

# LEADERBOARD

MAGAZINE

## NAVIGATE TOMORROW'S UNCERTAINTIES WITH CONFIDENCE.

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# WORKING TOGETHER: GUIDING OUR SCHOOLS THROUGH CHANGE

By Don Wotruba, CAE

When a natural disaster strikes an area, change happens whether the people living there want it or not. Some of the aftermath is permanent, like a river that is rerouted after a flood or mudslide. People adjust to the changes because they must and can't fight the will of Mother Nature. In education, changes and support for those changes take much longer to implement, even though the world that students will inhabit after high school has changed considerably over the last one hundred years, even over the last twenty years.

I often wonder how our education system, our delivery of instruction, and our classrooms have remained relatively similar over one hundred years when almost nothing else has. The expectations of colleges, businesses, politicians and even parents about what skills and knowledge kids will have when graduating have changed, yet when schools try to change how those skills or that knowledge is delivered, people resist.

This may be the biggest challenge that local educational leaders will face in the next decade. Societal and technological changes have become so drastic that schools must adapt faster. Cell phones and the ability to access the internet are out there, but we haven't found the best ways to integrate them into the classroom. Artificial intelligence (AI) will not and cannot be ignored by schools or parents and we must figure it out fast. The pace of change is only getting faster, and while MASB will always advocate for local control, centralized decision-making in other countries will handle this pace of change more effectively.

School leadership, including school boards, needs to figure out how to drive meaningful change in how we educate our students and to convince our communities that it is imperative to do so. How do we convince our parents that how or what they learned isn't relevant any longer? The answer can't just be to "do the right thing," as we have seen boards recalled and superintendents without jobs because they tried to "do the right thing."

To move forward, we need to change how we talk about education. It's not about getting rid of everything from the past—it's about helping students be ready for a future very different from what their parents or teachers experienced. Schools need to be open to trying new ideas and ways of teaching, while still focusing on important skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. That doesn't mean we jump at every new idea, but we do need to be open to change.

Teachers also need more support. We can't expect them to use new tools or teach in new ways without giving them time and training. At the same time, students need to learn how to keep learning, even after they leave school, in order to keep up with an ever-changing world.

Most importantly, school leaders need to help parents and communities understand why change is needed. People must see how new ways of learning will help their kids succeed. Without trust and clear communication, even the best plans won't work. We shouldn't wait until it's too late to make these changes. Education can't wait for a disaster to drive the need for change, we need to change to prevent the disaster.



**Don Wotruba, CAE**

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## ★ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE ★

*By James B. Johnson, Carman Ainsworth Community Schools*

# STAY READY SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET READY

## LEARNING, GROWING AND PREPARING ARE ESSENTIAL IN TODAY'S PUBLIC EDUCATION WORLD

Hello, fellow board members.

As our calendars show, spring has officially arrived. And yet, when I step outside, the weather still makes me do a double-take. That's just how this seasonal transition goes.

Around this time, it's routine for me to store away the snow blower, shovels and rock salt—tucking winter safely into the back of the shed. Then, out comes the weed and feed, the dandelion puller and the broadcaster to help revive the malnourished grass that's been buried and starved all winter.

It's a ritual I go through every year—almost like clockwork. I know what to do, when to do it and how often to do it. Over time, I've trained myself to be ready for this moment. Why? Because I know it's coming. Different year, same month—every time.

As a board member, ask yourself: Are you truly ready for change?

It's easy to settle into the mindset of "This is how I am, and this is how it will always be." But don't be fooled—change is inevitable. One day, in one way or another, it will come to a board room near you.

The real question is: Will you be prepared, or are you counting on making last-minute adjustments on the fly?

The late Muhammad Ali once said, "The best preparation for the unexpected is to stay ready, so you don't have to get ready." I remember watching him face opponents with all kinds of different fighting styles. No two were the same, yet Ali trained for the what-ifs. He didn't just prepare for what he could see—he trained for what he couldn't. That mindset is what made him a great champion.

As school board members, we're in a time when the future of public education feels uncertain. Policy changes, budget constraints and shifting community needs all require us to stay flexible and focused. Like Ali, we must be willing to train for the unexpected.

That's why I believe so strongly in the work of the Michigan Association of School Boards. MASB continues to provide tools that help us lead with confidence—through in-district workshops, webinars, conferences, institutes and publications like LeaderBoard. These aren't just events to earn EDU credits—they're opportunities to grow, sharpen our skills and prepare ourselves for whatever may come.

I've always held onto this simple truth: "It's better to have and not need, than to need and not have." That's what our training does for us. It gives us insight, perspective and tools we may not need today—but when the moment comes, we'll be glad we're ready.

There's an old proverb that reads, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise." Ants don't wait for instructions or emergencies—they prepare during the right season, stay diligent, and ensure survival during lean times. There is wisdom in preparation, in steady work and in quiet discipline.

So let us consider the ant's ways—and be wise. Let us not wait for the unexpected to catch us off guard. Let's stay ready.

As we continue serving our districts and communities, let's make the most of the opportunities available to us. Whether it's attending a workshop, joining a webinar, or simply taking time to read LeaderBoard, every step we take toward learning helps us grow stronger as leaders.

We don't have to wait for challenges to push us into action. By preparing now, we give ourselves—and those we serve—the best chance at success when the unexpected comes our way.

Let's stay open, stay engaged and stay ready.



**James B. Johnson**

*James is MASB's 2024-2025 President and can be reached at [revjbj66@comcast.net](mailto:revjbj66@comcast.net).*



# ASK BRAD: YOUR SCHOOL LAW QUESTIONS ANSWERED

By Brad Banasik, J.D.

EACH ISSUE OF MASB'S LEADERBOARD FEATURES HYPOTHETICAL SCHOOL LAW QUESTIONS THAT ARE SIMILAR TO THE QUESTIONS THAT THE MASB LEGAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT RECEIVES FROM MEMBERS. THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE LEGAL INFORMATION AND ENHANCE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS' UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL LAW ISSUES BY EXPLAINING HOW LAWS OR COURT CASES APPLY TO GIVEN SITUATIONS.

IF YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE ANSWERED IN A FUTURE ISSUE, PLEASE SUBMIT YOUR QUESTION TO COMMS@MASB.ORG.

## IS A SCHOOL BOARD COMMITTEE A 'PUBLIC BODY' UNDER THE OPEN MEETINGS ACT?

*After having multiple meetings involving volatile and contentious public comment, a school board established an ad hoc committee to review its public participation rules. The committee consisted of three board members and was charged with recommending new or amended rules that would assist in facilitating a more structured and orderly public comment period during meetings. When the discussion turned toward scheduling the committee meetings, the board president asserted that it was unnecessary to post a schedule of the meetings, because the committee membership was less than a quorum of the board, so the Open Meetings Act didn't apply. Another board member disagreed, claiming that the committee's charge and function likely made it subject to the requirements of OMA. Who is correct? Must the committee's meetings be posted as public meetings and comply with other OMA requirements?*

To settle this issue, the language of OMA must be considered. With exceptions, OMA generally requires that meetings, decisions and deliberations of a "public body" must be open to the public.<sup>i</sup> Thus, the threshold question is whether the ad hoc committee is a "public body" for the purposes of OMA. If it is, then the committee must conduct its business in meetings open to the public, take minutes and allow public comment at the meeting, and the meetings would be posted as "Committee Meetings" with at least 18 hours advance notice to the public. If the ad hoc committee is not a "public body," then its meetings could be conducted privately without notice or public access.

OMA defines a "public body" as any state or local legislative or governing body, including a board, commission, committee, subcommittee, authority, or council, that is empowered by state constitution, statute, charter, ordinance, resolution, or rule to exercise governmental or proprietary authority or perform a governmental or proprietary function.<sup>ii</sup>

The Michigan Supreme Court has articulated two pathways to determine whether a governmental entity is a "public body" under this definition: (1) the entity satisfies the above definition in its own right or (2) the entity is delegated authority from another public body.<sup>iii</sup>

School boards are covered by the first pathway, as they are local governing bodies that are self-governing and independent in regulating or controlling a political subdivision by making decisions effectuating or formulating public policy.

If a school board empowers a board committee to perform or exercise a governmental function, the committee becomes a public body and is subject to the requirements of OMA under the second pathway. Conversely, if a school board committee is purely advisory or only capable of making recommendations concerning the exercise of governmental authority and subsequently functions in that capacity, OMA does not apply to the committee.

There have been multiple court cases and opinions of the Michigan Attorney General that provide guidance to school boards on the issue of whether a committee consisting of less than a quorum of a board is a public body and subject to OMA. The following are summaries of a few select cases and opinions that are instructive:

- A school board charged its personnel and policy committee to review the district's method of evaluating school administrators and consider whether the length of administrative contracts should be adjusted. In a private meeting, the committee reached a recommendation to keep the status quo, which was not acted on by the school board when it was presented with the recommendation. It was determined that the committee was subject to OMA and violated the act by meeting in private.<sup>iv</sup>



- A school board created an advisory committee to study academic standards and athletic participation by gathering information, reviewing existing policies, and then making a recommendation to the board regarding eligibility standards for athletic participation. The committee was not given authority to alter existing policy or to create a new policy. A ruling concluded that the committee was not subject to OMA because it lacked decision-making authority and was only capable of making recommendations concerning the exercise of governmental authority.<sup>v</sup>
- A county board of commissioners created and authorized standing committees to review items of county business and determine whether specific items would be referred to the full board. It was found that the committees were subject to OMA due to exercising governmental authority by precluding various matters from reaching the full board for deliberation and decision.<sup>vi</sup>
- A city ordinance established a committee charged with evaluating applications for medical marijuana dispensary licenses, but the ordinance reserved final decision-making authority with the city council. The committee held 16 private meetings to score 65 applications, and the 15 highest-scoring applications were recommended to the city council, which granted licenses to those applications without any substantive deliberations or considering the other 50 applications. The Michigan Supreme Court held that the committee was a public body and failed to comply with OMA because it ranked applications and effectively decided which applications would receive licenses as a “de facto selector” even though it only had the power to make recommendations under the city ordinance.<sup>vii</sup>

As illustrated by these examples, the analysis of whether a school board committee is subject to OMA can be complicated and will be based on the specific facts relating to the creation of the committee and its function. Consequently, many school boards will conduct all their committee meetings as open meetings under OMA, because the benefit of having a private committee meeting doesn’t outweigh the possible risk of violating OMA.

