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Understanding School Alumni Parents
How to Create an Accountability Framework
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Minnesota School Boards Association

Insuroance Trust
Calendar

March 2009
8 .......... Daylight Saving Time begins
10 .......... Township Election Day
19-20 ...... MASA Spring Conference
27 .......... MSBA Phase III, Morton
28 .......... MSBA Phase III, St. Cloud

April 2009
1 .......... MSBA Phase III, Rochester
4-7 ........ NSBA Convention, San Diego, CA
14 .......... MSBA Phase III, Thief River Falls
14 .......... MSBA Insurance Trust Meeting
15 .......... MSBA Phase III, Proctor
19-20 ..... MSBA Board of Directors’ Meeting
27-30 ..... Board Book Free Webinars
29 .......... Joint Legislative Conference

May 2009
14-15 ..... MSBA Board of Directors’ Meeting
20 .......... Minnesota School District Liquid Asset Fund Plus Meeting
25 .......... Memorial Day (no meetings)

June 2009
11 .......... MSBA Insurance Trust Meeting
11-12 ..... MSBA Board of Directors’ Meeting

July 2009
3 ............ Independence Day Observed (no meetings)
4 ............ Independence Day (no meetings)

August 2009
12 .......... MSBA Summer Seminar Early Birds
13-14 ..... MSBA Summer Seminar

The MSBA Journal thanks the students of South Washington County Public Schools for sharing their art with us in this issue.

Cover Art: Katelyn White

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Quotes of Note captures some of the more interesting statements MSBA staff have read in local, state and national publications.

**Personal benefits of being on a school board for many years**

“I love education. I’ve learned from every person I’ve met, and that can be very powerful.”

Outgoing Burnsville-Eagan-Savage Board Member

Vicki Roy

**Taking board meetings on the road to different schools**

“I think getting out of our ivory tower here to interact with folks would show some leadership to the community and to the school district. I think it would increase dialogue and accessibility to the board.”

Stillwater School Board Member George Dierberger

**Keeping students in public schools**

“I think everybody reads a lot about students flocking away from public schools to other options, and that’s not necessarily true in our district. We understand that there’s other good choices for students out there and we work hard to provide what our community wants.”

Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Superintendent

John Currie

**Starting an Arts Booster Club**

“The fine arts are such a huge part of our community makeup. It seems like this is a piece that is really overdue in a community like this.”

Northfield Principal Joel Leer

**School consolidation plans with three other districts**

“The snowball becomes huge, and it starts rolling. We need to work together, or it’ll go to dissolution.”

Glencoe-Silver Lake Superintendent Chris Sonju

**Board members staying focused**

Our primary duty is not to manage daily operations at the schools; our trained and experienced staff does that. The board sets policy, gives direction to the administration and works to project positive goals.

Fergus Falls School Board President Melanie Cole
A

After each Leadership Conference, no matter how great the response, a former staffer would always tell us that we can look for ways to make next year a little bit better. That’s why I look through the evaluation forms with our board development staff to see what worked, what didn’t and what we can improve on for next year.

The most common response on the evaluations was: “We want more.” More workshops, more roundtables, some board members couldn’t get enough. We had some of the same comments last year. That is why the conference committee added a session of round tables Thursday after our second workshop. From 4:30 to 4:50 p.m. Thursday, we filled the tables in the Exhibit Hall with the new offering. The response was wonderful and brought comments for even more. And we’ll be looking at ways to add to those sessions. We also had comments to add more chairs for those sessions. Next year, we’ll set them up with a second ring of chairs to accommodate more people.

The second most common response was to add more workshops on Thursday—have three sessions instead of two. When setting up workshops, we have to balance the need to allow people time to visit our vendors (usually reserved from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m.), since they cover most of the cost for this conference. Because of these vendors, Minnesota is the only state in the nation to offer a FREE annual conference. We also want to respect people’s time to meet over supper and have tried to wrap up the sessions by 5 p.m. But we will again look at how we can add more sessions on Thursday for those willing to stay for one more round of workshops.

We also received a few comments about not having Friday workshops during the Commissioner of Education’s talk. Again, we have to juggle time for round tables, exhibitors, the commissioner and our keynote while finishing our conference by noon so people can check out of hotels by 12:30 p.m. We will be looking hard at ways to fit everything in. We know it is important to hear from our commissioner, so we will look at everything from starting a little earlier on Friday to juggling our lineup that day.

Other comments included:

“The Exhibitor Academy is a great addition.”

“The PR for small districts shows us that we have a lot of small districts with similar concerns and interests.”

“Dorsey was absolutely fantastic.”

