

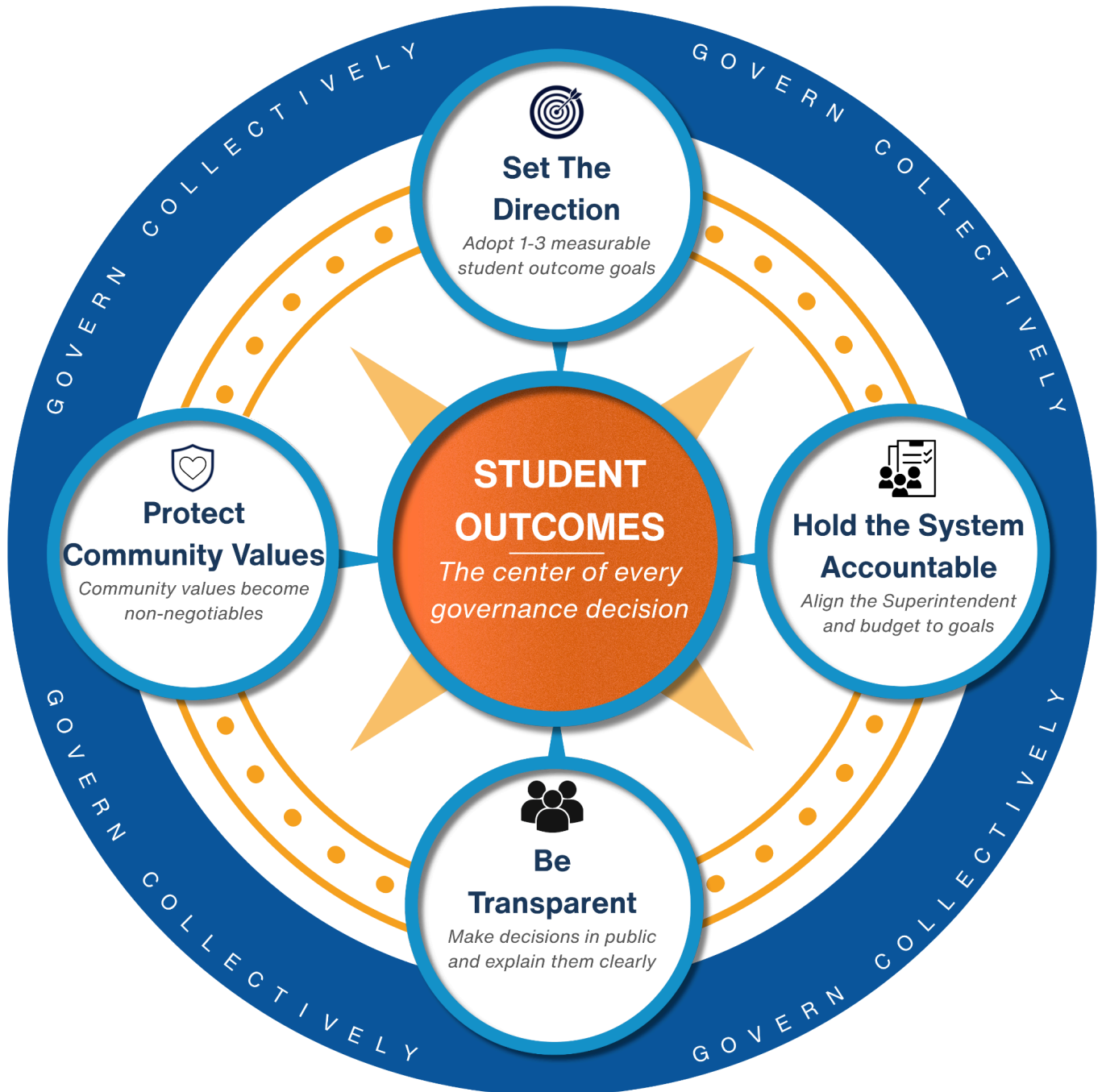
DRAFT

ACADEMY FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP CHICAGO

THE GOVERNANCE COMPASS

A framework for effective school board governance in Chicago

Public Draft for Review | August 2026



A SHARED STANDARD FOR CHICAGO

Chicago's transition to an elected school board is a historic expansion of democratic participation. Representation matters. But elections alone do not define what effective governance requires, build the capacity to govern well, or give communities a shared way to evaluate the board after votes are counted.

The Governance Compass is a public, nonpartisan framework for understanding what effective school board governance looks like in practice. It names five orientations an effective board must hold at the same time, all centered on student outcomes.

The Compass does not prescribe every decision a board should make. It provides a shared language for asking whether the board is setting direction, protecting community values, holding the system accountable, operating transparently, and governing collectively.

