

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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School board accountability: Meet the public's trust

Bob Hughes has plenty of experience when it comes to boards: He is a member of the Washington State Board of Education, a 29-year veteran of school board service, and has served on the Washington State School Directors Association's board of directors.

As a consultant, Hughes knows plenty about school board accountability. When Hughes works with boards, he likes to tell a story about what it means to be a "good" board.

"When I first became a board member in 1979 and attended my first state school board conference, I sat at a table with 10 other board members from across the state," Hughes said.

Hughes pointed out that there was some board experience sitting around that table, and he was new to board service, so he sought their advice by asking, "What is a good board?"

At the table, each of the board members ex-

plained their thoughts on "good" boards. "Then, the gentleman across from me, an older fellow, said, 'You know, a good board only has to meet once a year,'" Hughes said.

"The board should meet right after the district publishes its annual report, which most schools don't do. At that meeting, there needs to be a motion to fire the superintendent. If that motion fails, the meeting is adjourned until next year," he said.

"Everybody at the table thought this was funny, as state law requires regular school board meetings," Hughes said.

The point this board member was raising, Hughes said, is a very good one about school board accountability through the work of the superintendent. "That story says something about the performance of the district by the board fulfilling its duty when it assesses how its superintendent is doing," Hughes said. ■

6 sound habits for the board and administrator relationship

To get board members out of the habit of "fixing things" for the district, commit to these six principles:

1. The board gives counsel, makes decisions, and provides oversight leadership to the district.
2. The board does not manage; it governs.
3. The board is responsible for selecting and evaluating the superintendent.
4. The board is responsible for ensuring the long-term health and viability of the district.
5. The board is a governmental body of the state and acts in the best interests of the community.
6. The board does not set strategy; instead, the board provides direction. ■

Put on your team-builder cap

When boards work harmoniously, they can do great things for students and their communities. Conversely, when the board is plagued by infighting and bad blood, the board fails in its mission.

It takes a continual effort by every member of the board-superintendent team to develop good board teamwork.

The board should commit to two ground rules to encourage a sense of team spirit.

1. Recognize that every board member will have different opinions and ideas.
2. Respect everyone's ideas, even if you don't agree with them.

Here are some strategies to help board members encourage good teamwork.

1. Have dinner, and ban school board talk.

Schedule a night out at a local restaurant or country club. Invite all board members, their spouses, and your superintendent. Keep board business off the menu for that evening. Ensure this gathering complies with state open meeting laws.

This type of setting gives board members a chance to interact and talk when there are no problems or controversial items on a meeting agenda. It also helps members of the board team get to know each other better. The next time a tough issue comes up, the board will feel more comfortable dealing with it.

2. Learn the personalities on the board and how to deal with them. There are many types of tests

available to pinpoint specific personality types. Take one of them as a board retreat activity, and find out whether your board teammates are introverts or extroverts or whether an individual tends to make quick decisions or take his time before drawing conclusions.

When the board team has this type of insight about its individual members, you will better understand why they react the way they do to certain issues. Then it just becomes a matter of learning to work with others' styles.

3. Focus on the good. Make time for this simple board activity: Pass out notecards to each board member, and have them write down two positive things about several other board members. Then have each member read what they have written. Most board members will be surprised — and delighted — when they hear good things about themselves.

4. Never take issues personally. The board needs to stress in its policies or governance principles that the majority rules. Once a vote has been taken, board members cannot let things fester if they have been on the losing side of an issue. Do not torture yourself by stewing over the loss and letting it affect board teamwork.

Poor board behavior gets noticed by your community: The community doesn't expect the board to agree on every issue. But neither do stakeholders want board members to rant, rave, or pout when they lose on an issue. ■

Is the board on track?

A simple Q&A can give the board insight into its effectiveness and accountability to stakeholders.

Consider how your board is performing by discussing some questions in these four areas:

1. Planning.
2. Governance.
3. Teamwork.
4. Relationship with the superintendent.

Planning

- Does the board work with the superintendent on planning?
- Does your board have a clear mission and vision for the district that it reviews, approves, and articulates?

Governance

- Does your board govern the district by setting policy instead of manage it?

- Does your board assess the superintendent's job performance?

Teamwork

- Does your board work well internally and with the superintendent so that more is accomplished as a team?
- Does your board recognize that leadership requires all to focus on the vision, mission, purpose, and goals of the district?

Relationship with the superintendent

- Does your board understand the rules, ideas, and concepts that guide how board members work with the superintendent?
- Do the board and superintendent have an open, positive relationship?
- Does your board support the superintendent in the administration of the district? ■