“Get Smart parent training by Rochester was the best session I’ve ever attended.”

“The student newspaper on Friday was great.”

As for other comments: “Put a sheet of blank paper in the conference book for note-taking.” Great idea. We’ll try that next year.

“I couldn’t find a program at my hotel.” We make sure a box of programs are at our three conference hotels. We will double our efforts to make sure they are out at the lobby desk as in the past.

“Have more PowerPoint handouts available at the Resource table.” We will make more of an effort to get this information at the Resource table for others to pick up.

“Have the MACCRAY district back next year to see if they really saved the money they projected.” Another great idea. They’ll have an open invitation to talk about their four-day school week and how it is working.

We take your evaluation forms seriously at MSBA. Our goal will continue to be that, no matter how successful our conference is, we will be a little bit better every year.

Bob Meeks
MSBA Executive Director

We take your evaluation forms seriously at MSBA.

STRAIGHT TALK

MAKING OUR CONFERENCE A LITTLE BIT BETTER EVERY YEAR
“Will a test really show all the things we teach and value in schools?”

Jacqueline Magnuson
MSBA President

Testing isn’t new. In 1918, the Minnesota High School Board gave what was called the March examination. It was given at 9 a.m. March 22 and students were given two hours to finish. There were seven questions.

Today, this state and nation’s plunge into testing has turned March and April into a teacher’s version of Groundhog’s Day. Every day a student wakes up, goes to school and takes some sort of test. Over and over. Day after day. All in the name of a false “accountability.”

In my district, we start testing English Language Learners March 9. Testing doesn’t end until April 29. We have TEAE tests, SOLOM tests, MAP tests, MCA-II tests, GRAD tests. And I could go on.

Chances are, my district is facing the same schedule as the other 340 districts around the state. And as testing mania has taken hold, someone has to stop and ask, “How much testing is really too much?” and “Will a test really show all the things we teach and value in schools?”

The first question from districts is usually “When we use MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) tests, we get so much more information on how to help students learn than anything we get from the MCA-II. Why can’t we use the MAP tests in place of the MCA-IIs?”

Problem one is that the Legislature has required standards for each grade level and has required the state to have all students meet those standards. A MAP test, though much more helpful, doesn’t contain all of Minnesota’s standards.

Problem two is that the past federal education administration has not approved any type of testing that is formative; only summative. Summative tests reflect the slew of state standards that the Legislature thinks all students should know. Formative tests show in what areas students have grown and what areas they need help with.

So now we have districts testing students to help improve instruction using the MAP or some sort of NWEA test, AND testing students to jump through the federal and state hoops.

It’s time the state and federal governments give districts an option to use the test that helps students the most—whether it be an NWEA test or the MCA-II. This alone would slow down this testing frenzy. And if the feds want schools to use the MCA-II, do we really need to do it EVERY year?

Originally, schools tested in grade spans—once every three years. At the least, can we keep yearly testing to only those students who don’t reach proficiency?

In tight budget times, schools are being asked to use their time more wisely. I think it would be wise to cut out two months of testing each year so students can take back those days as learning days. We need tests that help teachers to see what children are learning and what they are not learning. We don’t need tests that are only used to artificially rate a school’s adequate yearly progress. We need tests that are timely and useful. Only then will we stop this nightmare of waking up and going to school simply to take more tests day after day after day.
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Education is complex, which is why it is important to have conversations about big issues with your community.
In March of 1992, St. Louis Park schools superintendent Carl Holmstrom was scheduled to speak at a Rotary Club meeting. He stood before the group, told them a story of children in need, and then told them that he didn’t have the answers to the issues he’d just presented. His speech that day began a community conversation, one that grew to an initiative called Children First, since replicated around the country and around the globe. We need only look to that speech on that day to see the amazing power of conversation.

Perhaps it was courageous of Carl to admit that he didn’t have the answers—we are wired to have an answer when faced with a question. But it was the best answer he had and, although he didn’t know it at the time, the best answer he could have given, because it invited others to be part of the conversation. It allowed for everyone who chose to engage to have a voice in the future decisions impacting the children and the community.

In the not-too-distant past, schools were the hub of every community because almost everyone in the community had students in the schools. Conversations about what was happening in the schools took place whether we planned for them or not, simply because the schools provided a common denominator for all of us. As that has changed and those with direct connections to our public schools are in the minority, conversations about the public schools do not just happen as they once did.

If you begin to talk about your public schools at a social gathering, people look at you as though you are talking a foreign language. They are seldom engaged unless there is a referendum on the ballot. Purposefully reaching out to the community to engage them in real conversation will help us regain the support we have lost. Building bridges to the community will help us solve our problems and make better decisions.

