

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

April 2018 Vol. 31, No. 12

Editor: Jeff Stratton

Public participation at board meetings: Avoid a black eye

The Vermilion Parish, La., School Board received some backlash because of a controversial action during a meeting earlier this year. The advocate.com reported a school district stakeholder was asked to leave the meeting after questioning a new contract for Superintendent Jerome Puyau, while teachers have had no raises for years.

The patron, who was a district teacher and parent, was handcuffed on the floor in the hallway and arrested, and the incident captured on phone video quickly went viral, the advocate.com reported.

Board President Anthony Fontana “provoked national outrage after ordering a teacher tossed from a public meeting and later defending her arrest is stepping down,” the advocate.com reported.

Video of the arrest “garnered millions of views on social media and was aired on network news programs. Within days, Puyau was on national television expressing regret that Hargrave hadn’t been allowed to finish her remarks at the meeting,” the advocate.com reported.

For information, http://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/education/article_a8b1294e-fd51-11e7-aff2-7bdf8d27448.html.

How the board handles its business is quite important and affects public confidence. If your board’s meetings are must-see TV, you have a problem on your hands.

Attorney Gary R. Brochu (Shipman & Goodwin LLP; 860-251-5705) said it appears the board president didn’t handle the incident properly. “This is a board chairperson who forgot Rule One of board service: model the conduct and values you expect from the staff and students in your district,” Brochu said. Individuals who persist in disrupting the smooth conduct of a board meeting can be removed, Brochu said, but that should always be the board’s final option, not its first.

“Of course, if an individual, after repeated requests, insists on interrupting a meeting they can be asked to leave, or even escorted from the room,” Brochu said. “But that is always a last resort.

“It’s important to remember that the board will never look good when having someone removed from its meeting, so it’s best to take the high road,” Brochu said. “This way, if an individual does have to be removed, the board is in the role of the victim as opposed to simply trying to shut down opposition.” ■

Guidance for managing public comment at board meetings

The Oregon School Boards Association suggests these guidelines for handling public comment:

“OSBA suggests limiting discussion or comment to a specific time on the agenda – possibly 15 to 30 minutes at the start of the meeting,” OSBA said. “It is also recommended that time limits be placed on each speaker; three minutes is the aver-

age. The key to making this work is being fair and consistent in the application of the time limit.”

“If an occasion arises where the topic is an explosive one, the board chair must use strong leadership skills to ensure that the meeting runs smoothly.” For information, http://www.osba.org/Resources/Article/Board_Operations/Public_participation.asp. ■

How should board members handle complaints?

Board members should expect to hear from their constituents about school issues in the course of their time on the board. That comes with public service. Sometimes, however, school stakeholders will simply want a favor or to vent with a complaint.

How the board member responds is crucial to upholding the school's chain of command. Here's a process I recommend:

Board members should not participate in a discussion regarding complaints but should instead direct the person making the complaint to the ap-

propriate person on the chain of command within the district. That person is best situated to handle the complaint directly. For example, if a constituent is complaining about his daughter's school, refer that person to the school's principal.

When pressed to do more, board members should inform the citizen that the board member needs to remain impartial in case the situation comes before the board at a later date.

Board members in the spirit of "no surprises" should inform the superintendent of complaints brought to them. ■

Consent agenda is a big meeting time-saver

The consent agenda is included as part of the regular board meeting agenda but contains items that can be voted on all at once under one motion unless a board member requests that an item be pulled out and looked at individually.

By doing this, the board acts swiftly on multiple items and saves meeting time.

Items usually contained in the consent agenda

typically are routine. Some examples:

- Routine and/or recurring items.
- Budget amendments.
- Gifts, donations, and bequests.
- Financial information.
- Minutes of the regular and special board meetings.
- Routine personnel items.
- Routine bid recommendations. ■

Develop a classification of duties chart to prevent role confusion

Here's a perfect retreat activity for the board and superintendent team: Jointly develop a board-superintendent classification of duties chart that can clarify respective roles. Keep it handy and refer to it whenever the team has a question about who should be doing what.

In the examples below, "B" represents Board responsibility and "S" is a Superintendent duty.

Approve district mission and vision statements: B

Approve budget: B

Make policy recommendation: S

Approve policy: B

Study the need for school facilities and develop a long-term school building program: S

Make recommendations to the board based on need for school facilities and school building program: S

Care for, maintain and operate buildings, lands, and apparatus and other property used for school purposes: S

Provide adequate instructional supplies and materials, distribute resources equally among schools; provide a safe school setting: S

Hire certified staff – teachers: S

Designate the schools to be attended by children: S

Provide for transportation of students: S ■