

Board & Administrator

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To improve meeting efficiency, categorize agenda items

Barrett M. Christina, staff attorney for the New Hampshire School Boards Association in Concord, N.H., said in his role, he is asked to provide education to boards on how to run meetings more effectively.

The problems boards encounter with meetings are often related to agenda management, Christina said. "They have too many agenda items," he said. For example, the board might have 10 agenda items, and they can only finish five. Then the board ends up tabling issues and constantly playing catch-up on the tabled items, he said.

That is a problem for the governance of the district. "The board can't get through its agenda, so it can't manage its business of governing the district," Christina said.

The NHSBA's recommendation, Christina said, is careful agenda organization. The NHSBA suggests breaking the board's business down into four categories.

1. Action items. These are the issues that require board action. "You need a motion, followed by a second, a discussion, and then a vote," Christina said.

Examples of action items can include authorizing expenditures or directing the superinten-

dent to accomplish something.

2. General consent items. These should be routine matters that don't require much, if any, discussion, Christina said. "At most, the board receives a report or approves minutes," he said. "Consent is for noncontroversial issues that require no specific action by the board and are approved by general consent."

3. Discussion items. A discussion item will not be voted upon on at the current meeting, Christina said. "The board might ask questions, provide feedback, or hear from counsel on the issue, but it won't take any action," he said.

4. Information items. These agenda items require no board action or discussion, Christina said. "They can be similar to consent agenda items but could involve a Boy Scout troop activity or a presentation by second-graders," he said.

Categorizing agenda items like this can lead to more productive school board meetings. "Breaking the agenda into three or four broader categories can leave the board time for discussion, voting, and receiving presentations," Christina said.

To contact Christina, email bchristina@nhsba.org. For more information, visit www.nhsba.org. ■

Want to serve effectively? Here's how

The California School Boards Association's professional governance standards define what is required to serve effectively as an individual trustee. Here are a couple of highlights.

1. An effective board member "participates in professional development and commits the time and energy necessary to be an informed and effective leader."

2. An effective board member "understands the difference between board and staff roles, and refrains from performing management functions that are the responsibility of the superintendent and staff."

For more information, visit www.csba.org. ■

Policy recommendation: Put that smartphone away during the meeting

Is technology a boon or bane to an effective board meeting?

It might be both. Some districts purchase laptops for board members in an effort to go paperless while also giving board members fast access to important meeting documents.

On the other hand, smartphones can create meeting problems if board members use them to communicate with each other or members of the public about school business.

The New Hampshire School Boards Association recommends districts have a board policy on the use of electronic devices at board meetings by trustees, said Barrett M. Christina, staff attorney

for the NHSBA.

In the NHSBA sample policy, the message is clear: The NHSBA sample policy reads (excerpted): “School board members will refrain from using electronic communication devices during board meetings. Electronic communication device means, but is not limited to, cell phones, camera phones, pagers, beepers, and other similar electronic communication devices.”

“I would encourage board members to refrain from using technology for anything other than official board business,” Christina said.

To contact Christina, email bchristina@nhsba.org. For more information, visit www.nhsba.org. ■

Tips for board electronic communications

The best recommendation for using electronic communication as a board member is to never use a smartphone, computer, or any other device to conduct board business.

A board member can use email, for example, to share information with other board members as long as no deliberation or decision-making occurs.

Here are acceptable uses of electronic communications.

1. Contact your superintendent or board president via email to suggest an agenda item.
2. Receive or send reminders on your phone regarding board or committee meeting times, dates, and locations.
3. Answer questions from the superintendent, president, or stakeholders as long as no board business is taking place. Remember, however, to respect the chain of command if responding to a query from a stakeholder. ■

Ensure district's story is told

A school board has an obligation to make sure positive information about the schools reaches the district's internal and external stakeholders. Why?

Because there are a lot of competing voices out there — some of them quite negative, or even angry about the schools. If the district doesn't put good news out there for public awareness, it may be swamped by the bad, incomplete, or even inaccurate news.

Here are some tips to ensure school news is conveyed properly.

- Send out regular news releases on accomplishments of the district, its students, and its staff on matters before the board.
- Ensure that board meeting agendas have space for student and staff demonstrations at every meeting.
- Place a recap of board meetings on the district's website after each meeting while ensuring

the update is sent to relevant local media.

- Ask your superintendent to write a monthly column for the local newspaper or write a regular “ask the superintendent” feature for the district's website in which she answers questions submitted by citizens.
- Arrange for board members to appear at community events and speak regularly at service clubs in the community.
- Teach the community about what the board does. Many district websites provide easy-to-find information about school board agendas, policies, the budget, and meeting minutes. That is good communication, but they don't often educate the public about the board's main purpose: school governance.
- Tour the schools. Make this an event in which board members see students and teachers in action, and arrange for a video of the event to be posted to the district's website. ■