

SIGNATURE
STORY



GRADING
GOVERNANCE

By Matt Alderton



Indian Prairie School District 204 is the perfect place to raise a family. Encompassing parts of Naperville, Aurora, Bolingbrook and Plainfield, Ill., in west suburban Chicago, it's brimming with cul-de-sacs, clean air, safe streets, soccer fields and schools. Thirty-five schools within 46 square miles, to be exact, making Indian Prairie the third largest school district in Illinois.

Indian Prairie isn't just big, however. It's also bright. Its average ACT score is 1.4 points higher than the state average, its high school graduation rate is near 100 percent and its proportion of students meeting or exceeding state standards is 90 percent, compared to a state average of 76 percent.

Despite everything it has going for it, however, Indian Prairie for the past two years has failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In 2009, Illinois required 70 percent of students to meet or exceed standards in reading and math. Although 90 percent of students in its general population met or exceeded standards in reading, and 91.2 percent in math, two of Indian Prairie's student subgroups — low-income students and students with disabilities — underperformed in one or both subjects, which was enough to put the entire district on the federal government's watch list.

There are myriad reasons school districts fail to meet AYP. At least one, however, is their school board, according to Alka Tyle, who served on the Indian Prairie board of education from 2006 until 2011. "Often, when a district's not performing, it's because the board

isn't doing its job," she says. "This is one of the few elected positions where you really don't have to be proficient in anything. You just have to be a resident and a citizen. That's it. So, as you can imagine, it's very easy for people's self interests to creep in; and when their members have special interests, school boards unfortunately make decisions that are not in the best interests of kids."

The issue isn't board members' passion. They have that in spades. It's their proficiency, according to the Illinois Association of School Boards.

"School board members in Illinois are locally elected," explains Cathy Talbert, IASB associate executive director of field services and policy services. "They're volunteers. There's no compensation. These are just great people who care about public education, who care about children and who want to contribute to their communities. They come from all walks of life, all backgrounds and all experience levels, and now they join something called a governing board. They may or may not have had experience participating in a group like that, so they often need help understanding what their job is."

That's where IASB comes in. Based in Springfield, Ill., with a second office in Lombard, Ill., one of its primary functions since 1913 has been offering board development services to its members, which are 98 percent of Illinois school districts — including Indian Prairie and dozens of districts like it, a growing number of which are not meeting AYP.

To help members dealing with AYP challenges, IASB

in 2004 launched its Targeting Achievement through Governance (TAG) program, which provides board development services at no cost to school districts with schools that have not achieved AYP under NCLB, the goal being to help board members understand the link between policy and progress in pursuit of higher student achievement and increased student learning.

No School Board Left Behind

Although it wasn't created until 38 years later, IASB's TAG program was born out of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." The largest and most far-reaching education act ever passed by Congress, its goal was providing students fair and equal access to education by providing federal funding for schools and school districts that serve low-income families. In the last 46 years, Congress has reauthorized ESEA several times — most recently in 2001 under President George W. Bush, who dubbed his version "No Child Left Behind."

In order to qualify for federal funding under NCLB, states must develop standardized tests in reading and math, then administer them annually in grades three through eight, and at least once in high school. Schools and school districts alike must meet a minimum, state-established performance threshold — AYP — to continue receiving federal money. In Illinois, AYP started at 40 percent in 2003, meaning that 40 percent of students in both the general population and multiple subgroups — including low-income students, students with disabilities and limited-English-proficiency students — had to meet or exceed standards, as established by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) at the elementary

level and the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) at the high school level. State AYP has grown incrementally each year, reaching 85 percent in 2011. By 2014, AYP will be 100 percent nationwide.

