

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Board service requires professionalism

Boards that are not professional often find some reason to fault their superintendent. It may be just one or two members who act unprofessionally, so it falls to the full board to rein them in.

To build and maintain professionalism, work to ensure:

- * Board members realize they have no individual power and can only make decisions as a member of the full board when it votes.

- * Board members realize the superintendent takes direction from the full board and doesn't take orders from individual members.

- * Board members realize they are policymakers, but do not implement policy.

- * Board members refer the problems of constituents to the lowest possible level of administration.

- * Board members realize that ethical dealings

are vital to their relationship with board colleagues, the superintendent, and the community.

- * Board members practice open, honest communication with their superintendent.

- * Board members maintain confidentiality, especially of the closed session and on all personnel matters.

- * Board members don't pursue hidden agendas.

There are many ways to formally commit to professional behavior as a board, such as:

- * Through the policies the board approves.

- * By developing a set of operating principles at a board and superintendent retreat.

- * Through attendance at your state school boards association meetings.

- * By developing a set of rules to govern the board and superintendent relationship. ■

Board's leadership sets tone on 'who does what'

The board sets policy, and the superintendent implements policy. That's the board and superintendent relationship in its simplest terms.

While this may be perfectly simple in theory, in practice, on issues such as hiring and leave for staff, among others, it is not always so clear-cut.

That's why when a dilemma about "who does what" arises, the leaders on the board team (generally the board's officers) should issue polite reminders to the full board. When they do this, their message should be, "The full board, through its votes, makes decisions on the issues that affect the entire district, while

the superintendent handles matters that affect individuals."

Another way for a board to manage this issue is for the board to agree on a "watchdog" who will remind fellow members when the board is crossing the line into management with its requests or actions. Some superintendents are upfront about saying this; others are not.

When a board member strays from this concept, do not single her out. Instead, politely remind the full board when an individual board member enters into the weeds on an issue. That way, no board member feels "targeted." Just say, "I think this is an area that belongs to the superintendent." ■

Superintendent evaluation schedule

Fill in this timeline so that the board can stay on schedule and perform the superintendent’s evaluation on time. Recommended time frames for key evaluation activities the board should undertake are included below.

Activity:	Date:
Job description and superintendent contract reviewed by: <i>If you are modifying either document, this can take several weeks. Be sure to build enough time into your evaluation schedule to accommodate these important steps.</i>	_____
Evaluation form agreed upon: <i>This should be a joint superintendent-board activity.</i>	_____
Evaluation form distributed to board: <i>Do this as soon as the board and superintendent agree upon a form.</i>	_____
Form completed by: <i>Allow one to two weeks for the board to complete the form.</i>	_____
Board should review and compile results from individual board member evaluations by: <i>Allow one week.</i>	_____
Evaluation meeting: <i>This should be scheduled for a closed session with the administrator in attendance as soon as the board has compiled the members’ comments.</i>	_____
New goals for the superintendent: <i>Allow two weeks for the process in which the superintendent submits new goals for board approval.</i>	_____
Board evaluation of the evaluation process: <i>Complete this within two weeks of the evaluation meeting. ■</i>	_____

What is the board attorney’s role?

Question: Our board is discussing the appointment of a new attorney for the district. There are some disagreements among board members about the “chain of command” here. What should we do?

The Board Doctor’s answer: Generally speaking, the board appoints an attorney or law firm to represent the district. The attorney will also give advice to the board as requested.

Here are some things to keep in mind about the attorney-district relationship.

* Many boards request by contract that the attorney (often a partner in a law firm) attend all

regular and special meetings of the board. The superintendent or board president typically also makes a request of the attorney when the board needs a legal opinion on an issue.

* When individual board members have a legal question, they should work through the board’s president to make contact with the attorney.

* If the district faces a management issue (a problem with a vendor’s work, for instance) on which it needs legal advice, the superintendent should then be designated contact with the attorney. ■

Board self-assessment improves governance

The Michigan Association of School Boards suggests that board self-assessment moves the board toward “governance excellence.” Is your board excellent or moving toward excellence?

According to the MASB, board self-assessment benefits the board by:

* “Fostering healthy dialogue.”

* “Improving the board’s understanding of its roles and responsibilities.”

* “Gathering the perceptions of all board members.”

* “Identifying next steps for board development.”

* “Demonstrating continuous improvement.”

For more information, visit <http://masb.org/board-self-assessment.aspx>. ■