If, however, the ad hoc committee in the hypothetical wants to be purely advisory and not function as a public body, it should identify preferred rule changes and recommend them to the full board while sharing all proposed changes that were considered by the committee without precluding any matters from reaching the full board for deliberations and decision-making. The board, in turn, must deliberate on the recommendations, avoiding a “rubber stamping” process when adopting the new or amended public participation rules.

<sup>i</sup> MCL 15.263(1) to (3)

<sup>ii</sup> MCL 15.262(a)

<sup>iii</sup> Booth Newspapers v Univ of Mich Bd of Regents, 444 Mich 211 (1993)

<sup>iv</sup> Schmiedicke v Clare School Bd, 228 Mich App 259 (1998)

<sup>v</sup> OAG, 1997, No. 6935

<sup>vi</sup> OAG, 1998, No. 7000

<sup>vii</sup> Pinebrook Warren, LLC v City of Warren, 2024 Mich Lexis 1455 (2024)



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**75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

# *Diamond Anniversary Member Giveback Program*

In honor of our Diamond Anniversary, we want to share the celebration with our valued members. To mark this milestone, MASB is offering up to \$750 back on select event registrations or services for your board in the upcoming year.

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1

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A transformative two-workshop series designed to empower school board members in navigating critical conversations about finding common ground and creating a strong sense of connection within their districts. This series provides a structured and collaborative platform for governance teams to engage in this important dialogue. Empower your school board with the tools to build a supportive and welcoming future.

2

### **Understanding Leadership Styles: Building Stronger Teams with the DISC Profile**

Discover the power of the DISC personality profile to enhance communication, collaboration and leadership within your school board. This workshop helps participants understand their own behavioral styles and those of their colleagues, fostering stronger relationships and more effective teamwork. Through engaging activities and personalized insights, board members will learn how to leverage their strengths, address challenges and create a governance team that works seamlessly together for the benefit of the district.

Ideal for boards seeking to improve communication and build a more cohesive, high-performing team.

3

### **Facilitated Superintendent Evaluation**

Would your board of education prefer to have an external facilitator assist when evaluating your superintendent? MASB's facilitation services are customized to the unique needs of each district, the board of education and superintendent.

4

### **Effective School Board Leadership: How to be a Better Board Member**

Participants will learn how to navigate interpersonal dynamics, communicate effectively and focus on student-centered decision-making. Through real-life examples, case scenarios and engaging discussions, attendees will develop skills to build trust, collaborate with stakeholders, and contribute to a positive and effective board culture. From teamwork to public relations and personal style, each component is explored so that there is a more collective understanding and agreement on how to improve the board's effectiveness.

Ideal for both new and experienced board members committed to improving their leadership impact and avoiding missteps that hinder progress.

5

### **Strategic Planning and Goal Setting**

MASB offers a wide range of strategic planning and goal-setting services. Each process is customized to meet your district's unique needs and challenges. From streamlined goal-setting sessions to a more comprehensive approach that includes full community input, use of strategic planning teams representing all stakeholders, and the use of district educational data. MASB facilitators have extensive experience working with K-12 planning processes and board/superintendent teams.

6

### **Teambuilding Workshop**

This workshop can be fully customized to your board's needs, helping you to work together effectively to achieve common goals. Topics include characteristics of effective board teams, group dynamics, identifying individual board behavior styles of each member, and learning how to use this awareness to build teamwork, communication skills for team members and handling conflict.



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## 1. DESCRIBE HOW DISC HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN YOUR DISTRICT?

The DISC assessment has proven to be highly effective for our leadership team. By enhancing communication through understanding each other's DISC profiles, our leaders have improved their communication techniques, leading to more effective and efficient interactions.

## 2. WHAT ARE YOUR DISTRICT'S MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES?

Absenteeism among students and staff is indeed a significant challenge for our district. Being an open-enrollment district, transportation sometimes becomes problematic for families. Like districts nationwide, we're also facing challenges with staff burnout.

## 3. ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WOULD GIVE TO ALL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS.

Take the DISC assessment and participate in a workshop with your team. It can be an invaluable tool for improved communication, team building, conflict resolution and personal growth.

## 4. YOUR BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT(S) AS A SCHOOL BOARD?

Open communication among members, largely due to the implementation of the DISC assessment. Our board has become more vocal at the table without fearing being misunderstood.

## 5. WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MASB PRODUCT OR SERVICE?

The workshops with the board—particularly those focused on the DISC assessment—and understanding the superintendent evaluation tool. These workshops have been instrumental in building a more cohesive, knowledgeable and effective school board.

## DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS



**Location:** Flint

**Schools:** 6

**Size:** 1,907

### Board Members and Terms of Service:

Deborah Roberts, **PRESIDENT**  
(2020–2026)

Jessie Cloman **VICE PRESIDENT**  
(2021–2023)

Ahmad Walker, **TREASURER**  
(2018–2025)

Jennifer Johnson, **SECRETARY**  
(2020–2028)

Tyra Coburn-Muldrew, **TRUSTEE**  
(2016–2026)

Kimberly Turner, **TRUSTEE**  
(2023–2026)

Cherese Bransford, **TRUSTEE**  
(2025–2030)

### Student Representatives (2024-2025 School Year)

Amyah Woodyard

Azariah Odell

**Website:** [hamadyhawks.net](http://hamadyhawks.net)

*If you would like to recommend your district to be featured in a future District Spotlight, please send an email to [comms@masb.org](mailto:comms@masb.org).*



# PLANNING FOR PROGRESS:

## *HOW STRATEGIC PLANS BENEFIT SCHOOL DISTRICTS*

*By Debbie Stair, M.N.M.L.*



## INTRODUCTION

In the ever-changing landscape of education, school districts must navigate numerous challenges, including fluctuating budgets, changing demographics, technological advancements and evolving educational standards/expectations. To effectively address these issues and ensure the success of students, educators and the broader community, school districts must develop and implement a strategic plan. The strategic plan serves as a roadmap that outlines clear objectives, establishes priorities and guides decision-making. This article will explore the importance of strategic planning in school districts, the key components of a successful plan and the benefits of its implementation.

## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED A STRATEGIC PLAN?

A strategic plan is a comprehensive document that outlines an organization's agreed-upon mission, vision, goals and action steps that are intended to last for a specified period of time, usually three to five years. In the context of school districts, a strategic plan serves as a guide for educational leaders, teachers, students, parents and stakeholders, aligning resources, policies and initiatives with overarching educational objectives. It encourages a proactive, forward-thinking approach that enables districts to anticipate future challenges and implement solutions that foster academic excellence and operational efficiency.

## WHY SCHOOL DISTRICTS NEED A STRATEGIC PLAN

### ESTABLISHING A CLEAR VISION AND MISSION

A well-developed strategic plan **provides a school district with a unified vision and mission**. A clear vision helps create a shared understanding of what the district aims to achieve, while the mission defines the fundamental purpose of the institution. The alignment of these two things ensures that every decision made and policy implemented supports the district's long-term educational goals. When all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, students, community members and partners—are working toward the same objectives, the likelihood of success increases dramatically.

### SETTING MEASURABLE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Strategic plans **establish specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals**. These goals help districts track progress and make necessary adjustments to enhance student achievement, teacher effectiveness and operational efficiency. Without clear goals, districts may struggle to monitor progress, evaluate success or determine areas for improvement.

### ALLOCATING RESOURCES EFFECTIVELY

Budget constraints and limited resources are common challenges for school districts. A strategic plan helps **prioritize expenditures**, ensuring that financial and human resources are allocated in ways that support student success. When boards align budgetary decisions with strategic goals, school districts can optimize spending and minimize waste. Proper resource allocation ensures that critical areas such as staff salaries and professional development, classroom supplies, infrastructure improvements and technology investments are adequately funded.

## ENHANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

A strategic plan holds school districts accountable for their actions and outcomes. It **provides a framework for measuring success** and evaluating progress. Transparency in planning and implementation fosters trust among parents, educators, students and the community, leading to greater engagement and support. When stakeholders can see how decisions are made and resources are allocated, they are more likely to support district initiatives.

## ADAPTING TO CHANGING EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Education is constantly evolving due to advancements in technology, changes in curriculum standards, and shifts in student demographics. A strategic plan **allows school districts to be proactive rather than reactive**, ensuring they remain adaptable to new challenges and opportunities. Whether addressing shifts in enrollment patterns or incorporating new teaching methodologies, having a structured plan enables districts to navigate these changes effectively.

