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Community and Student Engagement: A Committee's Weaknesses and Strengths

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Good, bad or indifferent...things are not always as they seem. The first glance often deceives many. School districts are no different; districts face many challenges every day, and with these challenges come weaknesses and strengths. Some of the challenges include areas such as assessment and accountability, teacher turnover, vouchers, diversity, bullying, technology, and funding (Cavanagh, 2011; Harris, Irons, & Crawford, 2006; Nelson, 2014; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Spector, 2013; & Terry, 2010). With these challenges, legislative mandates often create a level of apprehension or uneasiness for school district personnel. In May 2013, House Bill (HB) 5 was passed by the 83rd Texas Legislature. There were many aspects from HB 5 that affected all Texas school districts.

Specifically, HB 5 created “new directions for instruction, assessment, and graduation plans...” (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013, p. 1). As a result, HB 5 established the new Foundation High School Program. Among the requirements delineated in the new Foundation High School Program was the development of a new graduation plan for high school students entering ninth grade in 2014-2015. With this new curriculum change, HB 5 also “includes a section that now requires districts to conduct an annual performance evaluation on their community and student engagement efforts.” (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013, p. 1). Obviously with the new curriculum change, it is important that school districts continue to provide a quality education in all areas. Moreover, it is equally important that the districts evaluate each of the curriculum programs. Thus, in HB 5, Section 46, the Texas Legislature added an annual performance evaluation requirement. The performance evaluation for community and student engagement (CSE) efforts began in the 2013-2014 school year. The CSE component of HB 5 allows districts to evaluate the community and student engagement in a variety of areas; determine strengths and weaknesses; collect feedback from the students, parents, and community members; and spotlight community values and accomplishments (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013).

Kirby and DiPaola (2011) noted, “the survival of a school depends upon its environment and on the interactions between its component parts” (p. 557). Their study determined that higher levels of community engagement created higher levels of student achievement. It is worth noting that the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 required districts to investigate how they were meeting the needs of all students, regardless of economic status or race. HB 5 (Section 46) requires all districts to evaluate their performance in a variety

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of categories. Therefore, between the two systems, school districts evaluate specific academic programs or areas and ensure that the needs of all students are met in all areas. As a result, it is important that school leaders create an environment that not only involves students, teachers and parents, but also the entire community. Collaborative involvement of the community, parents, and teachers provides an atmosphere that promotes student success (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011).

With the CSE portion of HB 5 being new, there were some unanswered questions. However, Regional Service Centers and professional organizations provided training for district officials concerning the execution of HB 5; it generally was not specific or prescriptive in nature because the language of the law itself did not provide clear direction. While the intent clearly indicates improvement of the connection between schools and their communities, HB 5 provides little relief or direction on methodology or reporting. Organizations such as the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) gave suggestions on where to start, who to include on the local committee, what to include as the criteria, and possible ways to determine the ratings. While the suggestions were helpful, HB 5 allowed access for a wide range of freedom to evaluate campuses and districts on the CSE component.

While the “how” school districts conducted the performance evaluation with the CSE component of HB 5 was missing, there were certain requirements associated with the law. The major condition by HB 5 was to involve the work of a local committee throughout the evaluation process. Additionally, other requirements are: (1) evaluate the district on community and student engagement, (2) assign rating of exemplary, recognized, acceptable or unacceptable in each of the nine designated areas by campus and district, (3) report ratings to Texas Education Agency (TEA) through PEIMS by August 8th and (4) make ratings public as provided by commissioner rule (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013). As stated in HB 5 (Section 46) the nine required categories to evaluate are: fine arts, wellness and physical education, community and parental involvement, 21st century workforce development program, second language acquisition program, digital learning, dropout prevention strategies, educational programs for gifted and talented students, and record of the district and campus in complying with statutory reporting and policy requirements (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013).

