

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Board officers take colleague to task over 'ethics violations'

The Johnston, Iowa, board president and vice president came down hard on fellow board member John Dutcher because of what they believe are his repeated ethics violations. *The Des Moines Register* reported.

At a late January board meeting, Board President Mike Farrell read a letter concerning comments Dutcher made online and through email in response to an article at the *Register* website that they consider a violation of board policy, the *Register* reported.

Dutcher posted comments at *DesMoinesRegister.com* underneath a *Register* story about the Johnston district in which he criticized a teacher and indicated he was speaking on behalf of the board. He also revealed disciplinary action taken against the teacher, the *Register* reported.

As Farrell read the letter, Dutcher interrupted with comments that included expletives. Dutcher called the letter the "most ludicrous thing ever," the *urbandale.patch.com* reported.

In the letter, as reported at *urbandale.patch.com*, Farrell said Dutcher's actions were in direct violation of the board's Director's Code of Conduct policy. The policy states:

"Board members' interaction with public, media or other entities must recognize this limitation and the inability of any board members to speak for the board or school administration except to repeat explicitly stated board decisions," and "Board members will not publicly make or express individual negative judgments about the superintendent, staff performance or other board members."

Trouble-making board members put the board/superintendent team in a difficult spot. In the Johnston example, the board leadership is taking

action to neutralize the board renegade.

Here are some ideas that can help any board deal with a difficult colleague:

- **Remember "majority rules."** Some board members simply won't buy into decorum and behavior principles. If the majority is appalled by a dysfunctional board member's behavior, it should stay calm and patient. That's the best course with a board member who will never get it when it comes to his role. If four members of a five-member board do understand their role, the board team can typically ride out the situation.

- **"Leakers" need to be reminded of the board's policy on confidentiality.** No single board member has the right to act as judge and jury over what remains private. In fact, it may be a violation of state school ethics provisions to reveal information about staff discipline decisions.

- **Isolate troublemakers.** If nothing else works to control the behavior of a member with a chip on his shoulder, the board can isolate the troublemaker. Listen to the board member when he goes off, stay polite, but do not respond. Just move onto the next issue without acknowledging the problem member's rant. Once he finds himself isolated, the board member's options start to shrink.

- **Educate, educate, educate.** The orientation and development an effective board receives isn't really going to help fix a "bad apple" board member's behavior. But what it will do if the education is supplied steadily over time is teach your board majority its proper role. When the majority understands its role, the board team remains in a strong position while the trouble-maker is marginalized. ■

Do a quick board appraisal

Take 10 minutes now to put down your thoughts on how the board operates. Look for areas for growth. If each board member does this, collate the results and look for trends that show strengths and weaknesses. Develop a plan to correct weak areas of board performance. Use a scale with 4 being "strongly agree" and 1 being "strongly disagree."

Board works together as a team__ Comments:

Board members communicate well__ Comments:

Board communicates well with public__ Comments:

Board's decision-making process leads it to make sound decisions__ Comments:

Board maintains its legal role as a policy-making body__ Comments:

As individuals, board members understand their role and act accordingly__ Comments:

Board members conduct themselves professionally (come to meetings on time and prepared, participate)__ Comments:

Board members are respectful__ Comments:

Board agenda is structured for effective meetings__ Comments:

Agenda background materials are complete and received well in advance of meetings__ Comments:

Temporary committees can help

A temporary or ad hoc committee can research and report to the board on an issue of current importance to the district. A good rule of thumb for temporary committees is that they should not work in areas that are related to the mission of the board's standing committees.

Here are some more tips for temporary committees:

- 1. They should work only until their job is complete.** Dissolve temporary committees once they have made their report or recommendation to the full board.
- 2. Limit the number of the committee's meetings.** They should meet only when they have work to do. Otherwise, the committee may be tempted to find something to do.
- 3. Understand that the committee is established by and reports to the board.** The board should provide the temporary committee with a job description, mission, and deadline for its work to be complete. Have the board president appoint committee members subject to board approval to establish the principle of board control of the committee. ■

Commit to relationship maintenance

Here are four commitments the board should make to maintain an effective working relationship with its superintendent:

1. Hold regular board work sessions to focus on board roles and relationships with the superintendent. Meet once or twice annually to have this discussion. Consider adding a clause to the superintendent's contract that mandates these sessions will take place.

2. See yourself as a member of the team, not an individual. The board's authority comes from its collective action during meetings. Board members who don't understand this concept — or willfully disregard it — can damage board and superintendent teamwork.

3. Know your superintendent and board colleagues on a personal level. Relationships become stronger as people get to know each other better. Break bread together occasionally as a board and administrator team. Have regular meetings with the superintendent where the board member and administrator catch up on each other's personal news after handling school-related business.

4. Never criticize the superintendent in public. If the superintendent's work is unsatisfactory in your view, first bring it to the superintendent's attention. Then, use the appraisal process to correct it. That's the professional way to handle work performance issues. You would expect the same in your job. ■