## KEY COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLAN

### 1. Mission, Vision and Belief Statements

A strategic plan should begin with a clearly defined mission and vision that encapsulates the district's values, purpose and long-term aspirations. These statements serve as guiding principles for board policy development and decision-making at all levels.

### 2. Comprehensive Needs Assessment

A thorough analysis of current district performance, student outcomes, teacher effectiveness, infrastructure and community needs is essential. This assessment provides a data-driven foundation for identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). Understanding your district's starting point is crucial for setting realistic and achievable goals.

### 3. Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging parents, teachers, students, community members and partners throughout the strategic planning process ensures that diverse perspectives are considered. Strong communication channels help build consensus and maintain momentum throughout the implementation phase. Without broad support, even the best plans may struggle to gain traction. Take advantage of the opportunity to engage everyone throughout the process. This creates ownership of the process rather than asking for buy-in later in the process.

### 4. Strategic Goals and Priorities

Once needs are identified, school districts must establish high-level strategic goals that address critical areas such as student achievement, staff development and financial sustainability. Each goal should be broken down into actionable steps, ensuring that progress can be tracked and adjusted as necessary.

### 5. Action Plans and Implementation Strategies

A successful strategic plan must include detailed action steps, timelines and designated responsibilities. Implementation strategies should specify how goals will be met, including funding sources, staff/community involvement, and necessary training or professional development. A well-structured implementation plan ensures that objectives do not remain theoretical but are actively pursued.



## 6. Performance Metrics and Evaluation

To ensure accountability, strategic plans should include key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure progress toward each goal. Regular assessments and adjustments based on data-driven insights are crucial for continuous improvement. Schools must establish a culture of reflection and assessment to identify areas where interventions and/or course corrections may arise. Monitoring the progress towards goals is arguably the board's most important role in the process.

## CHALLENGES IN STRATEGIC PLANNING AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

### LACK OF STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

Resistance from teachers, parents or administrators can hinder strategic planning efforts. To overcome this, school districts should actively involve stakeholders from the beginning and create additional opportunities throughout the life of the plan. Maintaining open communication is critical. Once invited to be a part of the process, participants expect to see that their time and energy were well spent. Transparency and inclusion foster trust and cooperation, even in areas where there is bound to be disagreement.

### INSUFFICIENT DATA AND ANALYSIS

Effective strategic planning relies on accurate data, both quantitative and qualitative. School districts should invest in data collection tools and analytics to inform decision-making. Without solid data, efforts to improve student outcomes and resource allocation may fall short. While objective, quantitative data can be gathered through tools, subjective, qualitative data must be gathered through outreach to stakeholders. Using one set of data without the other gives an incomplete picture and may lead to faulty assumptions.

### INCONSISTENT IMPLEMENTATION

Even a well-designed strategic plan can fail if not properly executed. To implement a strategic plan effectively, start by clearly defining objectives and desired outcomes. Next, match responsibilities to team members, ensuring everyone understands their roles. Develop timelines with milestones to track progress and maintain momentum. Regularly monitor performance through measurable indicators; adjust the strategy as needed based on results and communicate progress to stakeholders to maintain engagement and support.

### CHANGING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

External factors such as new legislation, policy changes or economic downturns can impact the effectiveness of a strategic plan. Flexibility and periodic reassessment help districts adapt to unforeseen circumstances. Plans are living, breathing entities that sometimes need adjustments given new circumstances. Districts unwilling to make the necessary adjustments can find themselves frozen in place and lose the momentum needed to succeed.

## WE HAVE A PLAN, WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT FROM IT?

### 1. Improved Student Achievement

A strategic plan focused on academic excellence helps improve student outcomes by aligning curriculum, teaching methods and assessment practices with research-based strategies. When goals for student achievement are clearly defined and backed by evidence-based instructional practices, schools can more effectively support learners.

### 2. Stronger Teacher and Staff Development

By prioritizing professional development, a strategic plan ensures that educators receive the training and resources needed to enhance their effectiveness, leading to better student engagement and performance. Investing in teachers results in improved instructional quality and a more motivated workforce. Be sure to include professional development opportunities for all staff, helping them to see their role in moving the plan forward.

### 3. Enhanced Community and Parental Engagement

A well-communicated strategic plan encourages parental and community participation in school initiatives. Increased involvement fosters a stronger school-community relationship, leading to additional support for educational programs. When parents are engaged, students benefit from greater academic encouragement at home. Continued engagement throughout the life of the plan can create ambassadors for decisions in the future.

### 4. Greater Financial Stability

By identifying funding priorities and establishing clear financial strategies, a strategic plan helps school districts optimize resource allocation, reduce inefficiencies and secure additional funding through grants and partnerships. Effective financial planning ensures that districts can weather economic fluctuations without compromising student services.

### 5. Increased Adaptability to Change

With a clear framework in place, school districts can better anticipate and respond to challenges such as leadership transitions, enrollment fluctuations, technological advancements and policy changes, ensuring long-term sustainability and growth.

## WHO SHOULD LEAD YOUR PLAN? THE BENEFITS OF USING AN OUTSIDE FACILITATOR

### UNBIASED PERSPECTIVE, EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE

An outside facilitator brings an objective viewpoint – a fresh set of eyes, helping school districts identify challenges and opportunities without internal biases. This ensures that planning decisions are made based on data and best practices rather than personal or political influences. Facilitators specializing in strategic planning bring valuable experience and knowledge of successful strategies used in other districts. Their expertise can help streamline the planning process, making it more effective and aligned with proven educational strategies.



## EFFICIENT USE OF TIME AND RESOURCES

Having an outside facilitator allows school leaders to focus on their role as participants in the process, rather than managers of the process. This ensures that meetings are productive, discussions remain on track and actionable steps are clearly defined. It also allows the district to benefit from the subject area expertise of the staff members, now fully able to participate in the process, rather than leading it.

## FACILITATING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

An external facilitator can ensure that all voices are heard during the planning process, from teachers and parents to administrators and students. This inclusivity fosters greater buy-in and support for the strategic plan. It also allows stakeholders to share their real feelings without fear of retaliation. This allows the plan to be built on a solid base.

## STRONGER IMPLEMENTATION AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

A facilitator can help set up accountability structures, ensuring that the strategic plan moves beyond planning and into effective execution. Their continued involvement can also help districts stay on track with their goals and adjust as needed.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of strategic planning in school districts cannot be overstated. A well-developed and effectively implemented strategic plan serves as a guiding force, helping districts navigate challenges, allocate resources efficiently and ultimately enhance student success. By establishing clear goals, engaging stakeholders and maintaining accountability, school districts can create a more structured and sustainable educational environment. Strategic planning is an ongoing process that, when done effectively, leads to continuous improvement and long-term success.



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# *Mastering Change:*

Coaching as the Lever for  
Transformation in Education

*By Tovah Sheldon, Ph.D.*



## Introduction

A few years ago, I came across “Master of Change” by Brad Stulberg, and it couldn’t have landed at a more fitting time. Personally and professionally, I was navigating big transitions—shifts in my role in education, family and health challenges, and the dizzying pace of change unfolding all around us. Change wasn’t just happening to me; it was happening within me. I’m sure you’ve felt this too, the way life’s only constant seems to be change itself.

But what is change, really? And how can we define it in a way that’s meaningful for both our work in education and our own lives?

The truth is, change isn’t just an event—it’s a process, a force, sometimes a companion we didn’t invite but who shows up anyway. We experience it personally, collectively, gradually and/or all at once.

When change is everywhere and all the time, we need ways to make sense of it. For me, having a skilled coach beside me was a game-changer—but I’ll come back to that shortly. First, let’s zoom out and explore change through different lenses. I believe that when we do this, we’ll see the key isn’t to resist change, but to master it—and the right coaching can help us do exactly that.

## Understanding change through allostasis and rugged flexibility

To lead well through change, we first need to understand it more deeply. For decades, we leaned on the concept of homeostasis—the belief that systems work best when they return to a stable balance. I get it, we crave stability in life. But let’s be honest: in today’s complex world, especially in education, “going back to normal” isn’t always possible—or even desirable.

Instead, modern research introduces a more realistic, helpful model: allostasis. Unlike homeostasis, allostasis acknowledges that stability can be maintained by continuous adaptation. It is about achieving stability through change—adapting and creating a “new normal” as circumstances shift. That idea really resonates with me, especially as I reflect on the sheer volume of change we all experience. Stulberg (2022) points out that the average person encounters 36 life-disrupting events. Think about that: a big disruption roughly every 18 to 24 months. I know you’re likely already doing the math for your own life—and yes, it adds up quickly.

In education, where change comes from shifting policies, technologies, student needs and societal pressures, it’s essential that we, as leaders, develop mindsets, skills and identities that help us not just endure change but use it as a catalyst for growth.

One concept Stulberg offers that’s helped me tremendously is rugged flexibility. It’s about holding firm to essential values—such as equity, student success and instructional excellence—while remaining open to new methodologies, strategies and approaches that better serve the changing needs of schools. I’ve found that rugged flexibility doesn’t just help me as a leader, it creates space for innovation and resilience across entire systems. And while it’s powerful on its own, there are additional tools we can use to navigate change with even more clarity and intention.

## Mindsets, behaviors and identities that support change

Change is inevitable, but how we respond to it is where choice comes in. In my own leadership journey, I’ve realized that how we navigate change is shaped by an interplay of mindset, behaviors and identity.