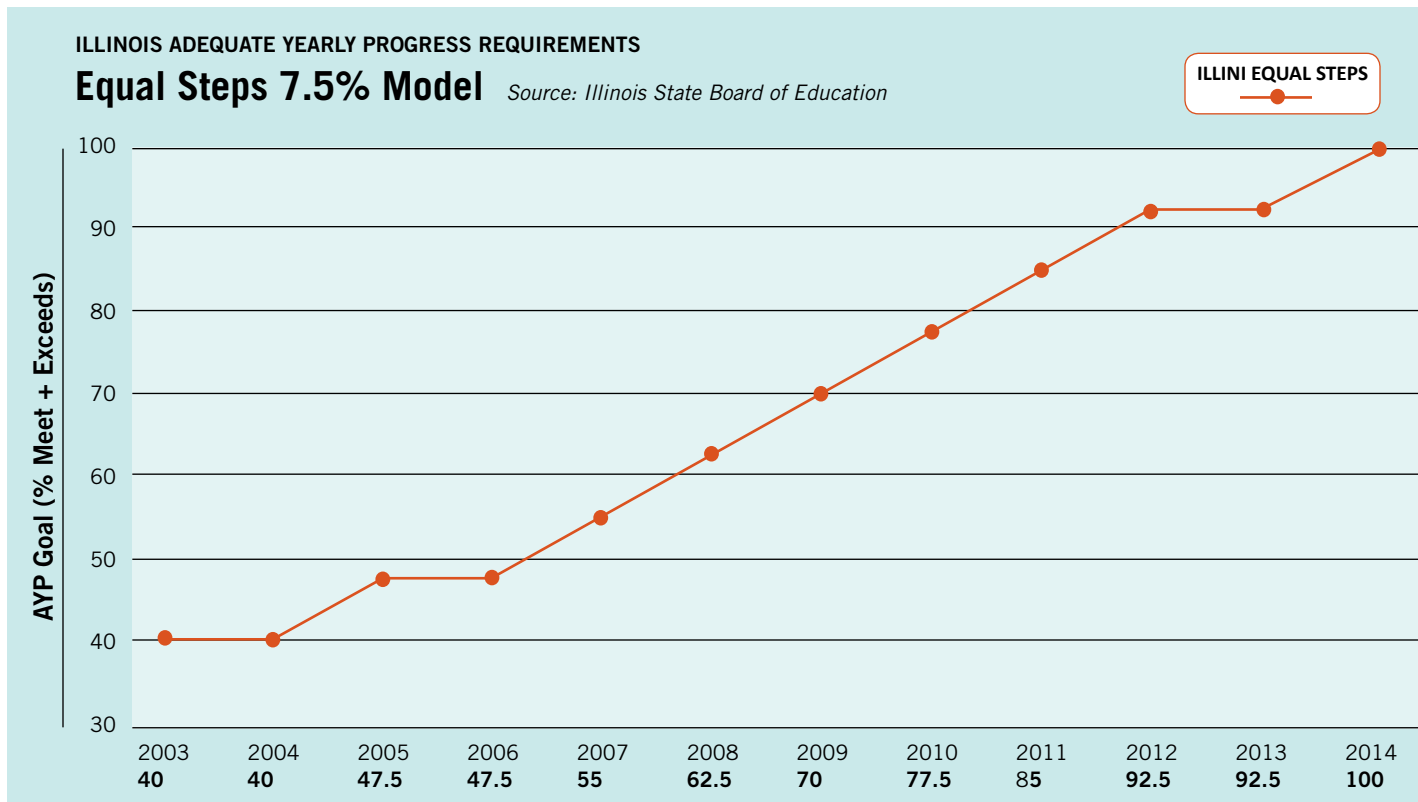
"If a school or district does not meet AYP targets for two or more consecutive years, they're identified as not making AYP and are required to do certain things in order to increase their chances of meeting future targets," says Angie Peifer, IASB's associate executive director of board development and TAG.

A progressive hierarchy of test scores and standards, NCLB's purpose is improving public education by way of clear accountability and measurable outcomes. Loathed by many educators, who deem its goals unrealistic, it has plenty of critics. It's not all bad, however.

