

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Avoid too much hands-on driving and the ditch!

School governance consultant and former board member Rick Maloney really nails it on who should be doing what in the board and superintendent relationship. He likens it to steering a vehicle:

“When the board obsesses over the details of operational matters six inches above the surface of the road -- the board of directors is the cause of a poorly functioning steering system,” Maloney said.

“Six pairs of hands on the steering wheel will inevitably lead to the ditch on the side of the road.”

One pair of hands (the superintendent’s, watched and guided by five other pairs of trustee eyes and ears) is the better way to drive the car, steer the ship, run the railroad, and govern the school district, Maloney said.

For information, <https://governance101.com.Overview/Key Points/Links>. ■

A checklist for effective boardsmanship

To serve effectively, board members must understand specific issues about their school district as well as the difference between board and superintendent responsibilities.

Use the following checklist to spot where you already have a good grasp of board issues. Any “no” answers might suggest a need for board education. ■

	Yes	No
1. Do you understand the responsibilities of a board member, both as defined by your district and by applicable state law?		
2. In terms of board actions, what constitutes negligence and malfeasance?		
3. Do you know your board’s quorum for meeting? Please state it:		
4. Have you received and read the district’s budget?		
5. Do you know where the district’s funding comes from? What are its three top sources of funding? 1. 2. 3.		
6. Have you read the board’s bylaws and policies, information provided by the superintendent that explains board roles and responsibilities, and information from your state school boards’ association?		
7. Have you reviewed the district mission statement and strategic plan?		
8. Does the board have goals for the superintendent? What are they?		
9. Do you possess special skills that could help the board and district? Have you discussed them with the board president and superintendent?		
10. Has your board and superintendent team visited another school board and district?		

Set the policy; then delegate the implementation

From time to time, it's a productive governance activity for the board to be reminded of what it does for a school district. Here is a brief recap of the board's key responsibilities:

- The school board meets the needs of students and the community.

A school board accomplishes this by establishing the mission and creating a vision for the district. The board must also interpret the community's needs to the school district, while communicating the district's vision and successes to the community. The board is also responsible for evaluating the performance of the district. An effective method for evaluating the district is to appraise the performance of the superintendent annually.

- The board establishes policy.

Board policy guides the district's actions. Implementation of board policy is delegated to the superintendent, who oversees school staff as they implement board policy.

- The board plans.

A school board works with its superintendent to identify the district's strategic goals. This is a

matter of the board setting the district's priorities, while considering the community's wishes, available resources, and sound educational practice.

The superintendent develops annual plans to achieve the board's long-term objectives for the district. The superintendent reports regularly on progress toward the district's strategic goals.

- The board monitors finances.

The school board approves the district's annual budget. The budget should reflect the district's current vision. The board will also approve contracts, property purchases, building projects, call elections on bond proposals, and negotiate with employee associations to determine salaries and benefits.

- The board practices teamwork.

Trustees must work cooperatively with their colleagues on the board, and with their superintendent. Teamwork will affect nearly everything the board does: meeting efficiency, conflict management, evaluation of the superintendent and the district, and board development activities. Without a commitment to teamwork, boards accomplish very little. ■

Survey shows board governance data

Board & Administrator conducts its Survey on School Boards each year. In late 2016, B&A subscribers in overwhelming numbers said their school district's board had a code of ethics (87%) and a conflict of interest policy (97%).

Survey respondents also reported that 51% of boards conduct an annual board self-evaluation, while a troubling 36% never evaluate their performance. See charts below. ■

Boards with code of ethics	% of Responses
Yes	87%
No	13%
Total	100%

Boards with conflict of interest policy	% of Responses
Yes	97%
No	3%
Total	100%

Frequency of board self evaluation	% of Responses
Annually	51%
Every 2-3 years	13%
Never	36%
Total	100%

A board member's relationship with constituents is sensitive

When a parent hears firsthand that a board member will "take care" of something, it becomes gospel to the parent.

That's why board members should be cautious about making promises on which they cannot deliver: Examples include obtaining new uniforms for the band, improving school lunches,

or firing a coach.

Instead of making promises, take this approach instead: Listen to constituents, thank them for their input, and then tell them how to bring the concern to the proper person in the district to address the matter. Follow up on the matter with your superintendent. ■