**Building Relationships by Engaging in Conversation**

MASA and MSBA, along with Parents United for Public Schools, recently hosted a seminar that focused on the power of conversation, and the hunger of people in communities of all sizes to participate in and impact the decisions being made. The sheer power of conversation is exciting and motivating. Conversation provides the opportunity to get past either/or positions and move into areas of commonality.

Deb Gurke, of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, led a portion of the presentation. “The definition of leadership is changing. It is no longer sufficient to be the can-do person. You need to be able to communicate effectively with both the internal and external stakeholders,” said Gurke.

The need for conversation is critical to the future success of our schools. According to Gurke, “The context in which public schools operate has changed over the last 30 years and school board leaders need to think differently about how they do their work. The public is not unengaged. Instead, when they are not included they are more likely to become hostile to decision-making processes that ignore them.”

**World Café Conversations**

Gurke uses a *World Café Conversation* model for school boards. The café format is flexible and adaptable, fostering dialogue, engagement and possibilities. Offering timed table conversations that build off the previous tables’ conversation, the format allows a voice for many ideas all on a common thread.

The café format was powerful for participants and garnered an interest in the many uses of the model. A ideal training model is one that both teaches and inspires, and indeed the café style of participation did just that—it worked to engage participants in the topic and shared a new way of facilitating discussions.

The Café Guidelines are:

- Clarify the purpose
- Create a hospitable space
- Explore questions that matter
- Encourage everyone’s contribution
- Connect diverse perspectives
- Listen for insights and share discoveries

While interesting and engaging, the café conversations can make some uncomfortable. One participant shared that he does not like conversations with people he doesn’t know. It was a good reminder that not everyone has a gregarious nature and we need to build supports for comfortable conversations within our
communities, whether the participant be a school leader, elected official or a new resident. Linda Rodgers and Karen George, of Anoka-Hennepin schools, shared the concept of Engagement in Action, and the steps to making engagement an integral part of the decision-making process. As leaders know, there is a difference between public and private relationships, and by opening up to conversation, we also open ourselves up to criticism. While it’s easy to put the worst interpretation on what the critic says or does, George suggests the cost of doing that is the loss of fresh ideas. By managing what appears to be an attack, the conversation can and should continue, leading to a focus on the issues raised and potential solutions.

The challenge of engaging the public in conversation

For districts where everyone on the block has kids in school, school procedures, successes and failures are the topic of conversation all over—at the grocery store and on the ball field. However, with some communities seeing as little as 12 percent of families with kids in school, and with many families not feeling obliged to attend the school down the block, schools must involve as many constituents as possible in the conversation. But how?

Burnsville school board member Vicki Roy knows of the tremendous competition for the public’s attention. “We can invite them in, we can send them written communications, we can e-mail, put ads in the newspapers and on the airwaves, but we can’t force them to participate. And, even when we do get their attention, it seems to be transitory. How do we build a compelling enough message to bring the unconnected ones in? How do we build a compelling enough message so they see that it is in their best interest to participate?”

One answer is in community education, which has been the connection for families with children and non-parent families for many decades. This is where we find the 20-somethings who play volleyball; the seniors at the various programs just for them; the artists who use the school’s pottery studio; the

“Great leaders don’t necessarily know the answers—great leaders figure out what the questions are and then perpetuate the inquiry.”
Margaret Wheatley, speaker and author

The Conversation Continues

The session on conversations, not surprisingly, began a conversation. A Web site for continuing the brainstorming, sharing questions, ideas and encouragement was created. At the end of the day, Mia Urick of MASA reported a number of comments from participants wanting to see more on this topic.

“Organizations are coming to understand that relationship is at the core of success—people do better when they think together. Community conversations are a terrific opportunity for schools (and kids) to benefit from engaged, involved communities, and it is critical for school leaders to build relationships to create capacity for public decision-making and problem solving,” said Urick. “We need a vehicle for a reinvestment in our schools, for folks to participate and care and know. And that’s conversation.”

Beth Johnson has spent her career building community through communications. A former pre-K-12 summer school director, regional trainer and communications director in public schools, she is now in marketing communications with Red Tail Communications.

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Every year, commencement exercises signal the end of an era for some high school parents, either because their graduate is an only child or the youngest child in the family. In the context of school elections, the perceptions of this group of parents, which we call “alumni parents,” contrast sharply not only with current parents, but also with adults who have never had children in public schools.

Alumni parents make up a substantial part of any school community and they wield much power, because they tend to be frequent voters. But if you think that this group of parents can be counted on to support school bond referendums and tax elections, think again. Alumni parents, it turns out, are often the least supportive of school tax increases.