**Mindset:** The lens through which we view the world. Certain mindsets have helped me—and many leaders I’ve coached—lean into change with confidence:

- A growth mindset reminds us that intelligence and capacity aren’t fixed—we can grow (Dweck, 2006).
- Embracing the impermanence of life helps us find comfort amid uncertainty or ambiguity (Dalai Lama, Tutu, & Abrams, 2016).
- A curiosity mindset pushes us to ask deeper questions and explore creative connections (MacKenzie & Bathurst-Hunt, 2018; Vance, 2022).
- An innovator’s mindset reframes challenges as opportunities and encourages bold thinking (Courois, 2015).

In my experience, watching leaders live these mindsets—and being coached to adopt them myself—has shaped how I see and respond to complexity.

**Behaviors:** Mindset alone isn’t enough. Our actions need to align. One of my favorite reminders comes from Henry Ford: “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”

Here are three behaviors I encourage all leaders to practice and that I do myself:

1. **Prioritize regular self-reflection.** Create time to ask, what truly matters to me? What am I doing that is helping or hindering my transformation?
2. **Foster authentic human connections.** Have real conversations—not just surface-level exchanges.
3. **Rely on intentional, defined processes** aligned to long-term values for effective decision making even when short-term pressures push on us all the time.

## Take a quick pulse-check:

How often have you lived these behaviors recently? Go to your calendar. Start to examine the frequency and depth to which each behavior—reflection, connection and processes for choice-making—has occurred. How many of these behaviors did you do in the past week? Do you need to go back further than a week? How about the past month? Now look at your calendar going forward, can you block out time to intentionally ensure you are practicing these behaviors? Remember, what you pay attention to gets done.

OK, so we know behavior is a complex product of thinking, feeling, values, historical experience and context. Behaviors directly affect outcomes, and some behaviors, like the ones named above, support mastering change more than others. Behavior is a choice!

**Identity:** Finally, how do you see yourself? Do you view yourself as a change agent—a leader with the power to influence meaningful transformation? Titles might hint at this role, but the deeper driver is your core values. When we internalize identities like “architect of transformation,” we bring energy and courage to the work ahead.

Mindsets fuel behaviors, behaviors reinforce identity, and identity acts as a multiplier in our change journey. Yet, no one leads change alone. Sustainable transformation is also shaped by context, culture and community—external forces we’ll explore next.

## External factors: The role of context and professional learning

Even the most adaptable leaders can’t create lasting change in isolation. Schools are living ecosystems influenced by politics, funding and community expectations. That’s why personal adaptability needs to be paired with structural and cultural support.

Cynthia Coburn’s work (2003) reminds us that context matters when scaling or sustaining change. Schools don’t operate in a vacuum—they’re part of interconnected systems. As leaders, we must account for both internal and external influences as we design and evolve change efforts.

But here’s the thing: navigating change in education isn’t just about implementing an initiative—it’s about scaling it in a way that’s both meaningful and sustainable. And that’s where many well-intentioned people and efforts typically fall short.

## Scaling change in schools: Depth before breadth

The challenge in education is not just adapting to change but also scaling it effectively. Coburn challenges us to rethink what it means to scale. It’s not just about how fast or far an idea spreads—it’s about how deeply it takes root. Coburn (2023) claims scalable and sustainable change rests on three key principles:

- **Depth:** Ensuring that shifts in practice are deeply understood and embedded individually and/or in small groups before expanding them across a larger system.
- **Pacing:** Recognizing that real transformation takes time. Avoid rushing for quick wins that don’t last. Respect when timing is out of your control, but don’t stop moving either!
- **Breadth/cultural integration:** True change aligns with the values and behaviors of the entire organization—and is done with people, not to them.

I often hear myths like “if a change didn’t go systemwide, it wasn’t successful,” or “if it didn’t happen on schedule, it failed.” But real impact doesn’t always follow neat timelines or show up in spreadsheets. Sometimes, helping one person, one team or one school take a transformative step forward is enough to spark a ripple effect. By utilizing a broader definition of scalability—as well as debunking these myths about scalability of change, sustainability and impact—individuals like school leaders, groups like boards of education, and districts or communities can authentically navigate change together. And this is where coaching

becomes invaluable—it creates the space for leaders (with all different titles) to think deeply, plan intentionally and navigate change in ways that stick.

## Professional learning to address change

Navigating change isn’t just an individual challenge—it’s a collective one. That’s why professional learning is so essential. In education, where complexity is the norm, leaders need high-quality learning experiences to strengthen their capacity to lead through uncertainty.

Jay Bennett (2023) spotlighted the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning, which emphasize that learning should be ongoing, collaborative, embedded in daily work and data-informed. These principles don’t just apply to teachers and students—they’re critical for leaders, too.

While workshops, courses and peer learning communities all play important roles, in my experience, coaching is one of the most powerful forms of professional learning. Coaching provides personalized, ongoing, just-in-time support that helps leaders build resilience, sharpen strategies and sustain meaningful change.

## Coaching for change: The power of human connection

Coaching has been a game-changer for me—not just professionally, but personally. At its core, coaching is a relationship built on trust, reflection and intentional dialogue. It’s about helping leaders like you and me surface ideas, challenge assumptions, and strengthen both mindset and action.

I draw from the work of researchers like Costa, Garmston, Knight, Aguilar and others, but here’s my personal take:

- Coaching is an **intentional set of conversations** leveraging structured but authentic dialogue, growing an individual’s self-reflection, exploration of ideas, and the development of new perspectives and skills.
- Coaching occurs in a **one-on-one environment, establishing a trusting relationship** and safe space to take risks and be honest. It is also customized based on the unique context (district, community, etc.) and needs of the individual.
- Coaching takes **time** but is most likely to sustain changes in behavior and mindset in a way that exceeds stand-alone professional development or other forms of professional learning.

From my own lived experience and research, I’ve seen four clear benefits that coaching brings to the change process:

1. By talking with another person, thinking is made visible, more real and more actionable.
2. Repeated talking with a trusted person over time increases a person’s internal accountability and external sustainability of a transformation at multiple levels.
3. By engaging with others of various viewpoints and perspectives, new ideas are more likely to be generated. Exposure to different viewpoints challenges assumptions and encourages creative solutions.



4. By spending time in reflection with others, learning deepens, beliefs and mindsets solidify into behaviors, and effective decision-making processes increase.

Also, good coaching is customized to your unique role, your district and your community. And while it takes time, it creates lasting shifts—far beyond what stand-alone professional development can do.

I know, I've lived it. I've been coached and have coached others for years. During my time as the Director of Learning Services and Instruction at the Jackson County Intermediate School District, with goals as a leader and a strategic vision for innovation, I found I wanted and needed a trusted person to push my mindset, co-build action and accountability for small steps of change, and much more. So, I invested in an external coach for myself as well as coaching for some leaders on my team. The results? Tangible, meaningful transformation—not just in me, but across the entire organization.

Today, I'm a champion of **Leadership Coaching for Innovation**, a model designed specifically for education leaders managing complex change and striving for innovation that will make a difference in our schools. Grounded in research and tailored to each leader's unique context, this coaching approach has helped me—and many others—harness change as a lever for positive impact.

## Conclusion

Change in education isn't just inevitable—it's essential. But it doesn't have to feel overwhelming. When we understand models like allostasis, adopt the right mindsets and engage in intentional behaviors, we start turning disruption into progress.

And when we add coaching to the equation? That's when things really shift. Coaching provides the reflection, structure and human connection that helps leaders like us move from reacting to change to mastering it.

I've lived this journey. I've seen how coaching has helped me—and countless others—build resilience, deepen purpose, and lead with clarity, even in uncertain times.

So, here's my invitation to you: Don't just navigate change. Learn to master it—with support, with intention, and with a coach by your side. Because when you do, change becomes more than something to survive. It becomes your greatest opportunity to lead, grow and transform your community.



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# Navigating the Shifting Sands:

**How Professional Development Empowers Educational Leaders in an Era of Constant Change**

*By Daniel Feinberg, J.D.*





The well-worn adage, "may you live in interesting times," carries more weight now than perhaps ever before. Regardless of individual political leanings, a palpable sense of transition permeates our socio-political landscape. This era of "interesting times" inevitably translates into a cascade of evolving priorities and shifting policies that ripple through every sector, including education. For school board members tasked with the profound responsibility of guiding their districts and ensuring a high-quality learning experience for all students, these constant fluctuations present both challenges and opportunities. The ability to not only understand but also effectively adapt to these changes is paramount, and professional development emerges as an indispensable tool in equipping these leaders for the complexities of this dynamic environment. The information ecosystem surrounding these changes is vast and often overwhelming. A relentless barrage of perspectives and opinions emanates from a multitude of sources – broadcast media, podcasts, cable news, the internet, and the ubiquitous realm of social media. Discerning signals from noise, identifying credible information, and understanding the implications for local educational contexts can feel like a herculean task. Every development is often presented as either a monumental triumph or an unmitigated disaster. In this environment of heightened rhetoric and polarized viewpoints, the crucial responsibility of school board members to remain grounded in facts and objective analysis becomes even more critical.

Whether individual board members personally agree or disagree with the changes that arise, their primary obligation remains steadfast: to strategically adapt to safeguard and enhance the educational opportunities for the students within their district. It is crucial to reiterate a fundamental principle of school governance: individual board members, acting alone, lack the authority to enact policy. Policy decisions and changes are the exclusive purview of the collective board, requiring at least a majority vote. Therefore, the ability of board members to engage in robust, informed, and civil deliberations during their meetings is contingent upon their individual preparedness. This preparedness stems from diligent research, an understanding of the issues at hand, and the capacity to clearly and cogently articulate their positions.

