

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Identify, fix board meeting problems

When the board has meetings that don't accomplish much of anything, the first step in correcting the problem is to identify the cause.

The following checklist identifies common meeting issues that can create conflict or bog the proceedings down — and offers solutions.

*** Board meeting action items are really decisions that should be made by the superintendent.**

Solution: a review of the agenda by the superintendent and board president prior to the meeting.

*** A board member pops a surprise with an unplanned agenda addition at the meeting.** "I'd like to discuss the poor test scores at XYZ Elementary tonight." **Solution:** Use an agenda item request form to help set the meeting agenda. If board members don't use the form to request agenda additions prior to the meeting, their items don't make it onto the agenda. It's up to the board's president to enforce this rule.

*** Meetings are too long.** **Solution:** Use a timed agenda to keep the board on track.

*** Decisions are not being made at board meetings.** **Solution:** Delegate work to board committees,

who then bring recommendations for action to the board meeting. Act on those recommendations; do not rehash the committee's work.

*** Employees and district stakeholders contact board members with their issues seeking resolution, and board members bring these issues up at meetings.** "A parent contacted me about a teacher's grading system recently." **Solution:** Use the board's complaint-resolution process to enforce the district's chain of command.

*** Board members beat the drum over their pet issues.** "I don't like the way the history curriculum teaches about slavery." The board haggles over these issues at its meetings. **Solution:** a reminder by the board president to the board member that a board majority is the only entity that can make decisions for the organization in a legal board meeting.

*** The board is divided over controversial or contentious issues.** **Solution:** Disagreement is not necessarily unhealthy when it's a product of open decision-making. Be sure that each board member has a chance to air his opinion prior to a vote. ■

Parliamentary expert: Straw poll 'is not in order'

As a board member, it may be tempting to get advance notice of how board members plan to vote on an issue.

Parliamentarian Jim Slaughter, in his book *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Parliamentary Procedure Fast-Track*, issues a warning to a board that might use a "straw poll" to sound out members' opinions on an issue.

"[Robert's Rules] flat out states that a straw poll 'is not in order because it neither adopts nor rejects a measure and hence is meaningless and dilatory.'"

In his book, Slaughter points out that the results of a straw poll can be upsetting to the winning side when they realize the results are not binding.

For more information, visit www.jimslaughter.com. ■

Assess board's commitment to transparent communication

How effective is your board in meeting its communication responsibilities to the district's stakeholders? Effective communication is important to making the district's operations transparent.

Ask yourself the following questions to determine if the board needs further guidance or training in this area.

1. Do board members speak only for themselves unless the board has authorized them to speak for the board?
2. Do board members understand the district's challenges, successes, and problems, so they can effectively communicate them to the administrative staff and stakeholders?
3. Do board members understand the board's policy on requests for official information?
4. Do board members realize their power only comes from the collective action of the board, not as individuals?

5. Are all board members supportive of the concept that they must support majority decisions of the board, even when they are in the minority?

6. Do board members direct patron comments to the appropriate place on the chain of command so that concerns can be resolved?

7. Do board members see the superintendent (or appropriate person on the chain of command) as the best person to direct concerns and complaints for investigation and resolution before providing an update to the full board?

8. Is the board willing to share both the good news and the bad?

9. Does the board make decisions outside of the legally noticed board meeting?

10. Do board members engage in "back channels" of communication with each other and the district's staff? ■

Clarify roles by communicating expectations

In a post titled *Clear Board and Superintendent Roles Are Crucial to the District*, Joseph Reeves, executive director for the Association of Alaska School Boards, provides sound advice on clarifying roles.

"Boards that micromanage are working outside of their policy-making role. Superintendents who macromanage are superseding the governance role of the board."

Reeves recommends that the board and administrator

clarify roles by stating expectations and responsibilities for various tasks. "If there is disagreement about the process or responsibilities, take the time to discuss each participant's perception of what has taken place in the past and what he or she thinks should take place in the future," he wrote.

For more information, visit <http://aasb.org/content/clear-board-and-superintendent-roles>. ■

Put some time into your advocacy efforts

Board members make the best advocates for schools when they communicate with elected representatives.

That's true for two reasons:

1. **You're a volunteer.** Board members donate their time to ensure that children receive an education. That makes you more credible than a salaried employee or a public relations specialist.

2. **You have influence in the community and access to voters.** Elected officials will respect the role you play in your community.

Tip: Don't forget the fax in board advocacy work.

According to the Alabama School Boards Association, the fax machine can be a highly effective advocacy tool.

Fax messages are quick, inexpensive, and considered important. They allow you the detail of a letter and the immediacy of a phone call.

Make sure each fax message is individually addressed to legislators. If possible, call to confirm that it was received. If timing is critical, mark it urgent.

For more information, visit www.alabamaschoolboards.org/index.php/grassroots-advocacy-tips.html. ■