Consequently, school leaders, who may believe that this group is a sympathetic audience, should take a closer look at this demographic if they want to win school tax elections or bond referendums.

We discovered these differing attitudes several years ago when we conducted a series of focus groups for a school district that was seeking voter approval of a major tax increase. During these sessions, it became clear that alumni parents clearly were a separate voting bloc from...
current parents and from those who were childless or who never had children in the public schools.

We wanted to find out as much about them as possible so we could advise school leaders on how to win their votes for bond referendums. First, we sought to find out who they are demographically and, second, we wanted to know why they generally didn’t support school bond referendums and tax elections.

WHO ARE ALUMNI PARENTS?

We started identifying alumni parents in random-sample telephone surveys we completed for districts in California, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin by asking respondents if they had “grown children who went to a local public school at any time in the past.”

We were able to develop a demographic profile of a district’s typical alumni parents. A majority (60 percent) are women. In addition, they have a fairly wide age range: 40 percent of the alumni parents in a typical district are 65 years of age or older, while 30 percent are between 55 and 64, and 30 percent are below 55.

Alumni parents also are frequent voters. More than half (54.4 percent) are what we consider “very active voters”—they have voted in four or five recent district elections. Nearly 38 percent are “active voters”—voting two or three times in recent elections.

Only 7.8 percent are “less active or new voters,” those who voted only once or who recently registered to vote.

These levels of participation are significantly higher than the populations as a whole, and they make alumni parents a formidable voting bloc.

UNDERSTANDING ALUMNI PARENTS

Next, we wanted to understand more fully the attitudes and opinions of the alumni parent population, including why they tend to vote down school-related tax hikes. To do this, we asked the Center for Community Opinion to do a telephone survey with 380 Minnesota voters. Half of the interviews were completed with current K-12 parents and half with alumni parents.

Our first question: “Tax dollars are used on the federal, state and local levels to provide a variety of services. I am going to read you a list of some of these. For each, please tell me if you believe it is best to spend more, continue the current level of spending, or spend less on the service or improvement described.”

Almost 64 percent of all the respondents said more should be spent on the public schools, while 17.7 percent want more spent on library services.

This opinion is held both by alumni parents and current parents. Not until we divided alumni parents by age did we see a significant difference in the attitudes of current parents and alumni parents. Alumni parents under 65 saw increased spending on public education as a lower priority item than do current parents or alumni parents over 65.

Dividing alumni parents by age provides valuable insight into the very different attitudes and opinions held by younger alumni parents.

We asked the question: “In general, do you believe that things in the public school district serving your community are moving in the right direction, the wrong direction or not changing very much?”

Among current parents and alumni parents 65 and older, almost half said the schools were moving in the right
direction. Among the alumni parents 64 or younger, only 32 percent said their local schools were moving in the right direction, and 31 percent said they were moving in the wrong direction.

The younger alumni parents also were most likely to feel the quality of public education has gotten worse over the last few years. We asked, “Over the last 10 years, do you believe that the quality of the education provided by the public schools in your community has gotten better, gotten worse or not changed much?”

Nearly 30 percent of the alumni parents 64 or younger said things had gotten worse. In contrast, only slightly more than 15 percent of the current parents voiced this opinion.

The difference among older alumni parents is not as great. Among alumni parents 65 or older, nearly a quarter said that the quality of the local schools had gotten worse.

When asked to grade the local public schools, younger alumni parents were much more likely to give the local schools a D and much less likely to give them an A. About 10 percent of the alumni parents age 64 or younger gave the schools a D. Among current parents and alumni parents 65 or older, less than 3 percent gave the schools a similar grade.

FINANCE FACTOR

One of the goals of the survey was not only to measure differing reactions to questions about public education but also to explore larger differences in the importance voters placed on major tasks like paying college tuition or planning for retirement.

A series of three questions provides some of the best insight into how our three groups differ. Both current parents and alumni parents were asked: “Which is personally most important to you today: 1) The quality of public education; 2) Paying tuition costs so my children can go to college; 3) Planning for retirement; 4) Improving my job skills and finding a better job; or 5) Finding more time for my personal interests and hobbies.”

For both current parents and older alumni parents, the quality of public education was the item most often selected as most important. Among current parents, 56 percent made such a choice, as did 43 percent of the alumni parents 65 and older. The alumni parents under 65, however, were much more likely to select planning for retirement. In this group, 44 percent named retirement planning—not public education—as their top priority.

The respondents were asked to remove their top priority and select another from the list. They did this three times. For the younger alumni parents—those who were under 65 years old—it was not until the third round of prioritizing that public education was finally selected as the most important.