With the HB 5 requirement, one Texas district moved forward in compliance with the House Bill by first developing an eighteen member committee. However, three committee members could not make the time commitment, so the final committee consisted of 15 members. The committee was comprised of the following: two parents, three community members, three teachers, and seven district directors/coordinators. The committee was led by the district’s Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

The committee met four times during the Spring 2014 semester. Committee members were asked to review the state guidelines from HB 5 as well as the specific categories for evaluation, review sample performance measures, set performance indicators and develop the criteria for each indicator. In order to work efficiently, out of the nine evaluation categories, the committee members were asked to concentrate their examination on one specific category. With this structure, the goal was for two committee members to collaborate to create evaluation criteria for each category. Another goal was to include at least one district employee working with a community member on a category. This would allow the employee to answer questions from the community member on unfamiliar topics. As with any committee operating on a specific but

unfamiliar task, much information was gleaned from the experience. This information revealed both weaknesses and strengths within the process of complying with the CSE component of HB5.

Weaknesses

In order to improve, the weaknesses in the evaluation process must be identified and addressed. Reflecting on the work of the committee, several weaknesses were revealed. Specifically, five major weaknesses were identified. First, one weakness was the number of members on the committee. While originally 18 committee members were asked to participate, three could not, so the final committee consisted of 15 members. As noted above, the structure of the work was to include at least two committee members on each category. With nine CSE categories, there were not enough committee members to have two members on each of the categories. Also, it is rare that all committee members were present at each meeting, and this also added to the workload of others on the committee.

Another weakness of the committee was the lack of community members on the committee. Instead, the majority of the committee consisted of either district employees or individuals with close relationships with the school district, being past educators in the district, a spouse of an employee, or, in the case of one, a parent who is also a district employee. While these individuals made great contributions, the committee should consist of a variety of committee members representative of the entire community, including areas outside of the school district.

On the contrary, an additional weakness identified was the lack of knowledge community members had regarding the educational terminology and familiarity with the material and evaluation process. Therefore, school district personnel attempted to educate the community members about the issues being discussed and evaluated, providing reasoning for the district's desire of one community member and one district employee on each of the nine categories. While it is important to gain more community members, equally important is educating the committee members with the appropriate educational terminology and knowledge for each committee member to be as informed and knowledgeable about the subject matter as possible.

Next, the evaluation instrument lacked specificity. The committee created a rubric for each of the nine categories. When creating the rubric, it appeared to be clear and understandable to all members on the committee. However, after the evaluation process was completed, it was determined that the language of the rubric was vague and sometimes left the reader to interpret its meaning. Also, the evaluation indicators within the nine categories did not contain consistent data sources such as state assessment reports, PEIMS reports, Eduphoria, Advanced Placement exams, and Dual Credit courses. Using consistent data sources could certainly improve the rubric, which, in turn, improves the evaluation process and consistency in results.

Communication is essential for the work of all committees. While there was certainly an attempt to communicate with the CSE committee, there was a need for better communication. Some communication issues were out of the control of those in charge. For example, inclement weather caused meetings to be delayed or canceled unexpectedly. Another communication problem was the lack of closure at the CSE meetings. While the committee worked

collaboratively in small groups, there wasn't follow-up with the whole committee at the end of each meeting. Finally, there was a communication breakdown releasing the final results. Instead of hearing the results in a final committee meeting, the members had to read the results in the newspaper. Communication is important with the work of any committee. Luckily, these communication issues can be easily corrected.

Weaknesses always seem to have a negative connotation. However, if one wants to ever improve, the weaknesses must be identified and addressed. In this CSE evaluation process, the committee members have identified the weaknesses and addressed them during the 2014-2015 evaluation process.

Strengths

There were many positive contributions to the work of the CSE committee. A variety of strengths were identified from the work of the committee. First, there was a strong commitment of the core group of committee members. Not only did the core group continue to attend all meetings, but they also participated in group discussions and small group activities. Moreover, this core group was compliant throughout the entire evaluation process. Secondly, this group provided a congenial working environment during each meeting. Although the work of the committee was taken very serious at each meeting, the atmosphere was filled with ease, laughter and a sense of caring. The "sense of caring" was for the education of all students regardless of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status. The evaluation tool was the result of a diligent group of people that put their individual needs aside and worked collaboratively to accomplish the goals of the committee.