"In the past, people looked at their school district and said, 'Seventy-five percent of our kids are scoring at the top of the test, and that means we're doing a good job.' No Child Left Behind forced them to look at the other 25 percent," says IASB Executive Director Emeritus Michael D. Johnson, Ed.D. "School districts used to focus on buildings, buses and budgets. With No Child Left Behind, they started looking more at student achievement."

Improving student achievement had been part of IASB's mission since well before NCLB. When Illinois began looking for ways to help school districts comply with it, therefore, the association was ideally positioned to contribute.

In 2003, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) issued a grant request for proposals for grantees that would help the state support schools and districts struggling to meet AYP. Although the RFP asked specifically for resources to help teachers and principals, Johnson asked his staff to



respond with an unrelated grant proposal focusing on school boards.

“We felt we could make a case for how school board members can be partners in student achievement, and how they can be catalysts for — or sometimes even barriers to — improving learning,” says Peifer, the grant proposal’s principal author. “However, writing a grant proposal for the existing RFP, which was targeted at practitioners, was kind of like trying to put a square peg in a round hole. So, frankly, we got our mallet out and we forced it.”

IASB’s proposal focused on the unique training needs of school boards, which have been shown to positively influence and impact student achievement as governing and policymaking bodies. The basis for the grant proposal was the Iowa Association of School Boards’ “Lighthouse” study. Released in 2000, it included nearly 160 interviews with board members and educators in three high- and three low-achieving districts over the course of nearly two years. All other things being equal, a major difference between high- and low-achieving districts was their school boards, which in high-achieving districts:

- Consistently expressed the belief that all students can learn;
- Were more knowledgeable about teaching and learning issues, including school improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development;
- Used data to make decisions;
- Created a supportive workplace for staff; and
- Involved parents and communities in education.

The state was convinced. Although IASB’s proposal did not fulfill the requirements of its original RFP, ISBE nonetheless awarded it an annual grant of \$250,000 — now in its seventh year — to develop and deliver the TAG program.

Target: Student Learning

Introduced in 2004, TAG is an assemblage of fee-based training workshops — valued at approximately \$11,400 — that normally are offered ad hoc to school districts and school board members. For the purposes of TAG, however, they were packaged into a linear curriculum that’s offered at no cost to school districts or districts with schools that have not made AYP for two consecutive years. A voluntary program for qualifying boards, it’s delivered incrementally in two phases, each of which takes approximately 18 to 24 months to complete under the guidance of a dedicated TAG counselor.

“Board members are not paid for their time, so it’s a huge commitment,” says TAG Consultant Debra Larson. “To make it as easy as possible for them, we go into their districts to do the training. We’ll do it Saturday mornings, evenings — whatever works for them.”

After an initial orientation to the program, Phase One — which requires nine to 10 training sessions totaling 28 to 31 hours — begins with a board self-assessment, or Board Governance Review (BGR), the goal of which is getting school board members to critically evaluate their performance for the purpose of benchmarking and goal-setting.

“The board self-evaluation helps us see where the board is, in terms of internally working together, and how each

School Board Stats

- 866** The number of school districts in Illinois.
- 852** The number of Illinois school districts that are IASB members.
- 7** The number of board members on the typical school board.
- 3.2** The average tenure of a school board superintendent.
- 4** The typical term of an elected school board member.
- 2** The number of years between school board elections.
- 24** The average percentage of school board turnover in Illinois since 1987.

school board member is doing individually,” Larson says. “It allows us to pinpoint, name and identify targets the board wants to hit.”

Each school board sets its own TAG program goals based on IASB’s “Foundational Principles of Effective Governance” (see sidebar, p. 16), then engages in a series of workshops during which its members learn the proper roles and responsibilities of a governing board; the correct process for approving school and district improvement plans, which are required under NCLB; and the importance of data-based decision making.

The nucleus of Phase One, however, is the Targeting Student Learning Workshop (TSL), which IASB created in 1996 as a member of the Five-State Policy Project, a consortium of five state school board associations — in California, Illinois, Maine, Pennsylvania and Washington — that authored the “Targeting Student Learning Workbook,” a tool that helps school boards create and evaluate policies that promote student learning in eight different categories, including governance and planning, academic standards and assessment, education program, curriculum, instruction, learning environment, professional standards and parent/community engagement.