WINNING ALUMNI PARENTS BACK

In translating research to practice, it is clear that it is a potentially fatal mistake in school tax elections to assume that alumni parents are going to vote “yes” in support of more funding for operations or bonding for new schools.

This tendency of alumni parents is all the more significant given the fact that they frequently comprise about a third of all registered voters. Even voters who just recently became alumni parents often are more negative when compared to their counterparts who are at least 65 years old.

What should school leaders do to preserve the loyalty of alumni parents? Our research suggests that:

Knowledge is power. Understanding the opinions, concerns, and priorities of alumni parents is the first step to maximizing support, minimizing opposition, and tailoring communications.
Alumni parents under age 65 are more concerned about retirement planning and finding time for their interests than investing more time and resources in the quality of public schools. Look for ways for the district’s community education, volunteer programs, and external communications to engage them and respond to their interests.

Alumni parents age 65 and up are often more supportive of education than their younger counterparts.

Broad community engagement planning should include alumni parents in recognition of the fact that this demographic group votes at a higher percentage than any other age group.

Finding success at the polls will require that school leaders move beyond looking simply at the attitudes of parents vs. nonparents to gain a more sophisticated understanding of alumni parents.

This is particularly important in terms of deciphering and responding to the perceptions of the age 64-and-under alumni parent bloc. The growing number of alumni parents make this group pivotal—especially if you want to plan and win a successful tax election.

Don E. Lifto (dlifto@springsted.com) is a senior vice president with Springsted, Inc., a St. Paul, Minn.-based independent financial advisory firm. J. Bradford Senden (brad@communityopinion.com) is the managing partner of The Center for Community Opinion, based in San Ramon, Calif.

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More than 1,500 school leaders gathered at the Convention Center for MSBA’s 2009 Leadership Conference. Here are some memories that we captured. Enjoy!

Above: Thursday Keynote Speaker Jason Ryan Dorsey was a huge hit with his story about how the little things teachers and school administrators do can make a big difference in a student’s life.

Below: Wavelength, the conference Friday keynote group, brought some fun to the crowd with its rendition of “Teacher Angst Jeopardy!”
Above: Early Bird presenter Deb Gurke, of the Wisconsin School Boards Association, led a small-group discussion on ways districts can engage their communities.

Below: Winners of the 2009 All-State School Board are: (Sitting, left to right) Carol Ladwig of Moorhead Area, Martha Van de Ven of Orono, Elizabeth Lawson of Stewartville, (standing) Marvin Kleven of Westbrook-Walnut Grove, Cary Linder of Dassel-Cokato and Marvin Vredenburg of Nevis.

Above: A school board member tries her luck at the Minnesota State High School League exhibit booth Olympics competitions. The Exhibit Hall was packed with people and full of vendors with information.

Above: Laura Barta, Communications Director for Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose, had a standing-room-only crowd around her Round Table on “Public Relations for Small School Districts.”
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Minnesota’s increasing emphasis on STEM education is receiving a powerful impetus from Project Lead The Way (PLTW), an innovative pre-engineering curriculum that is being implemented by a growing number of schools across the state. In a world driven by technological change, students without a strong background in STEM are limiting their futures. Math and science courses are important, but Project Lead The Way’s emphasis on applied learning connects with students of all interests and levels of ability, who see how engineering and technology apply difficult concepts in real-world ways. It adds value to a curriculum that is meant to prepare students to be solid citizens and consumers, whether or not they choose to become engineers or work in technical fields.
Project Lead The Way was conceived in the early 1990s as a way to reverse the decline in students choosing engineering as a career. While the number of engineers graduating from universities in India and China has been steadily increasing, the opposite is true in the United States—a disturbing trend which will threaten America’s quality of life in coming decades. Educators in the field of engineering have pointed out that 90 percent of all engineers currently being trained are being schooled in Asia, which illustrates the magnitude of the challenge facing American education.

Fortunately, Project Lead The Way is proving to be a very effective solution and is being enthusiastically embraced by students, teachers, administrators, counselors, school boards and parents. Engineering-related businesses, community colleges and universities also realize its value and are playing a key role in the program’s success. A growing number of colleges and universities across the country recognize the coursework and many offer advanced standing, college credit and/or scholarships. All participants are finding that Project Lead The Way’s emphasis on partnerships builds closer relationships between schools and their communities. This has been true nationwide as well as in Minnesota.

The curriculum has been reviewed and adopted by the school boards, administration and teaching staffs of more than 3,000 schools around the country and is continuing to expand in Minnesota. This year, approximately 120 schools in the state are part of the PLTW network, with 266 trained teachers and more than 23,700 students enrolled in 250 courses statewide.

