

“While the board in West Vancouver places the bar high on learning, we ALWAYS LOOK FOR NEW WAYS to meet the needs of modern learners.”



CHRIS KENNEDY

is superintendent of the West Vancouver School District in West Vancouver, British Columbia. E-mail: ckennedy@sd45.bc.ca. Twitter: @chrkennedy

Doing Small Things To Improve Governance

WHILE MUCH IS made of the big things school districts can do to improve the state of board governance, small things make a big difference. When my board chair sits down in my office and pulls out her phone, I grab my computer as I know she is going to her “list” and I have one as well.

This exchange is part of our routine as we meet regularly to get guidance, clarification or action from each other. These meetings are one of the small things we do to maintain strong relationships and stable governance in West Vancouver, B.C. A few other ways follow.

► **Board work plan/calendar.** Our board work plan serves as a checklist. As people move in and out of roles, it provides continuity and keeps us moving in the right direction. By March, we are finalizing the calendar for the following year. From briefing meetings to committee schedules and liaison meetings, the earlier we can establish a calendar, the more respectful we can be around professional and personal schedules across the district.

► **Clarity around policies (board) and procedures (superintendent).** About a decade ago, our board updated the district’s policies and administrative procedures manuals. The board has 18 policies and bylaws that speak to their governance role. The administrative procedures manual, which is the responsibility of the superintendent, has 100-plus measures guiding daily operations. Of course, linkages exist between the two, but this model does help to reaffirm organizational roles.

► **Clear superintendent evaluation.** Our board uses a framework set out by its professional support organization for the evaluation process. With our model of policies and procedures, I have been assigned a high level of responsibility and therefore should be held to a high level of accountability.

In our district, all educators participate in a growth plan model. Administrators work with district staff on their plans and teachers share their plans with principals and colleagues. I meet with our five-member board three times annually to review my growth plan, which has three areas of focus — the first is from the role

description that is in policy, another is based on the district’s strategic plan, and the third is personal-professional growth.

► **Strategic planning.** The strategic planning process is written into policy in West Vancouver. We have just published our strategic plan that will carry the district forward until 2018. The board’s latest four-year plan includes directions around fostering learning excellence, promoting visionary governance, supporting an evolving community and embracing the transitions we are seeing with learning in our schools. Our plan is incredibly valuable as a guide to operations as we receive constant requests from groups inside and outside the district. With this in place, we can see easily which align with our objectives.

► **A culture of growth and support.** We are in the learning business. The more we can model that the better. No matter how strong results might be, opportunities to do better are always top of mind.

The board dedicates time at each of its meetings for school highlights. Each school has an opportunity to make a presentation during the course of the school year. Often schools share new ideas and innovative approaches that are having an impact on learning. Recent reports focused on outdoor learning spaces, libraries being converted to learning commons, and ways to communicate student learning beyond traditional report cards. Support for new ideas and recognition for good work go a long way.

Beyond Routine

While the board in West Vancouver places the bar high on learning, we always look for new ways to meet the needs of modern learners.

Readers may view this as a commonsense list, it is far more than that. It is the commitment to the plan — and the mutual understanding it creates — that can make the most difference in a high-functioning organization. As we see all the time in a district that is doing well, you will find a board and superintendent in sync and committed to doing whatever it takes to work together for the benefit of students.