Contemporary education policy today is dominated by an evolving array of federal and state mandates. Changes in educator and school accountability, the teacher workforce, and local priorities shape schools’ context. Education reforms and quality student instruction take time to implement. Yet, with an ever changing landscape, school leaders and teachers are challenged to meet current students’ needs with a rapidly changing set of instructional tools.

Balancing Voices presents a framework for school decision making that involves district leaders, principals, teachers, and community members. The articles for governance provide checks and balances, giving all stakeholders voice and agency as they make decisions.

**KEY CHALLENGES SCHOOLS FACE.** Holding schools accountable for putting students’ interest and achievement first is a national interest. Yet, after nearly 15 years of school accountability reform, a large amount of ambiguity remains surrounding testing expectations, educator expectations, and measures of success. Michigan Public Act 173 and revisions to ESEA through ESSA promote somewhat conflicting views of education evaluation and what matters in teaching quality. While Michigan legislation prescribes a set proportion of teacher evaluation related to test scores, federal ESSA law moves away from teacher quality defined through student growth models.

Concurrently, both nationally and statewide the market is reflecting a transformation in individuals engaged in the teaching profession. In Michigan, the number of high school teachers fell by nearly 4,000 from 2004-2011 (Covay Minor, Saw, Frank, Schneider, Torphy, manuscript under preparation). As shown in Figure 1, while some turnover may be due to retirement, this number mirrors a national trend of teachers leaving the profession citing challenging work conditions, administrative support, collegial climate and student population demands (Covay-Minor et al.; Ingersoll, 2001; Kukla-Acedvedo, 2009; Feng, Figolio, & Sass, 2010; Stuit & Smith, 2010; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). In fact, due to shortages in the labor market, Michigan law makers passed a new law allowing retired teachers to return to the classroom without losing their pensions. Coupled with market changes, union teacher bargaining contracts have weakened through right to work laws, charter school expansion, and public consumption of rhetoric calling for the removal of “rotten apples” in the teaching workforce (Edwards, 2014; Goldstein, 2014).

Local demands for college and/or workforce preparation, community involvement, or successful sports teams may affect choices of curricula, personnel decisions, and reform adoption. Furthermore, administrators and faculty must balance these demands with others from competing or complementary forces coming from external mandates and their teacher workforce. Choices made regarding key decisions often lack formal or consistent processes for communication with community or the full team of educators. This lack of transparency can compromise the decision-making process in a particular instance as well as erode trust between administrators, teachers, and community members in the long term (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, LeMahieu, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2011; Fullan, 2010).
**WHAT WE KNOW.** Those engaged in educational work are fundamentally responsible for improving the work (Bryk et al., 2015). Teachers and school leaders are called to meet the challenges posed by public education, working together as a collective, schools should continue to improve (Bryk et al., 2015). As such, Balancing Voices provides rationale and scope within the preamble below.

**PREAMBLE.** Many of the problems of schools are that they are asked to simultaneously respond to too many external pressures. The result is at best uncoordinated effort, at worst competing effort that undermines the commitment of the teachers. These articles represent a set of rules for guiding schools in determining when and how to implement changes in personnel, policies and practices.

Figure 1. Governance Responses to Key Challenges through Articles

<table>
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<th>Key Challenges</th>
<th>Governance Responses through Articles</th>
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<td>Mandates</td>
<td>1. Initial educator commitment to reforms</td>
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<td>Changes in Teacher Workforce</td>
<td>2. Time to learn and implement reforms, promoting collaboration</td>
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<td>Unique Features of Local Context</td>
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<td>4. Formal voice for teachers in school decision making</td>
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<td>5. Principal discretion in shaping instructional staffs</td>
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In Figure 1, mandates, changes in teacher workforce composition, and local priorities and needs educators’ work context. State and federal mandates relate time provided to learn and implement educational reform and perhaps unsurprisingly educators’ initial investment in reform rationale. Changes in the teacher workforce may also relate to these factors as teacher turnover can change school culture, a cohesive commitment to instruction, and undermine teachers’ collective voice in school decision making (Fullan 2011, 2010).
The articles do not concern themselves with specific matters of leadership, pedagogy, practice or curriculum. This will be left to the individual district, school, and faculty to decide. These articles pertain to the method of adopting and implementing changes in policies, practices, and personnel. Figure 2 depicts successful components to education reform and decision making, related outcomes, and potential pathways to attainment.