## **Policy and Understanding**

The Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) plays a vital role in providing foundational support for school boards navigating this complex landscape. Our resources and guidance offer invaluable assistance in understanding the broader context of change and its potential impact on local districts. Policy support services, like those offered by Neola, help boards establish robust frameworks for responding to both current and anticipated policy shifts. While policies rooted in federal or state law may offer limited room for interpretation, a deep understanding of the board's role in both creating and managing these policies empowers members to communicate these mandates more effectively and transparently with their communities. This clarity of communication fosters trust and understanding, crucial elements in navigating potentially contentious issues.

## **Strategic Planning for Adaptability**

Furthermore, having a well-defined strategic plan enables the board to identify the district's core priorities, chart a course for achieving its goals, and critically, build in mechanisms for flexibility and responsiveness to change. An effective strategic planning process facilitates the periodic review and potential revision of the district's mission and vision, ensuring they remain relevant and aligned with the evolving educational landscape. It establishes a structured approach for setting both short-term and long-term objectives, and crucially, it develops a clear plan for implementation, ongoing evaluation, and continuous improvement. By embedding these processes within the district's operational framework, the board cultivates an inherent capacity to adapt and thrive amidst the inevitable currents of change.

## **Collaborative Leadership for Effective Governance**

Beyond policy guidance and strategic frameworks, professional development opportunities, such as board workshops offered by organizations like MASB, are instrumental in equipping board members with the interpersonal and collaborative skills necessary to navigate challenging times effectively. Workshops focused on "Leading with Civility" or "Working as an Effective Governance Team" underscore the profound value of diverse perspectives and equip board members with strategies for fostering respectful dialogue and constructive disagreement. In an era often characterized by division and polarization, the ability to engage in civil discourse, to actively listen to differing viewpoints, and to build consensus around solutions is more critical than ever. These workshops help create supportive structures and processes within the board that enable them to lead their districts through complex issues with unity and purpose.



When the board convenes to develop its position on a particular issue, it is essential to adopt a long-term perspective, responding to the underlying issue rather than being swayed by the immediate emotional fervor of the moment. Often, initial reports and pronouncements lack the full context, and subsequent information can significantly alter the understanding of the situation. The recent "Dear Colleague" letter addressing DEI issues under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 serves as a compelling example. The initial letter generated significant discussion and, at times, confusion. However, the subsequent release of a comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document several weeks later provided much-needed clarity and nuance to the initial guidance. This underscores the importance of patience, critical analysis, and a willingness to allow for the emergence of more complete information before formulating a final position. By diligently following these steps – engaging in ongoing professional development, leveraging the resources and

guidance provided by organizations like MASB, critically evaluating information sources, and adopting a thoughtful, long-term perspective – school board members can build a robust understanding of the evolving policy landscape at the state and federal levels. This informed understanding, coupled with a deep awareness of their local communities' interests and values, empowers them to engage in reasoned deliberations and ultimately enact policies that not only comply with legal requirements but also align with the overarching goal of providing a high-quality and equitable education for all students. In these "interesting times," professional development is not merely an option; it is an essential investment in the capacity of educational leaders to navigate the shifting sands of change and ensure a stable and thriving future for their schools and communities.



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# *Leading With Civility:* **Changing the Conversation**



Heated debates surrounding school policies and curriculum are increasingly common, creating tension between parents, administrators and board members.

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A conceptual image showing a large hand at the top pulling several black strings. These strings are attached to the top corners of several vintage-style television sets. The TV sets are arranged in a row, and each one has a human face in place of a screen. The faces are mostly obscured by the TV frames. The background is a solid, muted orange-brown color.

# Navigating News from Washington:

*A Guide for School Board Members*

*By Sasha Pudelski*

As news from Washington continues to permeate the messages you receive from district staff, fellow board members and members of the community, it is important to remember to take what you're hearing and reading seriously, but not necessarily literally. Just because something sounds good or bad doesn't mean anything good or bad has happened. Just because a headline is concerning, doesn't mean you have to be concerned. There is more noise and more headlines out of D.C. now than ever before, and as we educate our students to be intelligent consumers of media, it is just as important that we apply and model the same skills and behaviors.

As a longtime lobbyist for AASA, I always try to temper my reaction to emails and headlines. I have learned the hard way that over reacting to things without having a full, measured picture can be a disservice to our members. Here's how I recommend approaching the changes that you may read or hear about coming from Washington.

1. Am I reading news or am I reading a rumor—is this something that has been reported the same way in multiple outlets?
2. Is there consensus from knowledgeable individuals about the impact of any changes underfoot? What are my members of Congress saying? What are the national groups or entities I trust saying? What are my attorneys saying? Do I need more information to assess the seriousness of this news?
3. Are these proposed changes temporary or permanent changes? The latter is a fundamentally important question to be asking as all three branches of government grapple with a slew of executive orders, lawsuits and swift operational shifts in federal agencies.
4. Finally, and most importantly: am I sure this will impact my students or my school community today or in the future? And then, what can I do to make sure it does or doesn't?

Of course even if your district may not be impacted by what's happening directly, what if you want to do something—supportive or oppositional—to what's happening in Washington? What are your options? What can you as a school board member do? This is when it's important to remember that you are one of the most powerful constituents who walk through the door of Congressional offices. There are few individuals who represent such big systems as our public schools and who are responsible for so many individuals and students within those systems. You have an opportunity to lean into the privilege of your public role by engaging with lawmakers who can make a difference in Washington or in educating your community about these changes. For some board members there are advantages in being passive and cautious, but for others, the positives of proactive advocacy and communication far outweigh the negatives.

No matter how you individually choose to respond, remember that your district's path is forward. Schools must still open. Kids will still show up to be educated. Your district will continue to have to follow a host of federal, state and local requirements and be accountable to your community for the results. Your job is to make sure to stay focused on the things that matter for the students, educators and families in your district—at the end of the day, systems will adjust and adjudicate and you and your board members will implement the new normal—whatever it is.



### **Sasha Pudelski**

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# Using the **DISC MODEL** Through Changing **BOARD DYNAMICS**

*By Christy Conn*

Board composition often changes following an election, bringing new opportunities and challenges. Local school boards must be willing and able to adapt to fluctuating board dynamics so they can best serve their districts. Using a behavioral assessment, such as the DISC model, is a great way to navigate these shifting tides.

The DISC assessment helps teams understand diverse communication styles and personality traits. Used in a variety of groups over several decades, DISC can help board members leverage insights, anticipate reactions to change, adjust strategies and foster collaboration. Personally, I think our board's DISC workshop helped open all of our eyes to what makes each of us tick.

## **What does DISC stand for?**

Through a series of specific questions, the DISC model categorizes behavior into four primary personality styles:

**D – Dominance:** Results-oriented, assertive and competitive. D-style individuals thrive on challenges and are driven by outcomes.

**I – Influence:** Social, enthusiastic and persuasive. I-style individuals are motivated by relationships, recognition and collaboration.

**S – Steadiness:** Dependable, calm and patient. S-style individuals value stability, harmony and support.

**C – Conscientiousness:** Analytical, detail-oriented and precise. C-style individuals seek accuracy, quality and structure.

While everyone can exhibit all four styles, most people have one or two dominant traits that shape their behavior. It's important to note there is not a "right" or "wrong" DISC profile. While some profiles may lend themselves nicely to a certain type of work (for example,

accountants should have a high level of detail orientation or a "C" profile), all humans are unique; therefore, understanding how each person's profile fits within the whole board team is key.

## **Maximizing your board profiles**

Understanding the strengths each profile brings to the board table can maximize efficiency and enhance cohesion. Here are some practical examples of how to apply the DISC model:

## **Create committees strategically**

Assign roles and responsibilities that align with each style's strengths. It may be best to have representation from each style to have a well-rounded team. Consider these style tendencies when creating committees:

- D styles can drive initiatives and lead project milestones.
- I styles are natural cheerleaders who can boost morale and spread positivity.
- S styles are great at ensuring broad cohesion and supporting those who feel uncertain.
- C styles excel at quality control, process documentation and risk analysis.

When each person feels they are contributing in a meaningful way, engagement and trust increase, even during change. Consider the best profile mix for the project at hand.

## **Balance board dynamics**

Sometimes, change will bring underlying board tensions to the surface. Use DISC insights to make communication more effective and aid in collaboration.

For example, if a board committee is full of D and I styles, there may be plenty of energy and ideas, but little follow-through or structure. Bringing in an S or C style can help ground the group and add stability. Similarly, if a board leans heavily toward S and C styles, change may feel paralyzing. The perspective of a D or I style could help push the board forward with urgency and optimism.

Encourage appreciation of diverse styles by facilitating board-building conversations or training sessions around DISC. When board members understand each other's behavioral tendencies, they are more likely to collaborate effectively. Again, no style is wrong, each has its own strengths and benefits. Being aware of these traits is what is important.

### Navigate conflict during change

Change can often bring tension, but the DISC model can help de-escalate conflict. Using the DISC model to identify what each style needs during moments of uncertainty is important:

- D styles need autonomy and progress—give them action steps.
- I styles need connection—make time for open dialogue.
- S styles need reassurance—be present and available.
- C styles need clarity—offer structured updates.

When board members recognize the need to flex their styles, real progress toward action items and solutions can be made. For example, encouraging a D-style person to slow down and listen, or supporting a C-style person in navigating ambiguity can help the board not only understand one another, but move forward efficiently. While DISC is a powerful tool during times of change, it also contributes to long-term cultural health. Boards that understand behavioral differences are more adaptive, empathetic and resilient.

