# Why you ran for school board

Governing is more than votes – it's behavior, process, and follow through

*Belief that governance decisions shape real outcomes*

Strong governance is a lever for system improvement

*Ensuring voices historically missing are present*

How decisions are made matters as much as what is decided

*Oversight as a form of care for the institution*

Holding the system accountable for results

*Seeing board service as stewardship, not status*

Responding to gaps others were not addressing

*Protecting legitimacy, trust, and ethical process*

Lived experience informing system-level change

*A sense of responsibility to act, not watch*

Bringing stability and continuity in complex times

*Stepping in when the system wasn't working as it should*

Commitment to the long-term health of the system

# Arlington Public Schools

School Board Governance Retreat

Saturday, February 7, 2026

Welcome & Goals for the Day

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# Framing Question

What do you want this board to be known for?

# What I Heard You Want From Today

- Focus on how the board works, not who is right
- Use real examples without relitigating outcomes
- Speak to patterns, not personalities
- Stay at the level of governance, not grievance
- Tolerate discomfort in service of effectiveness
- Prioritize clarity and follow-through over harmony

# SESSION 1 — THE BOARD AS A GOVERNING INSTITUTION

# This Is a Diagnostic

- Establish a shared map of reality
- Naming alignment and misalignment institutionally
- Separate role confusion from intent

# Strong Alignment

- Governance vs administration is clear in principle
- Collective authority is understood

# Strong Alignment

**Delegation to the Superintendent (#5)**

- operations belong to the superintendent,
- the board's role is oversight, policy, and outcomes
- individual members should not direct staff

# Strong Alignment

**Informed decision-making + public input (#3, #4)**

Members universally want:

- better information
- fewer surprises
- more time in the “right” forums

  (Ex: COW’s v. board meeting)
- better synthesis of community input

# Strong Alignment

**Collective governance & avoiding unilateral action (#10)**

Every interview flags concern about:

- gatekeeping
- unilateral communication
- actions taken without full board awareness
- decisions “presented” rather than co-developed

# Strong Alignment

**Respectful expression of disagreement (VSBA #6, #8)**

Strong shared belief that:

- dissent is healthy
- disagreement is inevitable
- minority voices should be heard and documented

# Strong Alignment

**Strong Alignment on Formal Authority**

- Across interviews, board members consistently align with:
  - Policy's prohibition on individual direction of staff
  - Recognition that authority resides with the board as a whole
  - Respect for the superintendent

# Tensions / Misalignment

**Individual initiative vs. collective authority**

**Oversight vs. perceived micromanagement**

**Information-seeking vs. direction-giving**

# Tensions / Misalignment

**Public accountability vs. public discipline**

**Dissent as governance strength vs. unity as governance strength**

# Tensions / Misalignment

- APS policies assume:
  - Clear information sharing
  - Consistent application of norms
  - Transparent deliberation
- Interview responses reveal:
  - Heavy reliance on informal one-on-one communication
  - Uneven documentation of external interactions
  - Inconsistent signaling of board positions

# Legitimate but Unnamed Work

- **Sensemaking across competing inputs**
- **Issue incubation and agenda-shaping**
- **Narrative stewardship and public meaning-making**

# Legitimate but Unnamed Work

- **Boundary interpretation in novel situations**
- **Long-horizon stewardship**

# Where Policy is Silent

- **How disagreement is surfaced, timed, and communicated**
- **How information is tested and trusted**
- **How board members hold one another accountable**

# Where Policy is Silent

- **How informal communication is used responsibly**
- **How the chair exercises influence without extra authority**
- **How the board resets after stress, error, or conflict**

# Break

*15 minutes*

# SESSION 2 — DECISION-MAKING & MANAGING DISSENT

# Session 2

What this session is:

- Decision pathways
- How dissent surfaces
- What happens after votes

What this session is not:

- Re-litigate outcomes
- Assign Intent
- Evaluate individuals

# How Decisions Are Made

**In practice, how do decisions move through this board?**

- Where alignment happens
- Where surprises occur
- Where informal influence shows up

# How Decisions Are Made

**Governance Is Not Passive**

- Across roles, governance is understood to require:
  - Active oversight
  - Deliberation
  - Judgment
  - Responsibility for system-level outcomes
  - Disagreement lies in **how assertive** the board should be, not whether it should be engaged.

