

New use for an old word



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In PSBA’s board development programs, we often refer to the “top of the clock” – the policy setting and monitoring roles of the school board, and the “bottom of the clock” – the duties of the superintendent and the administrative team to implement those policies and manage the day-to-day affairs of the district. The line that separates these two realms generally is fairly clear even if people don’t always see eye-to-eye about who should be doing what in certain situations. Of course, the debate that ensues when there is disagreement about roles is not always very reasonable or even rational. Usually, it is fraught with claims and counter-claims, assertions made with great intensity and little room for discussion.

One word almost always invoked in these situations – “micromanagement” – is wielded freely as an instant judgment and criticism. To be sure, I have seen plenty of situations where school boards were deep in the tall grass of school administration, having lost sight of their primary obligation to establish direction and hold superintendents accountable. By the same token, I have witnessed examples of the word being invoked to back-off well-intentioned boards that had legitimate questions for which they were not receiving answers.

Although I have viewed both sides of this debate for many years, I have come to believe we have wasted the true power of this word on fellow members of the school leadership and management team when it actually would be better employed elsewhere. In a recent meeting with counterparts from around the country, a good friend referred to needlessly detailed pieces of legislation that dictate the actions of school districts as “state and federal micromanagement.” Wow! It struck me that “micromanagement” describes perfectly the actions of legislators,

governors, presidents, and other policymakers in state and national capitals to impose their will on school districts. There is no top or bottom of the clock for them; their hands move freely over the entire face of public education.

I view this issue through two equally important lenses. First, education is primarily a state and local responsibility. The role of the federal government, fueled by billions of dollars in funding for a range of programs and initiatives, may have grown dramatically but it is supposed to be a supportive, not directive, one. Second, in Pennsylvania, public education is a constitutional obligation of the state General Assembly, but the delivery of this critical service is a duty shared with school boards. As we noted last year, the 175th anniversary of the Common School Law of 1834, it was this very partnership between state government and local communities that enabled our public school system to be established in the first place.

So, the question arises: If the federal government should be supporting local school officials, and state government is to be their partner, why are we confronted with a continuing stream of laws, regulations and policies that dictate in minute detail what school districts must do and when they must do it? We historically have referred to these as “mandates.” That word isn’t inaccurate but it has lost any real impact on listeners. (I have heard legislators acknowledge enacting new mandates, apologizing for the offense with no greater sense of guilt than a driver who turns right at a red light without first coming to a full stop.)

Why use a word that has become background noise in the debates about education policy? Let’s call excessive state and federal regulation exactly what it is – an effort to micromanage schools from Harrisburg and Washington. **B**