### Understanding response to change and communication preferences

Each DISC style approaches change differently. Knowing this helps board members communicate more effectively and anticipate potential friction points within their board.

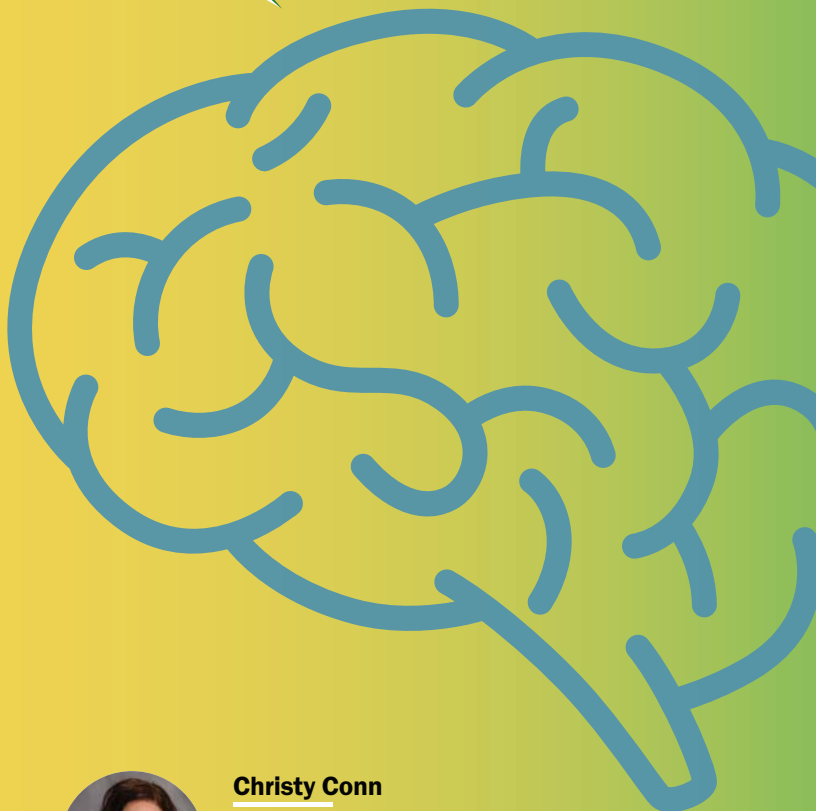
- D-style responses: D-style individuals often embrace change if it promises improvement or advancement; however, if the change feels like a loss of control or slows down progress, they may push back or attempt to take charge prematurely. When communicating with D types, focus on the vision, goals and bottom-line impact. Keep it brief and action-oriented.
- I-style responses: I-style individuals may initially react with enthusiasm, especially if change involves new people, ideas or opportunities for visibility; however, if they feel left out of the process or unclear on expectations, their energy can wane quickly. When communicating with I types, emphasize how the change fosters collaboration and new beginnings. Keep it conversational and engaging.
- S-style responses: S-style individuals may resist change at first, as it disrupts their sense of routine and security. These folks need time to adjust and appreciate a thoughtful, reassuring approach that shows how the change will benefit the board. When communicating with S types, highlight continuity, support structures, and how the anticipated change aligns with board values. Be empathetic and steady.

- C-style responses: C-style individuals prefer well-planned, data-backed changes. Sudden or unstructured shifts can cause anxiety. They need clear information, logic and time to analyze the impact before fully committing. When communicating with C types, share data, timelines and well-documented plans. Be precise and ready to answer detailed questions.

### Moving forward with understanding

Change does not have to unravel your board—it can be a catalyst for growth. By using the DISC model as a lens for understanding behavior, board members can manage change with greater empathy, clarity and impact. Personally, I found myself enlightened by the behavioral traits identified for my fellow board members and cabinet team. The DISC results gave us a nice data point as to why each of us may behave the way that we do. Recognizing what each board member needs, valuing diverse contributions, and leading with both strategy and heart is key.

Curious about your own DISC profile? To learn more about the DISC assessment, to understand your profile as well as those of your fellow board members, consider booking a DISC Board Workshop with MASB. Reach out to Debbie at [dstair@masb.org](mailto:dstair@masb.org) for more information.



**Christy Conn**

*Christy is an MASB consultant and serves as the Treasurer of Howell Public Schools' Board of Education. She can be reached at [christy@cconnllc.com](mailto:christy@cconnllc.com).*



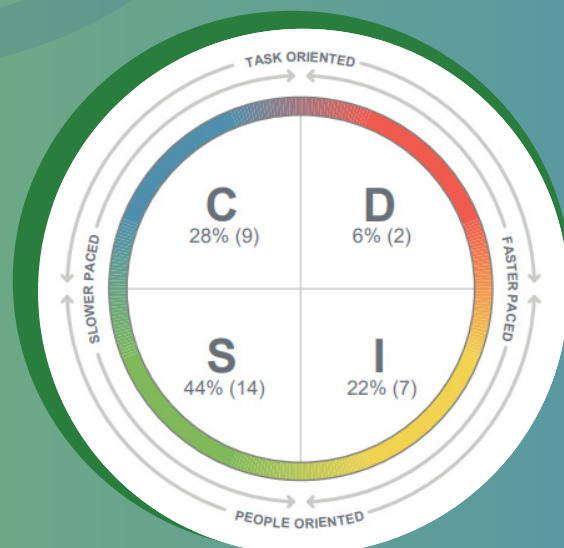
# GUESS THAT DISC PROFILE!

Scan the QR code to guess which DISC profile goes with which MASB employee and win 10 EDUs.



- D** styles can drive initiatives and lead project milestones.
- I** styles are natural cheerleaders who can boost morale and spread positivity.
- S** styles are great at ensuring broad cohesion and supporting those who feel uncertain.
- C** styles excel at quality control, process documentation and risk analysis.

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The background of the page features a collage of financial data visualizations. At the top right, there is a bar chart with three series in blue, orange, and red, showing data from January to June. Below it is a large stacked area chart with four layers in orange, yellow, teal, and dark teal, spanning from January to November. A magnifying glass is positioned over the middle of this stacked area chart, focusing on the data for April through September. To the left of the magnifying glass is a line chart with two series, one blue and one yellow, plotted from January to September. At the bottom, there are two more bar charts: one with blue bars from August to September, and another with blue bars from August to December, labeled 'Bookkeeping'.

# MANY METRICS NEEDED

to Understand Public Education  
in Michigan and in the Nation

*By Michael F. Rice, Ph.D.*

Measuring student achievement is important as we work to improve our education system. Metrics help identify both our successes and our opportunities for improvement.

But we must keep in mind that education is complex. No one goal and no one metric define public education. That's why we have eight goals in Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan and multiple metrics for most goals. Like the human body, education is simply too complicated to be distilled into a single metric. We don't need to just know our weight. Blood pressure is important. So too are cholesterol levels. As we have a national conversation about the changing educational landscape, we need to avoid the temptation to judge an educational system by any single metric.

In Michigan, data show progress in different ways for different goals of the Top 10 Strategic Education Plan. Credit goes to students, educators, families, support staff, school board members and communities—as well as to legislators and the governor for investing in our schools more substantially in recent years.

Here are a few of the accomplishments we have achieved together:

- Last school year, Michigan's graduation rate reached a record high. The 2024 four-year graduation rate improved to the highest level since the state adopted the federal formula for calculating the rate in 2008. The rate of 82.8% increased from 81.8% in 2023 and has increased the past three years. The new data represent progress toward Goal 5 of the Top 10 Strategic Education Plan, to increase the percentage of all high school graduates.
- Michigan students' participation in rigorous Advanced Placement (AP) courses and performance on AP exams has also reached record levels. In the past two years, AP participation in Michigan has increased by 12.3% and we saw record levels in the numbers of students taking AP courses; number of AP courses taken; students scoring a 3, 4 or 5 (scores often generating college credit), and AP tests receiving a 3, 4 or 5 score. These improvements contribute to Goal 4 of the Top 10 Strategic Education Plan, to expand secondary learning opportunities for students.
- Other metrics that demonstrate progress toward Goal 4 include those related to Career and Technical Education. In the past three years, Michigan increased its CTE enrollment each year, to 112,156 students, a 9% rise. And the number of CTE completers—students who took an entire program of study rather than a single CTE course or two—increased by almost 8,400 students, or 19%, to 52,625, a record for the state.
- The percentage of Michigan adults ages 25–64 with a credential beyond a high school diploma is also at an historic level. That percentage has reached 51.8% as the state works toward the governor's Sixty by 30 Goal (60% of adults ages 25–64 with a college degree or skill certificate by 2030) and Goal 6 of the Top 10 Strategic Education Plan, to increase the percentage of adults with a postsecondary credential.

- Michigan students last year performed better than the previous year in most grades and in most subjects on state assessments, according to 2024 M-STEP and SAT/PSAT scores. The percentage of students who scored proficient or above increased on 13 of 20 tests, remained the same on one test and decreased on six tests. These results continue the progress from 2023, when Michigan students improved on 15 of 20 assessments. Despite these improvements, results show more work is needed to advance students' reading and writing skills. The percentage of students at or above proficiency on the English Language Arts tests improved in grades 5, 7 and 8, remained the same in grade 6, and decreased in grades 3, 4 and 11.