# How Decisions Are Made

- **Multiple decision venues, each serving a different function**
- **Significant pre-decision sensemaking happens outside of meetings**
- **Chair plays a synthesizing and sequencing role**
- **Consensus is preferred, but not always required**
- **Decision framing matters as much as the decision itself**

# Majority / Minority Experience

**Governance reality**

- Majority and minority roles feel different
- Both carry responsibility for the institution

# You are in the Minority

- **Signal early, not theatrically**
- **Distinguish disagreement with direction from disagreement with people**
- **Accept the decision without abandoning the issue**
- **Use minority status as an early-warning function**
- **Stay inside the institution once the vote is taken**

# You are in the Majority

- **Treat dissent as data, not disruption**
- **Acknowledge the concern even if you disagree**
- **Avoid interpreting dissent as disloyalty**
- **Create space for dissent *before* it becomes positional**

# Split decisions and staff

- **No surprises**
- **Clarity about what a “no” means—and doesn’t mean**
- **Alignment on implementation expectations**

# Common Tensions

- Unity vs transparency
- Speed vs inclusion

# Common Tensions

**Decision-Making Is Structurally Challenging**

- Commonly identified challenges include:
  - Heavy reliance on superintendent recommendations
  - Limited time and constrained public meeting formats
  - Information overload paired with information gaps
  - Pressure toward unanimity or premature closure

# Common Tensions

- **Uneven access to information before decisions**
- **Trust gaps around information quality**
- **Different thresholds for “enough” deliberation**
- **Open-meeting constraints distort deliberation**

# Common Tensions

- **Legacy decisions constrain current choice-making**
- **Disagreement sometimes surfaces late**
- **Different philosophies of oversight complicate alignment**

# Stretch Break

*5 minutes*

# SESSION 3 — INFORMATION FLOW & COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

# Session 3 Frame

Information enables judgment

# How information moved today

- Formal channels
- Informal workarounds
- Where confidence erodes

# Quality vs. Volume

- Enough Information
- Too much information
- Missing information

# “No Surprises” as a governance issue

Predictability builds trust

# Where It Breaks Down

- **Uneven Information**
- **Fragmented Information**
- **Late or Incomplete Information**
- **Information Breakdown**
- **Poor Information Flow**

# Impact of Breakdown

- **Uneven Information = Uneven Power**
- **Fragmented Information Distorts Decision-Making**
- **Late or Incomplete Information Creates Public Risk**
- **Information Breakdown Fuels Mistrust on All Sides**
- **Poor Information Flow Undermines Accountability**

# Impact of Breakdown

**The Hidden Cost:**

- **Emotional and Cognitive Load**

# Impact of Breakdown

- Board confidence
- Staff confidence
- Public confidence

# LUNCH & TRANSITION

# Lunch options

Scheduled 45 minutes for lunch

- You have three options:
  - Full break, no work
  - Partial break, then working lunch
  - Work through lunch

# Welcome Back

This afternoon shifts from diagnosis to commitments

# From the morning

- A shared understanding of the board's role
- Clear pressure points in decision-making
- Where information flow supports—or undermines—judgment

# SESSION 4 — FROM INSIGHTS TO OPERATING COMMITMENTS

# From Insights to Board Operating Commitments

*We’re not inventing a new board.*

*We’re strengthening how this board governs—on purpose.*

# Why commitments Matter

- **Operating commitments:**
  - Reduce ambiguity
  - Protect trust
  - Enable follow-through

# Where these commitments come from

**These commitments are drawn from:**

- Your interviews
- This morning’s diagnostic
- How this board already operates

# Two Buckets

**We'll work in two buckets:**

- **Protect**
  - Practices that already work and must not erode
- **Clarify**
  - Practices that exist but are inconsistent or fragile

# Commitment seeds

**Commitment themes already present:**

- “One of five” responsibility
- Advance signaling of dissent
- Chair as process steward
- Systemic framing over anecdote
- Direct, not indirect, conflict
- Govern through agreed forums
- Communicate as one board
- Surface risk early