School board members who have become familiar with the program are enthusiastic backers of Project Lead The Way. Their support of the program becomes even more pronounced once they see how successful it becomes in their schools.

Curt Johnson, CEO and Principal of Denali Energy, Inc., is a school board member in Pequot Lakes. “As leader of a technology and energy company, I see a tremendous and increasing need for new engineers,” he says. “We’re facing a shortage in many different areas as the baby boomers retire and new people are needed to replace them. PLTW is the tool that will enable today’s students not only to fill

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Leading the way on STEM education

Bil’s excitement inspires the students and they’re teacher, Bil Gangl, and his passion for the subject. John Belisle is a school board member in Mahtomedi and father of an 8th-grade student. “My perception of Project Lead The Way has morphed somewhat over the last year,” he says. “Prior to my daughter Claire taking the Design & Robotics course this year, my exposure had been via presentations to the school board. My wife and I do not have science backgrounds—she is in IT and I was trained as a CPA—so we were surprised and a little tentative when Claire said she wanted to take the class. Now she is so excited about engineering, robotics and using CAD that the first thing she talks about when she gets home from school is the wonderful hands-on things she gets to accomplish in class. Part of the reason for her success in the course is due to her phenomenal teacher, Bil Gangl, and his passion for the subject. Bil’s excitement inspires the students and they’re disappointed when the class has to end. Claire is now interested in an engineering career and is looking forward to taking additional PLTW classes next year in high school.”

One sponsor of the program is the Minnesota Center for Engineering & Manufacturing Excellence (MCEME). “This is a primary program that supports our goal of increasing the pipeline of STEM graduates for technology-based businesses,” says Judith Evans, the organization’s associate executive director. “We provide a support network for schools to facilitate opportunities for the benefit of students, teachers, communities and Minnesota’s future economic prosperity. In addition to financial contributions, many of our members support PLTW by making in-kind donations and providing their time and talent. They realize the tremendous value of this program to Minnesota schools.”

Project Lead The Way provides schools with a comprehensive curriculum, which has been developed jointly by K-12 educators, college faculty and engineers. Gateway To Technology, the middle school program, features five independent, nine-week units. Pathway To Engineering, the high school curriculum, includes eight year-long classes, of which four are considered the minimum “core.” PLTW also offers a four-course program in Biomedical Sciences that includes a capstone class devoted to science research. Although the main emphasis is on secondary programs, Project Lead The Way recently introduced an Elementary Lessons curriculum consisting of five independent units for use in grades 3, 4 and 5.

The hands-on nature of the courses is what gets students excited, allowing them to apply math and science concepts they’ve learned in direct applications. “Research confirms the importance of hands-on learning in STEM education,” says Dr. Ronald J. Bennett, executive director of MCEME. “Yet few kids today use their hands as they have in the past—working on auto engines, making ham radios, building structures or repairing tools. Those experiences help students see the relevance of what they’re learning in school. PLTW projects provide that connection between theory and practice and generate interest in STEM topics while increasing overall academic performance. Project Lead The Way is filling a need by helping to build the STEM educated workforce needed to maximize our state and nation’s manufacturing competitiveness and innovation.”

The program can be adopted incrementally over several years and has been successful in schools of all sizes. Small rural high schools sometimes work together in consortia or offer the program in conjunction with a local community college. Implementing Project Lead The Way is possible for schools of all sizes, if the teachers are motivated and the school board and administration are willing to make it a priority. Committed school boards are vital to the success of PLTW and its sustainability.

Teacher training is an important element. Before introducing courses in their classrooms, teachers attend two-week sessions devoted to each course at the state’s affiliate institution, the University of Minnesota, or at the state universities in Bemidji, Mankato or St. Cloud. This intensive training introduces teachers to the concepts, lessons and activities that they’ll be bringing to their own students and provides an opportunity to network with other professionals.
These Summer Training Institute classes, taught by university faculty and PLTW Master Teachers, are highly popular. The specialized training not only helps teachers implement the courses, but also infuses them with new enthusiasm. “The extensive training and popularity of Project Lead The Way classes with our students has rejuvenated teachers to want to become part of the program,” says a teacher in Grand Rapids.

Engineering and technology-related companies work with PLTW schools in a variety of ways—by providing speakers in the classroom, hosting visits by students, mentoring project teams and making donations. “Connecting with industry is always a priority,” says an administrator from the Fridley school district, “but PLTW gave us the format in which to do it.”

