

How Are You Treating Each Other at the Board Table?

By Deb Macon, MBA

Robert Fulghum got it right. Everything we need to know about how to treat each other at the board table, or anywhere for that matter, we really learned in kindergarten. Fulghum's simple lessons from his seminal 1986 book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, align closely with MASB's Board of Education Governance Standards and Guiding Principles. A few of these elemental beliefs include:

1. Share everything
2. Play fair
3. Don't hit people
4. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone
5. Learn some and think some
6. Watch out for traffic
7. Hold hands and stick together¹

Could it be that simple rules like Fulghum's or the ones our parents, grandparents and guardians insisted upon describe behaviors that, when practiced at the board table, contribute to effective governance as well as lay the foundation for successful student academic achievement? I believe so. These same behaviors also establish and sustain district culture.

The more complex work related to the Governance Standards must occur at school board tables across the state—in *living* the Standards—in holding ourselves and fellow board members accountable to them. Here are a few thoughtful ways to go about doing that.

To start with, what proactive behaviors at the board table demonstrate that board members are *living* the Guiding Principles and Governance Standards? A systematic way to explore behaviors that live the Principles and Standards would be to view them through the Trust Cycle. Each touchpoint along the Trust Cycle represents a specific set of behaviors that, when practiced effectively, supports the Guiding Principles that undergird the Governance Standards.

LESSON #1

Open and honest, two-way **communication** is the starting point in developing respectful and productive relationships. Team members should regularly communicate with one another respectfully sharing their personal values and interests in order to best serve as advocates for the interests of Michigan public school students.

Keys to good working relationships at the board table associated with this include:

1. Arriving at meetings early to network with other board members, the superintendent and stakeholders
2. Arriving prepared
3. Submitting questions for clarification consistent with the board's protocol so that all board members can be apprised of the answers
4. Listening actively without interrupting
5. Controlling pitch, tone and pace when speaking



6. Communicating clearly
7. Maintaining a sense of humor
8. Keeping an open mind
9. Modeling effective and positive nonverbal skills
10. Providing positive eye contact
11. Modeling positive facial expressions

BOARD OF EDUCATION GOVERNANCE STANDARDS		INDIVIDUAL BOARD MEMBER GOVERNANCE STANDARDS	
GUIDING PRINCIPLES		GUIDING PRINCIPLES	
Accountability • Commitment to Learning • Inclusivity Stewardship • Transparency • Vision-Driven		Advocacy • Civility • Courage • Empathy • Inquiry Integrity • Regard for Authority • Selflessness	
1	THE BOARD OF EDUCATION... in cooperation with the superintendent and stakeholders establishes and commits to a vision for the school district that emphasizes high expectations for achievement of all students and quality instruction.	1	THE INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER... is motivated by and focused on what is in the best interest of all students.
	2 governs in a manner that is dignified and worthy of trust.	2	believes in the importance of and actively engages in lifelong learning.
	3 is accountable to the school district community.	3	understands and respects both the authority and responsibilities of the Board of Education.
	4 holds the superintendent accountable for creating the outcomes identified in the school district plan.	4	approaches school governance work with a spirit of inquiry.

LESSON #2

Sustained and proactive communication leads to **shared understanding** of colleagues' positions on issues formed through active listening, empathy and integrity. You can bring these to the board table by:

1. Pausing a few seconds after a speaker finishes before speaking or asking a question
2. Assuming a posture that demonstrates positive attention
3. Addressing all comments and questions to the Board President unless in an informal setting
4. Helping focus discussion
5. Helping to keep the meeting moving
6. Asking questions for clarification as appropriate
7. Encouraging colleagues
8. Expressing appreciation

LESSON #3

Once shared understanding is reached through open, transparent, honest dialogue and inquiry, team members become **predictable** to one another. Based on an understanding that has developed from what each board member represents, they have shared expectations of how each other will behave. Paramount to developing shared understanding is civility, courage, accountability and selflessness. You can demonstrate these through:

1. Staying focused on student achievement
2. Remaining independent
3. Arriving informed
4. Remaining positive and upbeat
5. Addressing issues and not personalities
6. Seeking clarification respectfully

LESSON #4

When board members become predictable to one another behaving in a **trustworthy** fashion, trust begins to develop. Consistent attention to inclusivity and stewardship are active components of building and sustaining trust. Bring this to the board table by:

1. Learning your job
2. Staying in your lane
3. Devoting the time necessary
4. Using parliamentary procedure effectively—not too much, not too little
5. Respecting confidentiality
6. Holding yourself and the board accountable
7. Demonstrating understanding of budget, board policies, the strategic plan and public school funding
8. If holding a minority viewpoint, supporting the majority after the vote is taken
9. Demonstrating respect for and understanding of the chain of command

LESSON #5

Trust increases as teams learn to count on predictability to help them arrive at common commitments and shared efforts. At this point **teamwork** begins. Board members, the superintendent and stakeholders work in partnership to establish a shared vision and plans for the school district to attain that vision. At the board table:

1. Follow the “No Surprises” rule
2. Strive for teamwork
3. Comply with the board's Code of Conduct, protocols, procedures, etc.
4. Learn and practice consensus
5. Learn and practice compromise
6. Express active interest in professional development
7. Report on your own professional development
8. Affirm understanding of and compliance with the Governance Standards and Guiding Principles

To sustain effective governance, Trust Cycle Behaviors must continue, repeat and be renewed regularly. Special attention must be given to moving through these behaviors with fidelity especially in times of change and transition. Referencing the Board Governance Standards and its Guiding Principles serve as a framework for maintaining good working relationships at the board table and I encourage you to use them. And it never hurts to go back to Fulghum's lessons either!

¹Fulghum, R. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, 1986.

²Michigan Association of School Boards. *Board of Education Governance Standards*, 2017.

³My Accounting Course. *What are Guiding Principles?* Retrieved from www.myaccountingcourse.com/accounting-dictionary/guiding-principles, April 5, 2020.

⁴Michigan Association of School Boards. *CBA 101: Fundamentals of School Board Service presentation*, 1995.

BOARD OF EDUCATION Governance Standards

- Provide a framework for effective school board governance.
- Define **Guiding Principles** that should affect board decisionmaking.
- Identify the specific behaviors of school boards and school board members that contribute to positive outcomes for students.²

GUIDING PRINCIPLES are a set of values that establish a framework for expected behavior and decisionmaking.³



PERSONAL REFLECTION

- What lessons do you recall from your early days in school?
- Why is each lesson important?
- Which principles or values form the foundation for each simple rule?
- What additional behaviors have you either practiced or observed that live the Standards?

Was this article helpful to you?



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