A compass does not tell a board where to go. It helps the board check whether it is pointed toward the destination it has chosen with the community.

WHY A SHARED FRAMEWORK MATTERS

A board made up of elected members representing different districts and communities will not agree on every issue. It should not. But without shared clarity about the job itself, the board cannot function consistently as a governing body.

Some members may see themselves primarily as community advocates. Others may see themselves as watchdogs or partners to the superintendent. None of those instincts is entirely wrong. The challenge is holding them within a common framework so that the board can deliberate, decide, and take collective responsibility for results.

NONPARTISAN, NOT VALUE-FREE

The Governance Compass is nonpartisan, but it is not value-free. It is grounded in the belief that school board governance should be equitable, transparent, community-accountable, evidence-informed, and focused on student outcomes.

Academy for Local Leadership Chicago (ALL Chicago)

40 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS	10–200 PEOPLE AT EACH SESSION	2.5 yrs IN THE MAKING
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Reaching students, parents, nonprofit partners, sitting school board members, afterschool programs, and neighborhood councils across Chicago.

Photo: Before this framework was words on a page, it was a room full of people naming what they wanted for their schools. This flip chart is from one of ALL Chicago's community engagement sessions: where participants answered the question, "wouldn't it be great if..."

ABOUT ALL CHICAGO

Mission

Through the Fellowship, we prepare civic leaders for effective school board service. Through the Governance Compass, we give the board a shared framework for what good governance looks like. Through Community Empowerment, we build the capacity of parents and community members to engage their elected board with confidence.

Vision

A Chicago where all students, especially those furthest from opportunity, benefit from school boards and local leaders who are knowledgeable, engaged, and committed to equitable education.

Three Pillars

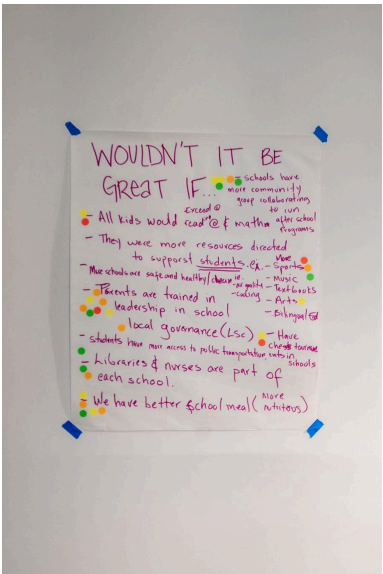
Prepared Leaders	Informed Communities	Strong Governance Norms
Building a fellowship pipeline and alumni network of trained school board leaders across all 20 districts. Equipping sitting board members with the knowledge, network, and resources to govern effectively.	Equipping residents with the knowledge and civic tools to engage meaningfully with school board governance. There is power in communities partnering with board members and holding them accountable for student success.	Establishing shared standards for effective governance, anchored by the Governance Compass and Board Insight Report. Defining and measuring good governance sets our system up for success beyond election cycles.

Why ALL Chicago Is Building This

Chicago's system includes many organizations doing important work: advocating for teachers, for families, for schools, for specific policy positions. ALL Chicago is not one of them.

We are not lobbying the board for a particular policy outcome. We are not advocating for a specific interest group. We are not pushing for a particular curriculum or a specific budget priority. We have no policy agenda beyond one thing: this board being effective at ensuring every young person in Chicago, especially those too often furthest from opportunity, receives a high-quality public education.

That is not a positioning statement. It is why we are the right organization to build an independent governance standard. When every organization defines good governance through the lens of its own issue, communities cannot hold the board to any single standard. The Governance Compass belongs to Chicago, not to any one organization or interest.



WHAT IS GOVERNANCE, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER HERE?

Governance is the job of the board. It means setting direction, making decisions in public, and being accountable for results. It is not running schools day to day.

For a school board, that means: setting a clear direction for students, hiring and evaluating the superintendent who is responsible for getting there, and being accountable to the community when it does not happen. A board does not run schools. It sets the conditions so that the people who do run schools can do their jobs well, and it holds them accountable when they don't.

THE MOMENT CHICAGO IS IN

Chicago has just made a historic shift: for the first time in decades, Chicagoans are electing their school board. Communities organized and advocated for over a decade to make that happen. They wanted their voices represented in that seat. That representation matters. And it is not enough on its own.

Elections change who holds power. They do not automatically build the capacity to use that power well. They do not define what good governance requires. And they do not give communities the tools to hold their representatives accountable after the votes are counted.

Right now, Chicago has no shared, nonpartisan definition of what good school board governance looks like. The result is visible: confusion about roles, decisions driven by politics rather than evidence, and a community left trying to make sense of it all. That is not a board member problem. It is an infrastructure problem. And infrastructure can be built.



