

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Board role conflict: Caucusing with the union is inappropriate

Where does a board member's loyalty lie during school district negotiations with the teacher's union?

A Maine school board is learning that the answer to that question is not so clear to one of its board members: The union supported the board member in his election to the school board, so the board member now sits with the teachers' caucus during negotiations.

Brad Banasik, Legal Counsel and Director of Labor Relations, Michigan Association of School Boards, said board members should look to their oath of office on questions of where their loyalty lies. He said the board member's action is "inappropriate" in this example.

"When a board member takes the oath of office, the oath indicates that the board member will uphold the duties and responsibilities of the board office in the best interests of the district," Banasik said.

How districts handle salary negotiations varies, Banasik said. Sometimes board members are appointed to the district's negotiations team, and

other times they are not, he said. "Certainly, if that board member is on the negotiations team, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to be caucusing with the union," Banasik said. "Even if the board member isn't on the negotiations team, I think there would be concern if he was caucusing with the union."

The board wants to be unified when negotiating with the union, Banasik said. If you have a board member who is not in agreement with other board members, that is going to hurt the district in its negotiations with teachers, he said.

"One strategy I've seen during difficult negotiations is for the union to divide the board," Banasik said. It would certainly be one way to divide the board if you have a board member sitting with the union's caucus, he said.

If the board doesn't have a member on the district's team during negotiations, the board's role then becomes staying informed during the process, Banasik said. The superintendent needs to give her board routine updates on the status of the negotiations as they occur, he said. ■

Don't debate the public at a meeting; listen instead

Here's a tip that can help your board get through rocky public meetings: Never debate with a citizen who needs to get something off of her chest at a meeting. It's always much better to simply listen during the citizen's allotted time.

One thing to keep in mind about a constituent who vents at a meeting is that people generally understand that their hot-button issue isn't necessarily of vital importance to the entire district. But that doesn't make their issue any less important to the speaker.

By listening, the board lets its constituents know that they have been heard. Give speakers a chance to participate in the process and board decision-making will be much smoother. ■

Try this model for a 2-hour board meeting

Believe it or not, a Michigan board recently voted to *limit* its board meetings to five hours! (ann-arbor.com/news/ann-arbor-school-board-commits-to-5-hour-limit-to-meetings/)

If the board invests planning and thought into how it wants its meetings to run, and communicates this to the superintendent and board president, it should be able to keep meetings to a reasonable length.

Below find an outline that describes *Board & Administrator's* plan for a two-hour board meeting:

1. The president calls the meeting to order on time. Board meetings that start on time have a better chance to end on time and are more professional and businesslike.
2. Take attendance. Note in the minutes who is present and who is absent.
3. Recognize visitors. Introduce non-board attendees who will play a part in the upcoming meeting. The board should know who will be listening. This is also a good time for the board to hear from students who have an activity they would like to show the board or to honor staff for their accomplishments.
4. Approve the agenda. Always formally accept the agenda.
5. Approve minutes of the last meeting. Minutes are the official record of the board's action. Handle approval quickly, but do not take this action lightly. Board members should scrutinize minutes *before* the meeting and correct any errors before they are approved.
6. Hear the financial report. The report should not include long discussions about where to find new revenue. Questions about bills should be directed to the superintendent *prior* to the meeting.
7. Hear committee reports. To save time, committee chairs should send written reports to the president and superintendent prior to the meeting for placement in the board packet. Recommendations from committees should be held until the new business section on the agenda.
8. Hear the superintendent's report. This report should be for informational purposes only.
9. Hear public input. Remember, however, the board meeting is the board's meeting. This section of the board meeting should limit speaker comments in terms of time, and the content of the comments should be identified prior to the speaker beginning. The board should not spend meeting time acting on speakers' comments.
10. Consider unfinished business. Ideally, there should be few items of unfinished business. The board should deal with items where motions were tabled or actions interrupted by adjournment and intentionally carried over to the next meeting.
11. Consider new business. The board president should ask for a motion on each item.
12. Make announcements. This part of the meeting is purely informational and does not require board action.
13. Adjourn the meeting. ■

Use summertime to solve districtwide issues

Tackle a districtwide problem when school is out for the summer and the board will engage in a good generative thinking activity. One example that comes to mind in our wired, connected, and fast-paced world is getting parents meaningfully involved in their child's education.

As a starting point, board members can take a leadership role in encouraging the public to be active in their schools. There are several ways to do this:

1. **Increase board visibility.** For instance, board members can take tickets at ball games. It's key for the public to see board members themselves involved in the schools.
 2. **Use speaking engagements to market.** This is a good way for the board president and other board officers to get the school's message out to the community. *Tip:* Have a theme, and repeat it at each speaking engagement. The message should encourage the audience to visit the schools and see how they operate. The schools are a public institution, and the public should be aware of what it is paying for.
 3. **Have committee members do board meeting presentations as needed.** If the committee's topic is particularly relevant to a community concern, a board member from the committee can provide an update.
 4. **Gather information from your principals.** If principals document what is taking place in their buildings and provide this information through the superintendent to the board, it gives board members a chance to talk about the schools at public meetings. ■
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