“The five states identified eight categories of policies, which they then expanded into 30 policy topics that affect student learning,” says TAG Consultant Steve Clark. “TSL is a four-step process that teaches the board how to assess and develop policy that supports student learning; the board then selects one of the 30 policy topics and goes through the

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actual policymaking process.”

The final component of Phase One is a second BGR. “Boards typically assess themselves more critically at the end of the 18 months,” Peifer says. “We believe the reason for that is they’ve finally learned what good governance looks like.”

Requiring seven to nine sessions totaling 23 to 29 hours, Phase Two of TAG is optional and begins with a needs

IASB’s Foundational Principles of Effective Governance

1. The Board Clarifies the District Purpose

As its primary task, the board continually defines, articulates and re-defines district ends to answer the recurring question: Who gets what benefits for how much? Effective ends development requires attention to at least two key concerns: student learning and organizational effectiveness.

2. The Board Connects With the Community

The school board engages in an ongoing two-way conversation with the entire community. This conversation enables the board to hear and understand the community’s educational aspirations and desires, to serve effectively as an advocate for district improvement and to inform the community of the district’s performance.

3. The Board Employs a Superintendent

The board employs and evaluates one person — the superintendent — and holds that person accountable for district performance and compliance with written board policy.

4. The Board Delegates Authority

The board delegates authority to the superintendent to manage the district and provide leadership for the staff. Such authority is communicated through written board policies that designate district ends and define operating parameters.

5. The Board Monitors Performance

The board constantly monitors progress toward district ends and compliance with written board policies using data as the basis for assessment.

6. The Board Takes Responsibility for Itself

The board, collectively and individually, takes full responsibility for board activity and behavior — the work it chooses to do and how it chooses to do the work. Individual board members are obligated to express their opinions and respect others’ opinions; however, board members understand the importance of the board ultimately speaking with one clear voice.

assessment, which is followed by a series of elective courses chosen based on board priorities. “Phase One is your first two years in college, where you’re taking required courses,” Clark says. “Phase Two is your junior and senior year, where you’re in your major and can take the courses you want.”

Throughout both phases of the program, the goal remains the same: TAG teaches board members the difference between governance and management so they can be more strategic and less tactical, resulting in school districts where learning supersedes lobbying.

“One of the biggest challenges, even with the most well intentioned board members, is learning the difference between governance and management,” Clark says. “We call it the view from the balcony: Board members stay up in the balcony so they can look at the big picture; everybody else — the superintendent and staff — is down on the dance floor, getting the job done.”

Adds Talbert, “Historically, school boards were there for fiscal oversight and hiring the right superintendent. But as we’ve moved over the last 20 years into an education reform environment, it’s become more important for school boards to also be accountable for learning in their district. This program helps school boards think about their role as leaders as it relates to student achievement.”

Final Exams

Given the time commitment and other challenges, such as school board turnover, persuading members to participate in TAG hasn’t always been easy. In the end, however, almost everyone who completes the program is glad they did.

“It was a lot of work, but well worth it,” says Carol Auer, Ed.D., superintendent of Keeneyville Elementary School District 20 in Bloomingdale, Hanover Park, Keeneyville and Roselle, Ill. Her board completed TAG training in 2007 and used it to create a new district policy on delivery of instruction that mandates diversity, data-based decision making and parental involvement. “TAG helped our board build a culture that’s devoted to student learning, and at the same time it was a teambuilding process that really brought our board together.”

Keeneyville isn’t alone. Since TAG’s introduction in 2004, IASB has spent approximately \$2 million in grant funds to work with boards of education in 127 Illinois school districts. That’s nearly 15 percent of all districts in the state.

According to IASB, TAG is successful for several reasons. In the context of the Great Recession, one of those reasons is that the program — IASB’s only grant-funded work — is free, which is a major benefit to struggling districts. Another is its “whole-board” approach to training and development, which IASB plans to emulate for other programs that traditionally have been delivered only to individual school board members. Ultimately, though, TAG works well because boards work hard.