There's a plan to improve reading and writing achievement. Last fall, the state legislature passed and the governor signed into law the most important education-related legislation in Michigan in two decades. The laws for which MDE advocated strongly will require that local school districts choose from approved screeners and progress-monitoring reading assessments and intervene with students found to have characteristics of dyslexia. Strengthened pre-service and in-service literacy training for educators, the requirement to select from among high-quality literacy materials, and a new coaching model will also help to improve literacy teaching and learning. In addition, 3,600 educators in the state have finished Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training in the science of reading, with another 6,500 working toward completion. MDE is asking the legislature to make LETRS training mandatory for K-5 teachers.

We're asking for additional partnership with our local school board members in advocating with the legislature and governor to continue to address the teacher shortage in areas of need (Goal 7), to help fund CTE expansion in CTE deserts (Goal 4), and to help improve early literacy achievement (Goal 2).

Many of these legislative priorities, among others, are included in a letter I sent to legislators at the beginning of 2025.

As I mentioned, education is a lot more complicated than a single metric. We need to continue working toward the eight goals. If a human body can't be defined by a single metric, surely something far more complicated—a system of education—can't either.



### **Michael F. Rice, Ph.D.**

*Dr. Michael F. Rice has been Michigan's state superintendent since 2019. He previously served 17 years as a local district superintendent—12 as superintendent in Kalamazoo and five as superintendent in Clifton, New Jersey.*



# The Red Carpet Treatment

Onboarding a new superintendent requires careful planning, clear communication, ongoing support

By Jay Bennett, M.Ed.

Onboarding a new superintendent is an important process for any school district that can really set the tone for the future, so it's important to get it right. Let's think about how a school board can make sure their new superintendent feels welcomed, prepared and ready to lead.

When the superintendent is hired, the board should make every effort to offer a warm welcome to the district's new leader. This could include a letter, some introductory emails, and maybe even a welcome package with all the essential info about the district. It's also an ideal time to set up a meeting between the superintendent and the school board to chat about expectations, goals and how the onboarding process will go. And hey, maybe throw in some district merch—everyone loves a comfy branded fleece or district mug for their coffee or tea!

Before the superintendent officially starts, make sure they have access to key documents like the district's strategic plan, recent board meeting minutes, organizational charts and policy manuals. This helps them get a feel for the district's operations and priorities.

## Introducing: Everything!

Once the superintendent is on board, a formal orientation session is a great way to introduce them to the district's mission, vision, values and strategic goals. This session should also cover the district's history, culture and community demographics. Taking tours of the district's community, schools and facilities can help the superintendent get a sense of the physical environment and meet key staff and community members.

"My suggestion to all boards and new superintendents is to meet early and often those first few months, travel the district together, host meetings, and invite people to discuss positive actions everyone can take to move the district forward," said Lansing Public Schools Superintendent Ben Shuldiner. "Even if the new superintendent came up through the ranks of the district, the role is much different than any other within the school system. Having the board make the initial introductions, set up meetings, and be a cheerleader for their newly hired employee goes a long way in getting off on the right foot and setting up the superintendent and school district for success."



Meeting with these constituents is crucial. Encouraging the superintendent to actively engage with the community by attending public meetings, participating in civic events, and maintaining open lines of communication with parents and the community is important. Developing a communication plan that includes regular updates through newsletters, social media and other channels helps build trust and support. The superintendent should also schedule meetings with district administrators, principals, teachers, support staff and local leaders. These meetings are all about building relationships and understanding the expectations and concerns of different groups.

“When I first started, my board was gracious in inviting me to multiple community events and even setting up meetings with local leaders like the mayor, city council members, nonprofit executives and business owners,” Shuldiner recalled. “Having the board welcome me and support me publicly allowed for a sense of goodwill to surround my first few months. This then allowed me to work closely with the community much earlier in my tenure than if I had to make those relationships by myself.”

### **A community primer**

Attending community events and school functions also can help the superintendent start building a presence and rapport within the community. Just remind them that the mascot costume is optional—unless they really want to make an impression!

Access to relevant district data and reports—like student achievement data, budget reports and enrollment trends—is essential for the superintendent to understand the district’s status and identify areas for improvement. Arranging for them to meet with the district’s data analyst or a designated administrator to discuss the data in detail is a good move. And if the data looks like a foreign language, MASB has several CBA opportunities that may be of interest to your new superintendent.

Shadowing experienced administrators—such as assistant superintendents or principals—provides valuable insights into the district’s operations and helps the superintendent understand the day-to-day challenges and opportunities. Assigning a mentor, like a retired superintendent or an experienced administrator, can offer guidance and support during the initial transition period.

Identifying professional development needs and arranging for the superintendent to attend relevant training sessions, workshops or conferences is beneficial. This can include leadership training, financial management and curriculum development. Encouraging the superintendent to join professional organizations and networks helps them stay updated on best practices and connect with peers. Plus, it’s a great way to collect more conference swag—who doesn’t love free pens?

Dr. Brian Davis, professional learning consultant with the Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators (MASA), believes that having a mentor is essential for a new superintendent.

“The transition into district leadership comes with complex challenges—building a strong governance team with the board of education; implementing a shared vision; providing safe, secure and predictable learning environments to foster growth in student achievement; understanding community expectations; and all while ensuring the day-to-day operations occur,” Davis said. “A strong mentor provides guidance, insight and a network of support to help a new leader reflect on their current leadership dispositions, find opportunities for growth, and accelerate their effectiveness.”

Davis noted that organizations like MASA offer structured leadership coaching and professional development designed specifically for new superintendents. “MASA’s coaching and mentoring program pairs new superintendents with experienced leaders who provide strategic coaching and problem-solving support.”

### **A development plan**

Encouraging the superintendent to pursue continuous improvement and professional growth by setting long-term goals and participating in ongoing professional development is beneficial. Board support for the superintendent in implementing innovative practices and initiatives that enhance the district’s educational outcomes and overall performance is important.

Veteran educator and Gibraltar School District Superintendent Amy Conway said investing in mentorship, professional development and regular check-ins throughout the first year provides critical support as superintendents grow into their role.

“By prioritizing these actions, boards lay the foundation for a strong partnership, empowering their new superintendent to lead confidently and create a lasting impact,” Conway said.

Establishing a process for regular feedback and evaluation is crucial. This should include informal check-ins, formal performance reviews and feedback from the board. Using the feedback to identify areas for improvement and provide additional support or resources as needed is essential.

### **Purposeful teamwork**

Supporting the superintendent in building a strong leadership team is yet another vital component of a comprehensive onboarding process. A cohesive leadership team is necessary for implementing the district’s strategic goals and ensuring long-term success. Encouraging collaboration and teamwork among the leadership team fosters a positive and productive working environment.



Preparing the superintendent for potential crises by discussing the district's crisis management plan and providing training on effective crisis communication and problem-solving is also necessary. Ensuring the superintendent has access to resources and support for handling emergencies and unexpected challenges is critical.

"Establishing open lines of communication and providing constructive feedback when they navigate difficult situations or communicate effectively reinforces trust," Conway said. "Clarity around district priorities, governance roles and evaluation processes ensures alignment from the start."

The board should always strive to be a good boss to their superintendent. Recognizing and celebrating the superintendent's successes and milestones, both big and small, are essential. This can include public recognition at board meetings, awards and other forms of acknowledgment. Fostering a culture of appreciation and support within the district motivates and inspires the superintendent and staff.

Onboarding a new superintendent is a comprehensive process that requires careful planning, clear communication and ongoing support. By following these steps, a school board can ensure that their new superintendent is well-prepared to lead effectively and make a positive impact on the district. A successful onboarding process not only sets the foundation for the superintendent's success but also contributes to the overall success and stability of the school district.

So, whether it's navigating the complexities of district data or surviving the first board meeting, a well-thought-out onboarding process can make all the difference. And if the superintendent ends up in a mascot costume at the football game, well, that's just a bonus!



---

**Jay Bennett, M.Ed.**

*Jay Bennett is MASB's Assistant Director of Executive Search Services and can be reached at [jbennett@masb.org](mailto:jbennett@masb.org) or 517.327.5928.*

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# READY FOR CHANGE

*By Amanda Clapp, Esq.*

Change is inevitable. In the ever-evolving landscape of education, school boards must remain agile, prepared and proactive in adapting to new challenges. Whether it's legislative updates, technological advancements, shifting demographics or unforeseen crises, effective policy practices provide a structured framework to help boards remain compliant, efficient and forward-thinking.

At Neola, we have spent decades working with boards to develop, implement and maintain policies that not only meet current legal requirements but also anticipate the future. This article explores how strong policies act as a safeguard, a guide and a catalyst for progress—ensuring that boards of education remain ready for change.

## The power of policy in navigating change

Good policy is more than a rulebook; it's a roadmap that helps districts respond swiftly and effectively to change. Policies define expectations, provide consistency and facilitate compliance with federal and state regulations. More importantly, they allow boards to focus on strategic decision-making rather than scrambling for solutions in moments of crisis.

### Three key characteristics define effective policies:

- **Clarity and accessibility:** Policies should be written in a way that is easy to understand and apply. A well-organized, accessible policy manual enables board members, administrators and staff to quickly find and interpret necessary guidelines.
- **Legally sound and up to date:** Laws governing education are constantly changing. Regular policy updates help districts avoid legal pitfalls and support compliance. Neola's services focus on keeping policies aligned with the latest legislative changes.
- **Strategically aligned with district goals:** Policies should not be static but should evolve in alignment with a district's mission and long-term objectives. Boards that integrate strategic planning into policy development are better equipped to lead their districts into the future.

