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# The FISCAL REPORT an informational update

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## What Do I Do About Staff Development for My Board: They Just Don't Want to Learn to Govern Effectively?

*[Editor's note: From time to time, we publish guest articles that we think inform readers on topics of interest. Necessarily, the views and opinions of the authors are their own, but we think the article below is interesting and informative. Dr. Walt Hanline was the 2007 California Superintendent of the Year and is presently the Executive Director of the National Center for Executive Leadership and School board Development. Information regarding his work can be found at: <http://nationalleadership.net/>.] Dr. Hanline's email is [whanline@nationalleadership.net](mailto:whanline@nationalleadership.net).*

By Walt L. Hanline, Executive Director

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I recently coached a new superintendent. He told me he could not convince his board members to participate and support their own professional development. He asked, "How can I convince them?" After 26 years as a California school superintendent and serving well over 50 board members in four different school districts, ranging from 170 to 12,000 students, I experienced this same frustration. I also experienced board members who demonstrated some bizarre and counter-productive governance behaviors. Early in my career, I made a mistake that created an unnecessary rift within the governance team: I told board members what they were doing was wrong.

**Lesson One**—Superintendents must teach board members and absolutely avoid telling them what they are doing is wrong. To teach board members means that the superintendent needs to create professional development and team building opportunities for board members that bring them together and facilitate the development of a functional and successful governance team.

Educational leaders accept the premise that the superintendent is ultimately responsible for the professional development provided to each member of the district. Districts spend millions of dollars on professional development, but are often unwilling to spend thousands of dollars on the professional development of the leaders who make the ultimate decisions. When faced with staff members who believe that they do not need professional development, superintendents do not throw their hands up and do nothing: They lead!

**Lesson Two**—Superintendents need to take the professional and political lead in providing professional development for all members of the team, including board members. Instead of asking permission from board members, superintendents must provide the professional development opportunities that will enable the board members to be successful. The simple lesson is not to solicit board member approval, rather develop and implement the professional development opportunities that will address the needs of the board and district.

**Lesson Three**—To support and protect the board, the buck needs to stop at the superintendent's desk. When the "critics" declare that we should not spend the money on board professional development, the superintendent needs to lead and take ownership regarding the decision. Do not place board members in the position to defend

their own professional development. That would be tantamount to them telling the critics that they are not prepared for the job. When required, the superintendent needs to assert the point of view that all members of the team need professional development, including board members. The superintendent may need to educate the critics on the sum of funds that are spent on staff professional development, as compared to board professional development.

After I shared my thinking with the new superintendent, he stated, "What if the district provides the opportunity and they still will not commit to participate?" He referred to the old saying, "you can lead the horse to water but you can't make it drink."

**Lesson 4**—Simply stated, you need to make them thirsty. Board members will not commit to professional development unless they see a connection to their own work. Superintendents need to teach/show individual board members there is a connection between the training and the challenges that the governance team is facing, or may be facing. Once the connection is understood, it is imperative that peer pressure begins to be felt by at least one board member who commits to participate in the training and actively encourages their fellow members.

In conclusion, if you apply these lessons, the long-term result will make a difference in the lives of your students and the school district. Great districts result from great leadership and great teaching. Great leaders and great teachers need continuous and consistent professional development. I cannot assure you that everyone will just love the superintendent who leads in this manner. I can assure you that the superintendent who leads in this manner will be respected as a teacher/educator and, most of the time, appreciated by board members for taking on the political and professional lead, as well as the heat, in providing a quality board professional development program.

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