works. It makes the point clearly that the structure (in this case, effective governance) cannot stand on one or two pillars; it takes all three working in conjunction to bear the weight.

3 Pillars of Effective Governance

Governance Mindset	Governance Culture: Coherence and Synergy	Governance Infrastructure
Systems Thinking		
Strategic Focus	Moral Imperative	Principles
Deep Learning	Collaboration	Norms
Managing Manner	Trust	Protocols

Pillar I: Governance Mindset

The first pillar contains three chapters that form the foundation of what we call Mindsets for Efficacy, which that lay at the heart of the shift in culture we advocate: Chapter 2: The Governance Mindset, Chapter 3: The Governance Mindset in Action, and Chapter 4: Onboarding: Welcoming New Trustees.

Pillar II: Governance Culture

For the second pillar of effective governance, we take up the challenge of integrating coherence and governance in two chapters: Chapter 5: Governing With Coherence and Synergy and Chapter 6: The Governance Responsibilities of the Board.

Pillar III: Governance Infrastructure

For the third pillar upon which effective governance stands, we discuss the essential governance structure that provides the framework and guard rails for the board and superintendent to sustain effective governance. Together the two

chapters map out a new more powerful system that we call the Governance Core: Chapter 7: Governance Infrastructure and Chapter 8: Governance Tools.

GOVERNANCE DRIVERS

We have one more front-end organizer: Fullan's fundamental concepts of wrong and right policy drivers (Fullan, 2011a). A driver is a policy intended to make a positive difference in practice. A wrong driver is a policy that turns out not to make a difference, and in some cases actually backfires. Fullan identified four wrong drivers: punitive accountability, individualism, technology, and ad hoc policies. The corresponding right drivers are capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness (when most people realize and act with the system in mind). We have since updated the drivers in our system work: well-being and learning, social and machine intelligence, equity-equality investments, and systemness (Fullan & Quinn, 2024).

Systems thinking represents a situation in which people are concerned with their own role expectations but also see themselves as part of a bigger picture. They realize that their responsibilities extend to contributing to the bigger entity and to learning from others. The end result is greater satisfaction for individuals and greater efficacy for the system itself.

Sorting out right and wrong drivers is at the heart of effective governance. Our solution is to frame the agenda around the right drivers for local governance. Systems thinking mainly involves the capacity to see one's role in the larger perspective of what other factors and relationships might be determining actions and outcomes. A key feature of systems thinking is that a small number of key factors interact with each other. Each factor itself is important, but the *interaction effects* make the difference. Such thinking is based on the orientation: how do I carry out my own role in a way that I contribute to and benefit from the larger system locally and beyond? The positive and negative drivers listed in Figure 0.1 provide context for this shift, which we will pursue in subsequent chapters.

FIGURE 0.1 Governance Drivers

NEGATIVE DRIVERS	POSITIVE DRIVERS
1. Focus on school boards	1. Focus on governance
2. Focus on board behavior	2. Focus on governance mindset
3. Board presentations (audience)	3. Engaging the board (owner)
4. Counting votes	4. Counting understanding
5. Tactical (operations)-driven agenda	5. Strategic (goals)-driven agenda
6. Damage control perspective	6. Proactive, forward-thinking culture
7. Care and feeding of the board	7. Supporting the governance functions of the board
8. Board–superintendent relations	8. Board–superintendent cohesion

The eight negative drivers narrow the agenda, present endemic frustrations, and unwittingly hamper the work and impact of local governance. A shift to the positive drivers represents a change in culture, mindset, and behavior. It represents, in other words, a system change. As such, it will not be easy. We devote much of this book to detailing what this change in mindset looks like and how to achieve more of it. Once board members and superintendents see and experience what it entails, it will become more attractive. Once their constituents (teachers, students, parents) and their "bosses" (the electorate and policy makers, elected or otherwise) experience the success of the positive drivers, they will become more excited about and committed to their own roles. Put differently, it is in the best interest of school board members and superintendents to become more effective in improving the lot and learning of all those whom they are expected to lead. We know that quality change stands or falls at the local level. If we want systems to change, as we surely do, we better enlist the power of local governance with its schools and communities.

We examine the role of school boards by turning to their most important and basic function, governance, while showing how the concepts of governance mindset and coherence increase the

clarity, status, and efficacy of the roles of trustees and superintendents. Governance mindset refers to the shared attitudes and beliefs that school boards and superintendents must develop and possess related to the action and manner of governing.

Concluding Comments

▶ We trust that the reader is sensing where we are heading. In order to gain a shared understanding, local communities must engage in the give-and-take of ideas. In short, they must interact with purpose. More specifically, two fundamental characteristics are at stake for effective governing. The first is that school board members and superintendents must continually develop a governance mindset individually and together to become a unifying force for fulfilling the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all students. The second characteristic concerns the content of the governance mindset that, as we will see in subsequent chapters, consists of the moral imperative, systems thinking, strategic focus, deep learning, and manner. In this way, they learn together to appreciate the big picture and the details that make it effective or not. In the end, those with a governance mindset accomplish more—much more—for their local community and the larger system they serve.

Districts also need to develop a governance handbook to guide their actions (we provide guidance and examples in Chapter 8). The overall message is that, to be effective, you need to meld individual and collective action. The issues are complex, and the action to resolve them through effective governance is doable and essential at this stage of our evolution. Read, discuss, and use the ideas in this book. They are of the utmost importance.