

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Should the superintendent participate in policy review?

Board member question: “Our board is debating whether we need the superintendent present when we review board policy. Because the board is responsible for writing policy, not staff.”

Answer: Excluding your superintendent from any board activity is bad practice. The administrator is the board’s top resource and ready to offer sound professional advice and assist the board in writing policy.

There’s a practical reason the superintendent needs to be there as well. She can see that the work gets done such as typing up drafts, getting copies made of the board’s draft policy and making revisions to it.

And don’t forget the most important reason of all: Your superintendent will know best if your new policy will even be workable or legal in the schools in your state. ■

Best process for handling citizen or staff complaints? Try this

When a teacher or a parent contacts a board member directly and asks the trustee to intercede and “fix” something, the board member should be wary. A lot can go wrong when board members try to fix things. One problem this creates: the board member who does this is stepping directly on the superintendent’s toes.

Remember, your superintendent was hired to run the school district on a day-to-day basis. Part of this job comes with the responsibility of managing complaints from stakeholders.

Here’s what The Board Doctor recommends:

- The board should agree on a standard process for handling citizen and/or staff complaints.

- As a board member, have an open door policy by all means. Listen respectfully and take the complaint seriously.

- Honor your district’s chain of command. Do this by referring stakeholders and staff members who have a complaint to the proper person on the chain of command, whether that be a teacher, principal, or member of the district’s leadership team.

- When you respect the chain of command, you build trust with your superintendent. You also have a chance to tell your constituent “Thank you for your concern. Let me help you out here ...This is the person you need to contact and here is his telephone number.” ■

Plan board meetings well to focus on what's important

Attorney Gary R. Brochu, partner, Shipman and Goodwin LLP, served on a school board for close to 20 years, but also works with and educates boards as an expert on roles and meeting conduct in his work as a lawyer. He's learned a lot in his career about the ingredients that go into a successful board meeting.

Brochu said no board meeting can be expected to accomplish important work if it is not well-planned. "That work needs to be done beforehand, because once the meeting starts you are on a high wire," he said. "It is usually very difficult to adjust if not impossible."

The superintendent and board president should work closely in advance of meetings to determine what the meeting should look like and on what agenda items the board will focus. This is a vital ingredient, Brochu said, because the board and superintendent will be in public view at the meeting and should be concentrating on important work during this time.

"After saying all that and with the understanding that the board meeting belongs to the board, the superintendent is there to serve as a resource," Brochu said.

Since the meeting is the board's, it's unfair to blame meeting problems on the superintendent. "You don't get to blame board meeting dysfunction on the superintendent," Brochu said. "The board has to own its own functioning, or lack thereof."

When Brochu first started board service, the school board he served was incredibly dysfunc-

tional, he said. "We held parking lot meetings after the formal meeting between board members while some members would arrive at the meeting, open their agenda packet and you could literally hear the seal on the packet being broken," he said.

This board would have long-winded discussions on issues such as approving field trips. It drove Brochu crazy, he said, because he had attended these same field trips at the school 27 years earlier as a child. "The trip was just a 30-mile drive and the board was discussing whether to approve the trip or not," he said. "I was aghast. You'd leave a board meeting emotionally spent after not accomplishing a thing."

Pay attention to the design of your own board meetings to prevent this from happening in your district, Brochu said.

Focus the board's work on issues that are truly important, provide enough time to work on them, and ensure the board has enough information to make decisions. Board members should come prepared to work, Brochu said.

"You consciously design a board meeting to be successful," he said. Too many boards approach their meetings in the way things have always been done, even when they are unproductive, Brochu said.

"Results come from meetings being planned and deliberative," Brochu said. "The board can't wander in and hope something good happens."

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Policy vs. administration: Keep the distinction clear

Board policy affects the entire district and dictates what it will do. Implementation of board policy belongs to your superintendent and her staff. The administrator runs the day-to-day affairs of the district by leading, directing, hiring, evaluating, and firing employees if necessary.

Answer the three questions below to determine if you understand the distinction between the superintendent's job and the board's.

1. Does our board delegate day-to-day management of the schools to the superintendent?
2. Is our board professional about respecting the chain of command and referring questions, concerns, and complaints from staff and the public to the superintendent or appropriate party?
3. Does the board set broad policies that affect personnel, while the superintendent hires, promotes, disciplines, evaluates, and fires employees? ■