# Commitments

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

**Each commitment must answer**

- What the board will do
- When it matters most
- What it replaces or prevents

# Transition to Accountability

**Commitments without accountability dissolve.**

- *Next: how this board sustains what it just named.*

# Break

*15 minutes*

# SESSION 5 — ACCOUNTABILITY, METRICS & FOLLOW-THROUGH

# Reframing Accountability

**Accountability is not punishment.**

It’s how an institution:

- Notices drift
- Names it
- Adjusts before problems compound

# Introducing the “Foil”

**An accountability framework**

*This is not a recommendation!*

# Local Government Governing Model

**A framework:**

1. *Understand Its Legal Authority*
2. *Work with others*
3. *Set Policy*
4. *Allocate Resources*
5. *Be Accountable*

# Local Government Governing Model

1. Understand Its Legal Authority

___ Do we know what we are legally required to do or restricted from doing on this issue?
___ Are there constitutional issues?
___ Statutory issues?
___ Local policies that we must follow?
___ Do we know what we are obligated to do by state or federal law?
___ Do we know what we are prevented from doing by state or federal law?
___ Do we know what we are given the option to do by state or federal law?
___ Do we know if there are other laws or standards that need to be considered?

2. Work with Others

___ Have we identified individuals and groups that need to be consulted or buy in before we can act?
___ Are all members of the board informed and prepared to act on this issue?
___ Have we engaged the manager and the organization on this issue?
___ Have we consulted relevant external individuals and groups?
___ Have we identified who will be helped and who will be harmed if we pursue this issue?
___ Are the media informed on the issue and the board's proposed action?
___ Are there other units of government that need to be involved (e.g., the state, municipalities, neighboring counties)?
___ What agreements need to be negotiated internally or externally with key stakeholders to move the issue forward?

3. Set Policy

___ What result do we hope to achieve?
___ What policy do we want to enact?
___ How is this issue tied to our strategic plan?
___ Can we address this matter in our regular meetings, or do we need to hold a special meeting?
___ What information do we need to make a good decision?
___ What information will we need to monitor this issue over time?
___ Do we need to hold a public hearing?
___ Does the issue require a public referendum?

4. Allocate Resources

___ What resources will be required, and how will we know how well they were used?
___ Do we have the resources to pursue action on our own?
___ What other groups are contributing or might contribute resources to this issue?
___ Have we allocated resources to support our priorities?
___ Do we have a process for monitoring resource use?

5. Be Accountable

___ What will success look like, and how will we know if we achieve it?
___ What will we hold ourselves (as a board), our manager, and our organization accountable for?
___ How will we assess our own (board) work?
___ How will we assess the manager's and the organization's performance?
___ How will we address performance problems for the board, the manager, and the organization?
___ How will we recognize performance achievements by the board, the manager, and the organization?

# Directionally Right vs. Wrong

**As a foil, this helps us see:**

- **What doesn't fit**
- **What feels directionally right**

  **(even if the form is wrong)**

# Where Accountability Lives

**When this board drifts from its commitments—where should accountability live?**

- Chair
- Peer-to-peer
- Superintendent feedback
- Self-check moments

# Chair role (w/o Over-Centralizing)

**Chair accountability focuses on:**

- Process integrity
- Noticing patterns
- Naming drift

# Peer-to-Peer Accountability

**Peer accountability means:**

- Naming impact
- Holding commitments
- Protecting the institution

# Superintendent Feedback Loop

**Why superintendent feedback matters:**

- Reduces mixed signals
- Builds staff confidence
- Strengthens administration

# Signals, Not Sanctions

**Early signals of governance drift:**

- Surprises
- Informal workarounds
- Pre-vote tension
- Post-vote tension
- Information mistrust

# Session 5 Synthesis

**Agreed approach to accountability:**

- Signals, not punishments
- Shared responsibility
- Commitment to follow-through

# Transition to Close

**Before we close:**

What you've designed today changes how this board governs.

# WRAP-UP & CLOSE

# What Happens Next

- Facilitator synthesizes
- Board affirms
- Checkpoints established

# Return to the Question

What do you want this board to be known for?

# Thank you!