

# Learning Is Our Business

*Should the school board play a role in ensuring high-quality instruction? This board says Yes*

BY HOWARD E. FARRIS,  
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In business, "quality assurance" refers to a system to reduce defects and to improve processes and products. Quality assurance in education is intended to ensure that all students learn knowledge and skills at the best possible rates throughout their school careers, as well as acquiring positive attitudes and appropriate social behavior.

Some elements of a school quality-assurance system are commonplace: student testing and personnel evaluations, for example. Unfortunately, though, school districts seldom coordinate these elements to affect student learning significantly. That job is, of course, the responsibility of the district's professional educators, but school boards can play a key role in quality assurance, too.

Over the past 15 years, the Mattawan (Mich.) Consolidated School District (K-12; enrollment 2,700) has developed its own system to ensure the quality of student learning, and the school board has been actively involved in planning and implementing that system. Why did our board get involved in what is traditionally an administrative function? The answer is that our superintendent is a strong instructional leader, and we wanted to facilitate his focus on instruction. At the same time, we wanted the accountability measures on which the superintendent is evaluated to include instructional outcomes—not simply facilities and finance. To achieve these ends, board members worked cooperatively with the superintendent to put in place the system we'll describe here.

Mattawan has little money: In the latest state report, the district ranked 517th out of 524 Michigan school systems in per-student dollar expenditures. But on statewide assess-

ment tests, Mattawan students consistently rank among the state's best, a showing also reflected in extracurricular awards, parent involvement, and other measures of achievement.

How do we account for our high standing? Success is the result of a complex web of components, and it's difficult to know exactly which aspects are most important. Still, four features the board has put in place appear to be central: the board's student program committee; a budget that is designed around student learning; the district's own instructional management system; and a constant search for more effective instructional programs.

## **An agenda for learning**

Our board believes that issues having to do with learning are appropriate matters for the board agenda, and to that end, the board passes policies that deal directly with student learning. To keep board members informed about instructional issues, the superintendent submits regular reports to the board; he often delegates reporting tasks to the principals and other key personnel who are most closely involved in the topic at hand.

Many of the reports focus on student performance in critical areas, such as reading and math in elementary school and science, language arts, and math in middle school. Reports are prepared typically after the second, fourth, and seventh months of the school year. The board also hears from instructional supervisors and lead teachers on the general progress of their programs. Many reports are scheduled around the release of local or state assessment results. By staying up to date on student performance, the board can regularly help to set goals and review the performance of programs.

The student program committee is another way the board makes instruction its business. This committee, made up of three board members, receives more detailed reports than the full board on how curriculum and instruction affect student performance. The committee monitors the nature and quality of all instructional programs, which are reviewed in a five-year cycle, and studies proposed changes.

Drawing on the advice of teachers and administrators,

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the committee recommends necessary revisions or changes to the full school board.

A few years ago, for example, the staff of Mattawan's middle school wanted to change from a seven-period to a six-period school day. The principal made a general presentation to the board, which referred the matter to the student program committee. The committee subsequently met with the principal and teachers and studied the proposal in detail. Then the chairman presented the proposal as a recommendation to the full board, which accepted it.

Sometimes, of course, the board members all want to be involved in the deliberations on an instructional matter and will not send it to the committee but instead discuss it as a full board. Such a meeting would be posted as a board work session.

### **Instructional facilitation**

The reports from school personnel and the findings of the program committee help the board make budget decisions with an eye to instructional priorities. One of the most significant of these decisions occurred about 12 years ago, when the district had an opportunity to appoint a highly capable teacher either as the assistant principal of an elementary school or as the district's first "instructional facilitator." The board was committed to developing the teaching staff but wasn't convinced that relying on training from outside the district was the best way to do it. Our choice: Create a new staff position of instructional facilitator in lieu of an assistant principal. The new arrangement worked so beautifully in one school that we gradually instituted the position throughout the system.

These staff members' main responsibility is to ensure that each student in the school is progressing at an optimal rate. To that end, the facilitators work daily with teachers, principals, and one another to make sure the curriculum is consistent from grade to grade and school to school and to coordinate activities and strategies within and across grade levels. Facilitators help develop the skills of teachers—especially new teachers—and help place students in appropriate instructional groups. Facilitators also work with teachers to create and administer tests, which students take every six to eight weeks throughout the school year.

### **Instructional management**

The linchpin of our approach is an instructional management plan that has two separate but integrated components: accountability and improved instruction. Fundamental to the plan is monitoring student performance continuously and initiating quick action when students are not progressing as they should. Every grade level has three or four groups of students who have differing abilities in language arts and mathematics, but students are moved freely from one group to another as their progress warrants.

Frequent testing based on material in the curriculum helps identify student problems and progress. The instructional facilitator is the key to working with the teachers in developing the tests, analyzing the results, and implementing solutions to meet the needs of every student, not just the high or low performers.