“The boards that get the most out of TAG are the boards that make the most commitment,” Johnson says. “If you think about it, each phase of TAG includes approximately 30 hours of training, which is more training than you get for

anything from virtually any group. And that's in addition to regular board meetings. That gives you an idea about how committed board members are to students."

For effectively harnessing that commitment, TAG and the TSL curriculum earned the Five-State Policy Project the National School Boards Association's 2010 Thomas A. Shannon Award for Excellence in School Board Leadership.

IASB isn't resting on its laurels, however. There's too much work left to do. So much work, in fact, that ISBE recently changed the terms of its grant to further focus TAG's efforts: Because the number of school districts missing AYP is growing as the state's threshold climbs, it's asked IASB going forward to work only with districts that have missed AYP for four consecutive years, putting them in "corrective action" under NCLB.

"Right now there are 90 districts in the state in corrective action," Clark says. "This year we'll be working with up to 30 of them."

Ultimately, the goal in those districts is getting off the government watch list. TAG alone can't accomplish that; as one of many factors, however, it's helping districts move in the right direction.

"Evaluating in terms of hard data and numbers is really tough, because when we're looking at AYP we're looking at moving targets," Peifer says. "Perceptually, though, the folks who've been involved in the TAG program tell us it's made a difference in terms of the way they do their work, where they focus their energy and their single-mindedness of purpose."

Although that isn't always enough to get them off the government watch list, it's nonetheless helped districts move the needle on student achievement. In Keeneyville, for instance, Auer says student test scores have gone up every year since the board completed TAG — despite the fact that the district's low-income population has doubled in the last five years. Meanwhile, in Venice, Ill., where Venice Community Unit School District 3 has been operating under a state financial oversight panel since 2003, the school board currently is undergoing TAG training to help it re-establish its independence; although it remains under financial oversight, Superintendent Cullen Cullen, Ed.D., says test scores are up 50 percent compared to last year.

"When I started as superintendent, this district had not met AYP for some time and was put in a position where it had to make some kind of change," explains Cullen, who is Venice's third superintendent in two years. "I'm part of that change. The district had taken care of its financial issues and was in the process of changing its curriculum, but I knew the governance piece needed to be addressed also; I thought TAG was a perfect fit."

And in Indian Prairie? Although the district remains on the government watch list, 93.3 percent of its students met or exceeded state standards on the ISAT in 2010 — up from 92.4 percent in 2009 — while students' average ACT composite score reached 23.9, up 1.1 points since 2005.

"Considering the challenges we're up against, I think it's quite astounding that our district has still continued to increase student achievement," Tyle says. "The TAG program has certainly helped us with that."

Behind 'No Child Left Behind'

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all government-run schools receiving federal funding to administer to all students an annual standardized test. Schools receiving Title I funding through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 must make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in test scores across all student subgroups or face the following actions:

- Schools that miss AYP for two consecutive years are deemed "in need of improvement" and must develop a two-year improvement plan. Students at these schools may transfer to a better school within their district, if one exists.
- Schools that miss AYP for three consecutive years must offer free tutoring and other supplemental education services to struggling students.
- Schools that miss AYP for a fourth consecutive year are put in "corrective action," in which case they might be required to replace their entire staff, introduce a new curriculum or extend the amount of time students spend in class.
- Schools missing AYP for five consecutive years must make a plan for restructuring themselves — becoming a charter school, for example, or being taken over by the state; if AYP is missed for a sixth consecutive year, the plan must be implemented.

More than increasing student achievement, however, IASB hopes TAG will help districts redefine it. "We prefer the term 'student learning' to 'student achievement,'" Talbert says. "Our communities have greater expectations for school boards than simply doing well on tests. Historically, the reason we have public education is to transmit the values of a democracy and create good citizens. TAG teaches that it's incumbent on boards to look not only at test scores, but also at everything else communities want for their children." ■

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