

# Board & Administrator

## FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## Board unprofessionalism will cost the district in an era of competition

Board member bickering and a superintendent's formal complaint against the board dominated the news about the South San Antonio, Texas, Independent School District recently.

Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra's 153-page complaint stated "the district has suffered and become even more divided under the leadership of board president Connie Prado," [foxsanantonio.com](http://foxsanantonio.com) reported.

Saavedra called his board president "a bully" in the complaint, and he wants outside help to protect himself from Prado's micromanaging, [foxsanantonio.com](http://foxsanantonio.com) reported.

"I don't need to be spending my energy trying to maintain control over this district due to board interference," Saavedra said, according to [foxsanantonio.com](http://foxsanantonio.com).

The board's meeting debate about Saavedra's complaint became heated and lasted late into the night, according to the website.

The district has had several superintendents over the last five years, [foxsanantonio.com](http://foxsanantonio.com) reported.

Parents and teachers at the meeting stated they were frustrated by the board's behavior.

For information, <http://foxsanantonio.com/news/local/south-san-isd-board-divided-continues-infighting>.

This type of board member vs. the superintendent breakdown always makes me ask:

Why in the world would any parent want their child to attend school in a mess of a school district?

In a competitive environment where public schools are not the only choice in many communities for parents/stakeholders to send their kids, how the board conducts itself becomes something to monitor closely.

A fractured relationship with the superintendent is a sure sign that all is not well on the board and in the district.

It's important that each board member understand the impact his actions and statements have.

A board member needs to ask: "Is what I am saying helping or harming the district and/or the superintendent?" "Am I building confidence in our district?"

This is important because parents and guardians do have choices today about where they send their children to school.

And if your enrollment decreases because the district earns a bad reputation, enrollment and funding decreases will certainly follow.

Board members should understand that they are ambassadors for the school district -- and that this is an important governance responsibility.

If the leadership team is dysfunctional, the public will be aware and the charter or private school across town will start looking pretty good.

Ensure that board members have training in media relations and how to present themselves to the public. If you do this, and the board understands its advocate/ambassador role clearly, there will be no reason for patrons to check out your competition. ■

## **What's in your governance handbook?**

The purpose of a governance handbook is to remind board members and the superintendent about the agreements that have been created to ensure a smooth operating team.

These agreements serve to maintain an effective board-superintendent relationship and lead to a school board that conducts its business in a professional manner.

The governance handbook should contain a set of principles that clearly spell out how the board operates, how board members should interact with each other, and the nature of the board's relationship to the superintendent.

A governance handbook should address the following:

- A statement about the board's unity of purpose for the district, the board's vision and mission statements, and a listing of the board's beliefs about public education.
- A description of the board's roles and responsibilities.
- A statement about the superintendent's role in managing the day-to-day operations of the district.
- A listing of the board's governance norms.
- A section on board meeting management. This should

provide information about placing items on the agenda, preparing for meetings, and seating arrangements at meetings.

- Information about voting.
- Information about closed sessions.
- An agreement about board members visiting schools.
- The board's agreement about how members will respond to email from community members.
- The board's agreement about how members will respond to concerns from community members or school staff.
- Communication commitments that state board members will communicate all concerns they hear from stakeholders to the superintendent and the board and superintendent will practice "no surprises."
- A commitment to maintain confidentiality on sensitive district matters.
- A statement about the board meeting consent agenda, its purpose, and the types of items that can be placed in it. ■

## **Understand board role during negotiations**

As a board member, it is not your job to negotiate directly with the teachers' union. That is a role best performed by a hired professional negotiator or your superintendent.

Board members can sit in on negotiation sessions, and some do, but in your board member role, you should take more of a monitoring, direction-setting position. The board should perform these roles during negotiations:

1. Communicate financial parameters to the negotiating team. For instance, the board should state the district's financial

bottom-line figures for salary and benefits increases.

2. Hear an update after each session. The board should be briefed by a member of the negotiations team once a week during negotiations. This should be an update about any progress or setbacks during the previous week.

3. Maintain the principle of confidentiality. The board has a duty to keep information about negotiations confidential. If board members breach confidentiality, it can harm the district's position during collective bargaining. ■

## **Superintendent's evaluation and staff input: Here's why it's a bad idea**

There are two reasons why asking school personnel to evaluate the superintendent is a poor idea:

1. Board members should evaluate IF the district's goals and objectives were met, not HOW the goals were accomplished. If the board needs to assure itself that staff is "happy," they should review turnover rates, any filed staff grievances, and other evidence of staff contentment.

2. The chain of command disintegrates when employees communicate directly with the board through a superintendent performance evaluation. The board compounds the problem if it invites the staff to anonymously evaluate the administrator. Including employees in this process often opens the door for them to go directly to the board with any issue. ■

## **The board's 10 important governance tasks**

1. Define and approve the district's vision and mission.
2. Hire a superintendent.
3. Evaluate and support the superintendent.
4. Ensure the district has adequate resources.
5. Monitor the district's finances.
6. Plan strategically to give the district a successful future.
7. Approve curriculum and monitor the effectiveness of the district's instructional programs.
8. Act as an ambassador for the district.
9. Ensure that the district operates legally and ethically, in an accountable and transparent fashion.
10. Assess the board's performance. ■