Photo: Community members at an ALL Chicago civic engagement event in District 10 hosted by The Quarry and other partners.

"Staff members could link building goals to board and district goals for student learning and describe how those goals were having an impact in their classroom. They described the board as supportive. They knew who the board members were and what the board believed."

Iowa Lighthouse Study, from interviews with teachers and principals in high-achieving districts

WHY IT IS CALLED A COMPASS

A compass does not tell you where to go. It orients you so you can find your way. The Iowa Lighthouse Study, one of the foundational pieces of research behind this framework, took its name

from a navigational metaphor: research that could serve as a lighthouse to guide other school boards. We build on that spirit here.

In a compass, no direction is wrong. North is not better than south. East is not better than west. What matters is knowing where you want to go and being able to read whether you are pointed toward it.

That is what the Governance Compass does. It does not prescribe every decision a board makes. It names five orientations that an effective board must hold simultaneously. When a challenge arises, the Compass helps the board check its bearing: which of these commitments is being tested right now, and are we holding to it?

And here is the harder truth the compass metaphor holds: if you do not know where you want to go, a compass cannot help you. Without clarity of direction, board members will each be pointing a different way. Some toward one priority, some toward another, some toward the issue they campaigned on. The board will not function as a single governing body. It will function as a collection of individuals, each reading their own map.

"Board members could usually be very clear about their decision-making process in terms of study, learning, reading, listening, receiving data, questioning, discussing, and then deciding and evaluating."

Iowa Lighthouse Study, p. 10, describing board and superintendent teams in high-achieving districts



Photo: A fireside chat with Board President Sean Harden, part of ALL Chicago's fellowship program for aspiring board members and education advocates.

THE GOVERNANCE COMPASS

A Framework for Effective School Board Governance

The board's role is not to solve operational problems itself. It is to establish expectations and hold the superintendent accountable for addressing them.

School board governance is the practice of setting direction, establishing the boundaries grounded in community values within which the system must operate, and holding the system accountable for student outcomes, without managing day-to-day operations.

In Chicago, good governance means doing all of that through an equity lens, grounded in the CPS Equity Framework: goals anchored in who is furthest from opportunity, community voice as the source of limits, and decisions made transparently so the public can hold the board accountable.

Students at the Center

The five orientations hold together around one question: Which students is this serving? In Chicago, that requires an equity lens. Goals anchored in students furthest from opportunity, community voice shaping the board's commitments, and decisions made transparently so the public can hold the board accountable.

The Five Orientations

- 01 Set the Direction:** Adopt a small number of measurable student outcome goals and connect major decisions to them.
- 02 Protect Community Values:** Translate community priorities into clear commitments the board will uphold, especially under pressure.
- 03 Hold the System Accountable:** Align oversight of the superintendent and budget to the board's goals.
- 04 Be Transparent:** Make decisions in public, explain them clearly, and show how community input shaped action.
- 05 Govern Collectively:** Debate openly, decide through shared processes, and take collective responsibility for the board's actions.

01

SET THE DIRECTION

This comes first because everything else depends on it. The board decides what success looks like for students, with the community, not for them.

- Set 1 to 3 clear goals, shaped by what the community says matters most, with extra focus on students furthest from opportunity
- Stay focused on a few goals instead of spreading thin, even when there is pressure to add more
- Connect every decision, like the budget, superintendent's evaluation, and policy agenda, back to these goals.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN CHICAGO

The Chicago Board of Education often points to the district's [Success 2029](#) strategic plan as its goal. That plan spans 3 broad focus areas, 12 targeted priorities, and dozens of sub-goals. It was developed by the previous district administration, not adopted by this board through its own community engagement process.

The Compass asks something more specific: that the board adopts 1 to 3 measurable student outcome goals it owns (these can come from Success 2029), that connect the budget, the superintendent evaluation, and every major decision to a clear direction for students. Chicago's board has not yet done that work.

PUBLIC DRAFT SOURCE NOTE: Chicago Board of Education meeting records, 2026.

02

PROTECT COMMUNITY VALUES

The community decides what matters most for students. The board's job is to protect that, especially under pressure. A good board treats those values as non-negotiable, even when politics or money push the other way.

- Systematically collect the vision and values of community members, and turn those values into non-negotiables, like closing equity gaps, funding schools fairly, and keeping resources in classrooms
- When politics or outside pressure push back, the board doesn't trade away what the community said mattered most, especially for those with the least power to push back
- Listen first to the people most affected by the decision before the board acts, even if they are harder to reach
- Communities don't always agree on what matters most. A good board names that tension and builds a shared vision with transparent trade-offs.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN CHICAGO

In early 2026, the Board debated whether to fill a Local School Council vacancy at a high school where the council was divided over the interim principal's contract. The vacant seat could affect the outcome, and the Board ultimately chose not to fill it in an 8–7–4 vote.