## Key areas where policy keeps boards prepared

### Legislative and regulatory compliance

State and federal regulations shape many aspects of education, from curriculum standards to student rights to financial management. Without a process for ongoing policy review, districts risk falling out of compliance. For example, the Public Employment Relations Act (PERA) and related changes to the Revised School Code (RSC) regarding collective bargaining have undergone significant revisions in recent years. Having a mechanism to promptly update policies helps districts remain compliant while protecting students and staff.

### Crisis and emergency preparedness

If COVID-19 taught us anything, it's that boards must be prepared for the unexpected. During the height of the pandemic, Neola issued seven special updates for Michigan districts. Policies on health, safety, remote learning and staff roles were put to the test. Districts with comprehensive crisis management policies adapted better. From cybersecurity to natural disasters, strong policies empower boards to respond swiftly and appropriately.

### Student support and safety

As communities become more diverse, boards must provide policies supporting equity and inclusion. Policies related to nondiscrimination, anti-harassment, special education, student mental health services and school safety create environments where all students thrive. A well-maintained policy framework keeps these priorities central as leadership and social dynamics evolve.

### Financial and operational stability

Fiscal responsibility is a cornerstone of effective district governance. Policies on budgeting, procurement and oversight ensure stability and efficiency and prevent waste. With funding shifts and unexpected costs, clear financial policies and accounting principles maintain stability. Districts permitting crowdfunding pursuant to Neola Policy and Administrative Guideline 6605 must manage approvals, allocation and security with tools like Givebacks.

### Governance and leadership transition

Board members and superintendents change over time, but well-crafted policies and consistent administrative guidelines provide continuity. When leadership transitions occur, clearly defined policies and guidelines help facilitate a smooth handover, maintaining institutional knowledge and operational consistency. This prevents disruption and allows new leaders to focus on advancing the district's mission.

### A proactive approach to policy management

Many districts take a reactive approach to policy management, updating policies only when necessary or when a compliance issue arises. However, a proactive approach helps districts be prepared for change. Best practices for ongoing policy management include:

- **Regular policy review:** Conducting routine analysis of policies for alignment with current laws and best practices.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Involving educators, parents and community members in the policy development process to promote diverse perspectives.
- **Training and communication:** Ensuring that staff and board members understand policies and how to apply them effectively.

### Looking ahead: Policy as a tool for innovation

Successful boards know policy goes beyond compliance—it shapes education's future. Strong policies enable innovation through technology, modern learning and problem-solving. Many districts explore AI, data privacy and personalized learning policies. By anticipating trends and fostering responsible innovation, boards keep their district competitive and effective in preparing students.

### Final thoughts

Change is inevitable, but lack of preparation doesn't have to be. Through sound policy practices, boards can create a culture of readiness, adaptability and continuous improvement. As education evolves, so too must the policies that govern it. By prioritizing strategic policy management, boards are not just reacting to change—but leading it.

## Questions every board should ask about its policies

### *When was the last time we conducted a comprehensive policy review?*

- Are our policies aligned with current state and federal laws?
- Do our policies reflect our district's strategic goals?
- How accessible and understandable are our policies for staff, students and families?
- Are we prepared for leadership transitions with clear policies and administrative guidelines?

By keeping these questions at the forefront, boards can remain prepared for whatever changes come their way.

Questions? Please contact your Neola Associate or reach out to our team at [info@neola.com](mailto:info@neola.com).



**Amanda Clapp, Esq.**

Amanda is the President of Neola, Inc. and can be reached at [clappaj@neola.com](mailto:clappaj@neola.com).



# MICHIGAN'S NEW SCHOOL SAFETY FRAMEWORK: WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW

*By Sean Burns*

In January 2025, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed a comprehensive package of 19 bills to enhance school safety across the state. This legislation, which came in response to tragic school violence incidents, including the 2021 Oxford High School shooting, represents a significant shift in how Michigan approaches school safety and crisis management. While the complete package addresses various aspects of safety—from gun buyback programs to hate crime expansion—this article focuses on three pivotal bills that will directly impact school operations: House Bills 5549, 4095 and 4096.

## The Oxford Catalyst

The impetus for some of this legislative overhaul stems directly from the Oxford High School tragedy where four students lost their lives in November 2021. A subsequent third-party investigation found that the shooting might have been prevented through proper threat assessment and prevention protocols. The legislation addresses gaps identified by a bipartisan task force formed after the shooting, which spent two years crafting recommendations.

## House Bill 5549: Behavior Threat Assessment and Management teams

Perhaps the most significant operational change for schools comes through HB 5549, which mandates that by Oct. 1, 2026, every public and nonpublic school in Michigan must establish a Behavior Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) team.

### Team structure

Each BTAM team must include, at minimum:

- A school administrator who ensures the team fulfills its duties.
- A mental health professional.
- A school resource officer or a law enforcement official from the school district's local jurisdiction.

### Key responsibilities

The bill outlines specific duties for these teams, including:

- Defining prohibited and concerning behaviors and educating the school community about warning signs.
- Monitoring, assessing and investigating concerning behaviors.
- Distinguishing between credible and noncredible threats.
- Developing a central reporting mechanism for the school community.
- Establishing clear protocols for law enforcement intervention.
- Creating written plans to assist students exhibiting concerning behavior, incorporating both supportive and punitive measures as appropriate.

Importantly, the bill defines “supportive measures” as interventions involving school-based and community-based support structures that focus on building resiliency and protecting students while addressing safety concerns.

The Michigan Department of State Police's Office of School Safety (OSS) has been tasked by the legislation with developing training materials and providing these materials to school districts. In reality, OSS has been providing training on BTAMs since the 2023-2024 school year. These trainings have included basic and advanced courses on establishing BTAM teams and how to conduct threat assessments. Information on OSS BTAM training can be located at this link: [BTAM Training](#).

## House Bills 4095 and 4096: Standardized Emergency Response

The other critical components of Michigan's new school safety framework are House Bills 4095 and 4096, which establish standardized emergency response terminology for all schools in the state.

## Development of standardized terminology

Under HB 4096, the Michigan Department of State Police, in collaboration with the School Safety and Mental Health Commission, must establish standardized response terminology by July 1, 2026. This standardization will include:

- Specific terminology to be used by schools and law enforcement agencies in response to various emergency situations.
- A color-coding system to indicate when particular terminology should be in use.

## Implementation Timeline

As noted above, HB 4096 requires the Michigan State Police to establish standard response terminology by no later than July 1, 2026. HB 4095 requires all public and nonpublic schools to adopt and implement the standardized response terminology beginning with the 2026-2027 school year. This coordinated approach aims to eliminate confusion during crisis situations when multiple agencies may be responding.

## The broader context

These three bills represent the core operational changes for schools, but they exist within a broader safety framework established by the complete package of legislation. Other notable components include:

- Creation of a new School Safety and Mental Health Commission (HBs 5659 and 5660).
- Requirements for schools to distribute information about safe firearm storage to parents (HBs 5450 and 5451).
- Complete destruction requirements for firearms acquired through buyback programs (HBs 6144, 6145 and 6146).

## Implementation challenges and opportunities

School administrators face several challenges as they work to implement these new requirements:

1. **Resource allocation:** Schools must identify qualified personnel for BTAM teams and potentially reallocate staff responsibilities. Additionally, they will need to coordinate with local law enforcement agencies for qualified officers to participate on BTAM teams.
2. **Training needs:** All staff will need training on the new standardized terminology and threat assessment procedures.
3. **Community communication:** Schools must effectively communicate these changes to students, parents and community members.
4. **Policy development:** New policies and procedures will need development to align with the legislation.

However, the legislation also presents opportunities:

1. **Standardization:** A common language for emergency response across all Michigan schools will improve multi-agency coordination. First responders will have a common understanding of what a “lockdown” is and how a school employs it.
2. **Preventive focus:** The BTAM approach emphasizes early intervention for concerning behaviors before they escalate.
3. **Mental health integration:** The requirements explicitly recognize the connection between mental health support and school safety.
4. **Inter-agency collaboration:** The mandated team structure encourages ongoing partnerships between schools and law enforcement.

## Preparing for implementation

While full implementation deadlines extend into 2026, schools should begin preparation now:

- Identify potential BTAM team members and assess professional development needs.
- Review current emergency response protocols against anticipated state standards.
- Evaluate existing threat assessment procedures.
- Begin discussions with local law enforcement partners about future collaboration.
- Assess resource needs and potential budget implications.

The comprehensive approach taken by Michigan lawmakers acknowledges that school safety requires coordinated efforts across multiple domains: physical security, mental health support, emergency response and community engagement. Through standardized terminology, formalized threat assessment procedures and collaborative teams, Michigan schools are building a framework designed to prevent tragedies before they occur. As implementation unfolds over the coming years, educators, administrators and safety professionals across the country will be watching Michigan's experience as a potential model for comprehensive school safety reform. These laws will help to move Michigan forward toward becoming a leading state in the area of school safety and security.



### Sean Burns

*Sean is the Director of Safety and Security at Kent Intermediate School District and can be reached at seanburns@kentisd.edu.*



# EVENT CALENDAR

★ GREAT FOR NEWLY ELECTED BOARD MEMBERS

AUG. 7, 2025  
Back to School  
Legal Workshop  
VIRTUAL

★ AUG. 12, 2025  
New Board Member Series:  
Guide to School Finance  
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★ AUG. 15–16, 2025  
Summer Institute Featuring  
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A photograph of a female teacher with dark hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, leaning over a desk to assist students. Three students are visible: a girl with glasses on the left, a girl with curly hair in the center, and a boy with glasses on the right who is resting his head on his hand while holding a pencil. They are all focused on their work.

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