

## **What is Coherent Governance?®**

Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn, senior partners  
The Aspen Group Intl, Inc. LLC  
P.O. Box 1777 Castle Rock, CO 80104

**Ask any board member to identify the primary function of the board. Chances are good that eight of the first 10 answers you receive will be "policy."**

**Now, ask those same board members to list the decisions they made at their last board meeting. How many of their actions had anything to do with policy? Our experience: virtually none.**

**The truth is, boards don't operate at the broad policy level. Most boards make decisions at the operational level - the place where the CEO should exercise delegated authority, responsibility, and accountability for day-to-day operations.**

**This, probably more than any other factor, is what leads to confusion of roles, charges of micro-managing, wasted time, splintered vision and frustration due to boards' inability to make a bigger difference in the lives of the organizations they govern.**

**The problem is not that boards resist functioning at the policy level. It is more due to the fact that boards simply haven't taken the time to assess their own performance and consciously discover how board decisions can be made at the broad policy level.**

**It is much easier for boards to dabble in the day-to-day affairs of the organization, because these are the tangible "things" and the "stuff" that can be touched and played with. Creating an organizational vision and identifying long-term benefits for the students being served take more work—and more leadership. But it is the most important work a board can do. Unfortunately, most boards have given away the best part of their jobs!**

**Coherent Governance is a model of board governance that, if faithfully followed, will compel boards to make policy decisions, not operational decisions.**

### **What is Coherent Governance ?**

**Coherent Governance is built on all the traditional principles that people long have recognized that good boards strive to practice. While virtually all**

boards will acknowledge the wisdom of the principles, the difficulty that boards have in actuality practicing those principles in everyday board life is a different matter. This model, better than anything we have found, allows boards to be put the principles of good governance into practice. The principles and the model enable boards to effectively lead, direct, inspire and control organizations through a set of very carefully crafted policy statements.

Boards using Coherent Governance adopt a policy that defines the board's job description. This job description includes clear recognition that the board serves as a trustee or "owner representative" on behalf of the public. Their job? To lead, represent and serve the people who put them in office.

Coherent Governance provides a framework to enable boards to lead the organization through policy, rather than the usual custom of board approval of administrative recommendations. Unlike traditional boards, which may try to use policy manuals whose dimensions may be measured in feet and pounds, the Coherent Governance board usually manages to effectively guide the organization with a policy manual that includes not more than 35 to a maximum of 40 policies--total. The policies are grouped into four categories, each serving a distinct purpose. The four categories are:

**RESULTS:** Defined organizational products and outcomes. These policies clearly state the "bottom line" which the organization is expected to achieve over time: What Results? For Whom? At What Cost? The Results policies become the superintendent's and the organization's performance targets. They also form the basis for judging organizational and superintendent performance.

**OPERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS:** the board can, through policy, control day-to-day operational decisions without making them. It does so through the category of policies called Operational Expectations. These policies define both the nonnegotiable expectations and the clear boundaries within which the superintendent and staff must operate. They clarify the latitude and authority the board vests in the superintendent and staff. These policies articulate the actions and decisions the board would find either absolutely necessary or totally unacceptable.

Once stated, the superintendent is authorized to make all other operational decisions as long as they fall within the board's

stated values. This process enables boards to articulate with absolute clarity the superintendent's decision-making authority. The result is absolute role clarity—no more guessing about whether the decision belongs to the board or to the superintendent. The board's control over organizational performance is increased dramatically.

**GOVERNANCE PROCESS:** The board defines its own work and how it will be carried out. These policies clearly state the expectations the board has for individual and collective behavior, and also clarify the role and function of any board committees.

Taken in their sum, the Governance Process policies constitute the governing culture the board commits to work within. They also serve an important long-term function: the culture is much more likely to be perpetuated if it is deliberately stated in policy, and carefully monitored to assure board compliance.

**BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONSHIP:** The board stipulates in policy how authority is delegated by the board to its superintendent, and how the superintendent's performance will be evaluated.

Coherent Governance offers a logical process for boards to govern well, and to remove themselves from the daily operational “stuff” that boards typically allow themselves to become consumed with. The Aspen Group offers the practical help necessary to make the model work in real life.

For boards that successfully implement Coherent Governance, we promise, it will:

1. Eliminate forever the confusion between board and superintendent roles;
2. Provide a means for the board to add value to the organization it governs by focusing on the results that are expected to be achieved by students and at a specified cost;
3. Free the superintendent and staff to do their jobs without the board's micro-managing day-to-day decisions;
4. It will establish governing policy that overlays the typically large, unwieldy, and poorly maintained district policy manual with about 40 very clear, very dynamic and inclusive board policies;

5. It will give the board more control over operational decisions than it ever had before, and it will do so in a manner that retains the board's role at the governance level. In other words, *the board will be more active without also being more intrusive.*

**Bold promises, admittedly.**

**But these are promises that are entirely possible for the board that faithfully commits to the principles of Coherent Governance.**

**The Aspen Group International, Inc., has taken the theory of Policy Governance®, made it useable by school boards and implemented it in their boardroom. The theoretical now is practical. Aspen Group principals' work demonstrates the viability and power of this coherent governance in their work with client boards.**

**It is the only model of board governance that makes sense.**