In addition, teachers and the instructional facilitators project how much material they can expect students to learn. These projections are based on a core of knowledge (or content standards) that all students are expected to master

## **Supporting instruction**

**A**lthough you and your school board colleagues might only occasionally set foot in a classroom, you can still play a key role in supporting instruction in your district. Here are some ideas:

- Establish a comprehensive assessment plan to be administered three or four times a year, using tests that are current and valid—that is, drawn directly from the curriculum the teachers are teaching.
- Link the evaluation or performance reviews of personnel to goals built into the instructional system.
- Set budget and other district priorities to support teaching and learning, as embodied in a systematic assessment and the instructional development system, particularly the role of instructional facilitator.
- Establish a school board committee that is responsible for all aspects of student programming, learning, and instruction.
- Establish board policies and procedures that provide clear guidelines to the superintendent and district personnel for keeping the board regularly informed and involved in instructional matters.—H.E.F., D.W.C., and J.S.

during the year, divided into portions that are to be taught in each grading period. This gives teachers realistic goals to work toward in teaching the curriculum for each grading period; it also provides a basis for tracking students' progress.

The teachers and the facilitators analyze the results of the tests to determine whether each instructional group is progressing satisfactorily and whether individual students are performing adequately. Each group's rate of progress is determined by comparing the projected goal with the group's actual progress: If a group's performance falls short of the goal by a factor of 10 percent or more, the instructional facilitator and teacher decide on a corrective course.

If an individual student's accuracy level indicates that he or she is having difficulty in a subject, the instructional facilitator might initiate diagnostic testing, including classroom observation, and work with the teacher to give the child special help.

On either an individual or a group scale, the facilitator and teachers develop "action plans" that propose solutions. If an individual student is lagging behind, the solutions might include extra tutoring or assistance from a specialized teacher. If the learning rate of the entire class is unsatisfactory, the action plan focuses on the teacher's presentation methods, the curriculum design, or even the possibility of creating a new class or group.

For example, when one school had many students who were scheduled to take a mathematics class but who were found to have deficiencies in prerequisite skills, the school formed a new math section to focus on these students' needs. And when students completing kindergarten are lagging in social and skills development, these students might be placed in a "bridging" class between kindergarten and first grade to provide extra early assistance in development.

Subsequent tests of students are used to evaluate the solutions—to see whether they are accomplishing the speci-

fied goals. Classes not progressing at projected rates are also monitored closely.

### Improvement and accountability

Another way the Mattawan school board has been involved in instruction is by supporting instructional improvement. District officials search continuously for successful programs—from either within or outside the school district—that lead to high levels of student learning. As a first step, they obtain data from other elementary, middle, or high schools on a specific program. District officials analyze the data to identify exemplary performing groups of students from backgrounds similar to those of Mattawan's students.

If the analysis suggests that the current school curriculum should be modified, board policy requires that a statement of the instructional problem be included in the recommendation. The statement must specify the student performance problems or goals the change is meant to address; the research supporting the change (the research should be experimental and compare different approaches); the expected costs and training requirements; and an accountability system that would provide timely information and follow-up action after the program is implemented.

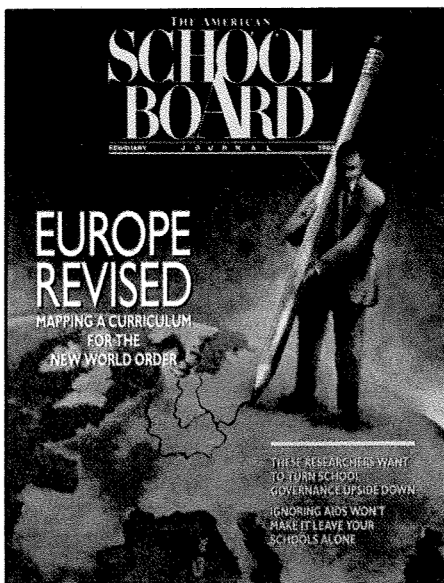
The board's final role in quality assurance is accountability. In addition to informing the board of the steps taken to ensure high-quality education for each student, the regular reports to the board serve as a tool for the performance reviews of instructional facilitators, principals, and the super-

intendent. The board reviews the superintendent's work, and the superintendent reviews the work of others.

The reports to the board contain general performance and achievement data, but more detailed internal school reports are available upon request. Records are also kept of the actions the instructional facilitators and teachers have taken for each class. These records serve as important sources of data for reference and evaluation.

The reports list any performance groups in which more than 20 percent of the students performed at levels that were more than two weeks behind the projected lesson rate. They also list groups in which more than 20 percent of the students were performing below an 80 percent accuracy level on tests. The report lists the number of students by class who did not perform adequately on the test or tests and tells how far from the projected lesson criterion the group is performing and what actions have been taken to remedy the problems.

As Mattawan's experience shows, a school board can install systems that profoundly alter what happens in district classrooms. Unlike any other group, the board can use policies and procedures to focus on student learning and outcomes. The result in Mattawan has been some of the highest performing students in Michigan—despite one of the lowest cost-per-pupil levels of expenditure. The beauty of Mattawan's plan is not only in its success but also in its simplicity. The plan might serve as a model for other school boards that seek to be directly involved in student learning. SB



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