Next, a strength afforded to the committee was the ability to place a district employee on each of the nine CSE categories. This was important due to the lack of working knowledge of those committee members outside of the district. While community members bring their own perspective, they do not completely understand the day-to-day operations and educational programs of the school district. Therefore, many committee members found it beneficial to have a district employee working with a community member to answer any questions or provide additional information when needed.

As mentioned above, community members bring their own perspective. This "outside" perspective was invaluable to the work of the committee throughout the CSE evaluation process. With a variety of committee members with differing positions, including community members and district employees, the committee gained different perspectives and experiences. This diversity provided the entire committee with a wealth of knowledge that positively affected the work of the committee.

An advantage of any committee is the ability to see areas of excellence and areas of weakness. The CSE committee created an evaluation rubric for each of the nine categories. The results from the CSE evaluation rubric allowed the committee members and school district personnel to determine the strengths and weaknesses within the school district and campuses. With these results, each campus and the district as a whole can celebrate the successes and make measurable

goals for the areas of improvement. Through this process, the entire district will improve in a variety of areas.

Lastly, through this evaluation process, it is imperative that the district continue to make necessary changes to further enhance the work of the committee for the betterment of the district. For example, the district built upon the work of the 2013-2014 committee as the 2014-2015 committee began. This evaluation process allows the district to tweak items as needed to improve the evaluation process and provide the district with the necessary results to move the community and district forward.

The first attempt at anything is difficult. With this being the first committee charged with the CSE evaluation process, several strengths were identified. It takes long hours and hard work to accomplish good things. The CSE committee provided the long hours and hard work and the result was a good evaluation tool and results that the district can use to bridge the community and student engagement component within the school district.

Changes in Progress

As a new school year begins, it is time to implement the necessary changes from the CSE evaluation results from the 2013-2014 school year. As Henry Ford would say, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." The same is true with the CSE committee. With the same charge as the previous year, the district has decided to make some adjustments for the 2014-2015 CSE committee. The following are changes to be addressed:

- Increase the number on the committee
- Increase the number of community members on the committee
- Review data and how the evaluation instruments were used by campuses
- Provide more information to principals
- Provide a follow-up from individual groups before adjourning meetings
- Review evaluation rubric for language specificity
- Plan a final meeting to discuss results

The beauty of an evaluation is the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses. More so, the evaluation process provides an opportunity for the areas of weaknesses to be addressed. After all, the idea of an evaluation is to show continuous improvement. In order to improve, changes must happen. However, before dealing with the changes, a celebration of the successes must occur.

Concluding Thoughts

Although school districts face new challenges every year, it is imperative that every student receives a quality education in all areas. HB 5 provides Texas school districts the opportunity to complete a self-assessment in a variety of areas in a flexible manner. After the CSE evaluation process, school districts can not only use the data to make the needed adjustments to improve within the district and on individual campuses but also showcase the strengths that are happening within the entire school district.

Since school districts have now completed the first years of the CSE performance evaluation process, legislatures might consider requesting feedback from the school districts. An example of evaluative feedback might include adding specificity to the performance evaluation process. The language of the law was not specific in nature leaving much control to the local school districts. Normally, local control is a wonderful notion; however, in this instance, conclusions or comparisons between the local CSE data and the state CSE data cannot be made. Each Texas district had the same nine evaluation categories, but the evaluation criteria and rating system was undoubtedly different across each school district in the state. Thus, the inconsistency in the evaluation tool will possibly deter districts from using the state data; instead, districts are likely to focus only on district and campus information. If more guidelines were given for the evaluation process, perhaps it would allow districts to make comparisons with other districts in the state. Then, ideas could possibly be shared among the school districts in the state. Moreover, if more specificity was given in the language of HB 5, maybe some of the weaknesses experienced by this CSE committee could possibly have been avoided.

Nonetheless, HB 5 initiated the performance evaluation process of CSE involvement in Texas schools. This evaluation process is certainly a first step that gives school districts the opportunity to evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of their community and student engagement activities. The next step for districts is to use the performance evaluation data to improve their district and campuses in the nine categories evaluated in the CSE portion of HB 5. Through this performance evaluation process, districts will be able to continuously improve in the nine categories evaluated through the CSE portion of HB 5. Involving the community in the school district is a “win-win” for students, teachers, parents and the entire community.

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