Districts committed to offering the PLTW program are prioritizing it in their budgets or are finding local business and civic partners to assist with some of the training, software and equipment costs. As part of the state’s STEM initiative, various competitive grants are available to schools for PLTW implementation. Schools wanting to learn more may contact Jim Mecklenburg (james.mecklenburg@mnscu.edu) or Dan Smith (Dan.Smith@state.mn.us).

In addition, the Kern Family Foundation has a competitive grant process that makes available multi-year funding for PLTW teacher training and other startup expenses—up to $25,000 over 2 years for middle schools and up to $35,000 over 3 years for high schools. For more information on these grants, contact Mark Schroll at (262) 968-6838, ext. 16 or mschroll@kffdn.org.

Mike Carr is a Communications Consultant for the Kern Family Foundation. He can be reached at mcarr@kffdn.org.

**PROJECT LEAD THE WAY CURRICULUM**

The Project Lead The Way curriculum can be adopted incrementally and tailored to the needs of a particular district or school within PLTW guidelines.

### Elementary Lessons

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<th>Grade</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Human Air Traffic Control</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Designing My Rover!</td>
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<td>Wireless Communication</td>
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### Middle School – Gateway To Technology

- Design & Modeling
- The Magic of Electrons
- The Science of Technology
- Automation & Robotics
- Flight & Space

### High School – Pathway To Engineering

#### Foundation Courses
- Introduction to Engineering Design
- Principles of Engineering
- Digital Electronics

#### Specialization Courses
- Computer Integrated Manufacturing
- Civil Engineering & Architecture
- Biotechnical Engineering
- Aerospace Engineering

#### Capstone Course
- Engineering Design & Development

### High School – Biomedical Sciences

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- Human Body Systems
- Medical Intervention
- BMS Capstone Course
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As the chief accountability officer of a large urban school district, I frequently get calls from other educators asking how we went about creating our accountability system. “How do you even define accountability?” I often hear. But to create it is to define it.

While the task may seem daunting, it is a necessary one for any district that wants to reclaim its footing in an inadequate federal system that doles out a one-dimensional definition of achievement. Due to its limits, NCLB has pushed educators to expand what accountability means in a more holistic way that addresses the needs of students and the root causes of the achievement gap and lagging graduation rates.

While our district may not have written the book on accountability, the implementation of our new accountability system in 2008 has afforded us some fresh insights that may help others embarking on this process. The following are the vital elements and lessons learned from our developmental process:

**Strong Leadership with a Clear Vision**

A district must internalize accountability at all levels to fulfill the hardest part: making it a living framework. Without direction and clear expectations from the superintendent and leadership team, the process can easily fall to pieces. The vision articulated in our strategic planning process became the touchstone that the workteams went back to when they ran into stalemates and confusion.

**The Workteam**

With the vision in hand, we convened a project team to outline the accountability framework. As we considered whom to recruit,
we knew it would be critical to have people with the following knowledge: sense of the overall policy environment (federal, state, district); versed in auditing systems; family involvement/community relations; history of the district; and data analysis. You will also need a strong team of writers and a good editor to ensure that the final document is readable and easily understood. If you are not able to fill these roles internally, consultants might need to fill the gaps.

Be clear about the community’s role in the process. Due to the complex nature of NCLB, limitations set by teacher contracts, board policy, etc., we learned that it’s best to set realistic expectations for community (and general staff) input.

Determining the Indicators

One of the biggest questions we faced was whether we were going to keep our state’s NCLB requirements as a separate system or integrate it into our new framework. In the end, we knew that if our indicators didn’t connect to AYP we’d end up with a dissonance that would overcomplicate the system. But we also knew we wanted to go beyond NCLB and hold all our schools accountable, not just the Title I schools. When determining the other indicators, it was important for us to develop a system that would be manageable, so we chose the fewest but most critical indicators that would have the most impact on student achievement, e.g., attendance, academic growth, dropout rates, etc.

Sharing the Accountability

Our process was deliberate in articulating individual and collective responsibility among internal and external stakeholders. Shared accountability was defined as everyone having a role to play to support the academic success of students; no longer would accountability be solely on the backs of our schools. Like schools, department services will be audited for continued self-improvement. Parents and the wider community will receive repeated messages and provide valuable feedback on how they can help students achieve.

Vetting the Framework

There must be an honest and respectful effort to engage stakeholders in the process. While it’s messy and takes time, people can’t support something they don’t understand or know about. Internally, it will minimize resistance among principals while externally it will help the community understand they too have a role in the success of our schools.

Aligning Your Systems

Once the framework is vetted, it must be embedded into the machinery of the district. Not only do you need a clear idea of who will be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the framework, but there needs to be a synchronicity between the framework’s implementation and how/when it is communicated. Align your systems (strategic plan, accountability framework, curriculum, communications, professional development, etc.) under one umbrella so that once the framework is rolled out, each system is reinforcing the other in its common goal of raising student achievement.