The governance question was not only whether the Board had legal authority to act. It was whether the Board had a consistent, publicly articulated standard for when it would intervene in a local governance dispute. Without such a standard, communities cannot know whether the same principles would apply at another school or under different political pressure.

PUBLIC DRAFT SOURCE NOTE: Chicago Board of Education, February 26, 2026 Board Meeting

03

HOLD THE SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE

The board's two most powerful levers are the budget and its oversight of the superintendent, and both should be used to improve student experiences and outcomes.

- Set clear, public goals for the superintendent, then evaluate them against those goals, not politics
- Require the budget to reflect the board's stated goals. If a goal isn't in the numbers, it isn't a real priority
- Trust staff recommendations backed by evidence. The board's job is to evaluate and decide, not to re-do the staff's work
- These decisions affect real people in real time. Waiting too long is still a choice, and it has consequences.

"The superintendent and board established district goals based on student needs. School goals were expected to be linked to the district goals."

Iowa Lighthouse Study, p. 12, from interviews with superintendents in high-achieving districts

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN CHICAGO

In 2026, the Board delayed several charter school renewal votes after raising questions about oversight, financial stability, and recent charter closures. Those are legitimate accountability concerns.

The moment also illustrated the Board's responsibility to establish standards in advance, demand clear evidence, and make a timely decision that students and families can plan around. Holding the system accountable does not require the Board to redo staff analysis during the meeting or turn each renewal into a referendum on charter schools generally. It requires consistent criteria, rigorous review, and a decision grounded in evidence.

PUBLIC DRAFT SOURCE NOTE: Chicago Board of Education, May 28, 2026 Board Meeting

04

BE TRANSPARENT

A good board shares decisions and data in plain language, so the community can see how its input shaped outcomes for students.

- Make decisions publicly and connect community input visibly to board action
- Acknowledge success when it's happening, be honest when goals aren't being met, and share data in plain language so residents can see which students are being served well and which are not
- Publish meeting agendas, notes, and recordings and explain major decisions after the vote.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN CHICAGO

The 2025 CPS budget process showed what transparency can make possible. The Board held community roundtables, shared fiscal information publicly, and discussed analysis at board meetings. That visibility created conditions for an informed public conversation and allowed residents to see the choices before the Board.

Transparency has not been consistent across all of the Board's work. Standing committees were eliminated without a clear public explanation, and a Student Success Committee for which the Board solicited applications had not launched at the time of this draft. When oversight mechanisms disappear without an accounting, the public loses a window into how decisions are made.

PUBLIC DRAFT SOURCE NOTE: Chicago Board of Education meeting records, 2025 - 2026.

05

GOVERN COLLECTIVELY

A good board debates openly, then stands behind its decisions together, so students aren't the ones who pay for a divided board.

- Every member gets the same information and the same accountability
- Debate openly in the boardroom. A member can dissent publicly, seek reconsideration, or work to change a decision, but should not interfere with implementing a lawful decision of the board
- Each member answers to their district and to a shared ethical standard. The board's credibility depends on every member honoring that.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN CHICAGO

In its first year, individual Chicago board members sometimes made public statements that contradicted, preempted, or sought to revisit official board positions. Robust debate and public dissent are legitimate. Governing collectively does not require unanimity.

The governance problem arises when the superintendent, staff, families, or outside partners cannot tell whether an official board decision will hold. A member may explain a dissenting vote, but the Board's authority is collective. Its credibility depends on clear distinctions between individual advocacy and the direction of the governing body.

PUBLIC DRAFT SOURCE NOTE: Chicago Board of Education meeting records, 2026.

USING THE GOVERNANCE COMPASS

The Governance Compass was developed by ALL Chicago and is intended to become a shared civic standard, one that communities, board members, institutions, and voters can use together.

Board Members

Use the Compass as an operating framework for setting direction, structuring deliberation, evaluating proposals, and assessing the Board's own performance.

Students, Families, and Community Members

Use the Compass to ask not only whether you agree with a decision, but whether the Board used a clear, equitable, transparent, and accountable governance process.

Civic and Voter Education Organizations

Use the framework to help voters understand the job they are electing board members to perform.

Nonprofit and Advocacy Organizations

Use the Compass as a common reference point for governance even when organizations disagree about policy outcomes.

Funders and Civic Institutions

Invest in the independent infrastructure, training, public education, measurement, and accountability—that helps effective governance norms endure.

Sources

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ALL Chicago community engagement sessions, focus groups, governance workshops, and direct engagement with school board members and district leaders.

Bellwether Education Partners. Desk research conducted in support of the Board Insight Report.