Figure 2. Organizational Motivations and Outcomes: Alignment with Top 10 in 10 Initiatives

In Figure 2, we examine more explicitly how governance responses address organizational outcomes and research based programs which can support these efforts. Balancing Voices articles facilitate five key indicants of cohesive, healthy schools including, initial educator commitment, time to learn and implement reforms, formal community and teacher voice in school decision making, and principal discretion over staffing and instructional reforms.

FILLING THE GOVERNANCE VACUUM. The constitution provides a structure to formalize existing social dynamics among school faculty and administrators. Contentions between short term outcomes and long term organizational culture, cooperation and reform, parent input and school leadership already exist. Navigating these issues can be difficult for both parents and educators alike. The articles outlined next provide processes to address these and other dynamics including:

- Better articulation and anticipation of competing school demands
- Increased transparency of school decision-making to parents and teachers
- Create conditions to cultivate collegiality
We translate the governance responses into the formal Articles in Figure 3 below. This Figure also shows the checks and balances among the Articles.

1. No school-wide reform, or change in policy or practice may be implemented unless the principal and two thirds or more of the teachers present to vote approve the change.

2. The effects of any change in practices or policies on student achievement should not be evaluated in terms of standardized test scores for three years after the initial vote to adopt the change.

3. The school shall have a local school council that has partial responsibility for governance. The council is to be composed of at least 50% of community members who are parents or guardians of students in the school. The council can vote to replace a principal by a vote of two thirds or more.

4. A principal can be evaluated for replacement if more than 20% of the teachers in the school request transfer or leave in a given year or if 50% or more of the teachers sign a collective grievance requesting the principal’s removal.

5. A principal can use a streamlined procedure to remove not more than 5% of the teachers in a given year.

6. For any decision in which the teachers vote differently than the principal the principal must explain his/her reasoning in writing and the teachers may appeal to the School Council. The Council must choose between the principal and the teachers and the Council’s vote will be final.

Different Demands and Decisions Require a Cohesive, Aligned Framework. The framework for Balancing Voices is designed to account for multiple stakeholder interests. Including the formal input of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes engenders cooperation – stakeholders are more willing to give on one decision if there will be a counterbalance on others. In addition, the constitutional framework fulfills a need to formalize decision-making, as well as makes the decision-making process more transparent and consistent. Affording teachers more agency and voice in policies and procedures engages educators in the school community, leading to a more committed teaching workforce and increased retention rates.
Administrators, meanwhile, have more time to make meaningful change before being held accountable for results by community or district members. This interchange improves decision making and may retain principals, as they have more discretion over their work and team. Finally, parents and students will benefit from a more collaborative, stable environment focused on instruction and excellence over time rather than unsustainable short-term, “quick-fix” improvements that do not produce systemic change.

TIMELINE FOR ADOPTION, INITIAL ASSESSMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION. Figure 4.

Adoption of the Constitution is a process that will ultimately contribute to the way a school governs itself. A school must deliberately consider adoption of the constitution, entailing assessment of existing governance practices, stakeholder contributions, reflective implementation which includes discourse among stakeholders, and evaluations including intermediate and long term metrics of successes, failures and challenges.
IMPLEMENTATION.

Implementing The Constitution for Effective School Governance will begin through a small set of pilot schools. Through careful progress monitoring, we will identify strengths, areas in need of reconsideration, and potential for growth (Figure 3).

Relying on the Learning to Improve paradigm (Bryk et al., 2015), we expect “to 'learn fast and implement well.'” This entails a process of scaling up, detailed below in Figure 4.
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