Timeline

The timeline really depends on whether a district already has a strategic plan in place or if it still needs to be articulated. The task of developing a shared accountability framework was a direct outgrowth of our strategic planning process and was identified by the community as a key concept for the district to champion. The strategic planning process took about seven months, while the accountability framework took 18 months to complete. It always takes longer than you anticipate.

While the effectiveness of our shared accountability system has yet to prove itself, we know that as we move forward success will depend on ensuring our framework is a living document to be refined as gaps in the system come to light. We know that it is truly a work in progress.

Michelle Walker is the chief accountability officer of Saint Paul Public Schools, 360 Colborne St., St. Paul, MN 55102. E-mail: michelle.walker@spps.org.
**Directory inculdes every thing you need to know to contact a company quickly—phone numbers, fax numbers and addresses—in an easy-to-read format. If you have a service or product you would like included in this directory, please contact Sue Munsterman at 507-934-2450 or smunsterman@mnmsda.org.**

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<tr>
<td>(DJ Paxton) 312 Van Buren Ave. Minneapolis, MN 55443 612-605-7263, Fax 612-395-9298 <a href="http://www.professionallearningboard.com">www.professionallearningboard.com</a> <a href="mailto:dj@professionallearningboard.com">dj@professionallearningboard.com</a></td>
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<td>(Steven T. Rizzi, Jr.) 300 First Street NW Austin, MN 55912 507-433-7394, 877-443-2914 Fax 507-433-8890 <a href="http://www.adamsrizzisween.com">www.adamsrizzisween.com</a> <a href="mailto:srizzi@adamsrizzisween.com">srizzi@adamsrizzisween.com</a></td>
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Every year, between sixty and seventy school boards must search for new district leaders due to the resignations of their current superintendents. Regardless of the reason(s) for the vacancies, most school boards begin their searches by contacting MSBA for information and guidance. Three of the questions board members most frequently ask are highlighted below.

Q. Are board meetings to conduct the superintendent search subject to the open meeting law?
A. Yes. All board meetings related to the superintendent search must be open meetings, so the school board should ensure that all notices of meetings are appropriately posted in compliance with statute. In addition, since the meetings are open meetings, school district staff and community members may attend any meeting, at any time, regardless of the meeting’s purpose. With this in mind, because superintendent candidates’ materials contain data that are classified as private data, the school board should practice care when discussing private data in an open meeting to avoid violating a candidate’s data privacy rights. For example, during the discussion board members should 1) remember that not all data on candidates is public, thus, school boards should speak generally about those issues, rather than in specific terms, and 2) point out positive attributes of candidates rather than negative attributes. Additional information can be found in MSBA/MSA Model Policy 205 OPEN MEETINGS AND CLOSED MEETINGS and in MSBA Service Manual, Chapter 13, Law Bulletin C.

Q. What information on applicants and finalists is public?
A. The answer to this question can be found in the Minnesota Data Practices Act. Specifically, the law provides that the names of applicants for employment are private, but the names of finalists are public. (M.S. 13.43, Subd. 3) So, once a school board selects an applicant for an interview, his/her name becomes public data. Then, once the finalists are named, the board can only release the following information on applicants for a position: name (only finalists), veteran status, relevant test scores, rank on eligible list, job history, education and training, and work availability. All other information about candidates is private, as are the names and information of all other applicants who are not finalists. Additional information can be found in MSBA/MSA Model Policy 406 PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PERSONNEL DATA and in MSBA Service Manual, Chapter 13, Law Bulletin I.

Q. How might the board involve staff and community in the search process?
A. State law gives to the school board the authority for selecting the superintendent. (M.S. 123B.143) As the hiring authority, the school board has the right to see all of the data contained in an applicant’s and/or finalist’s materials; however, staff, parents, community members, and the media do not have a similar right. So, for both legal and practical reasons, MSBA recommends that community involvement in the search process be limited to identifying the qualifications and criteria that will be used to select the superintendent.

Please feel free to contact MSBA regarding your superintendent search-related questions.
MSBA is here to serve YOU...

MASTER AGREEMENT ANALYSIS

Need help analyzing your district’s Master Agreement?

MSBA staff has analyzed more than 500 Master Agreements since 2000. MSBA provides a detailed, written analysis of the following Agreements:

- Teachers,
- Superintendents,
- Non-licensed staff,
- Others.

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MSBA’s mission is to support, promote, and enhance the work of public school boards.

Addresses service requested.