

Board & Administrator

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Emphasize commitment, open processes when facing competition

What can the superintendent and school board do to make their district stand out from the pack in a time of school competition and choice?

Betsy Miller-Jones, former executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association, has some ideas for emphasizing what is unique about public schools.

Start by emphasizing you are the community's schools governed by locally elected board members who answer to the public, Miller-Jones said.

"The board and superintendent need to maintain open, participative processes for policy making and goal setting, involve the community in providing input and feedback, and honestly use that input to guide the direction of the district," Miller-Jones said.

Communication is also key, including explaining the legal responsibilities for maintaining student privacy and protecting students' safety at

all times, Miller-Jones said. In addition, reinforce your commitment to all children. "The board and superintendent should also communicate clearly that public schools educate all children and are committed to doing so to meet each individual student's needs," Miller-Jones said.

Be sure to demonstrate how that is being done, she said.

"In today's world, social media is an important part of the communication tools a district needs to use, with appropriate guidelines and controls to maintain student privacy and safety," Miller-Jones said.

Board members serve as both the champions of the public schools out to the community, and the voice of the community back to the administration, Miller-Jones said. "Trustees need to understand that role and actively work with their community and administration to fulfill it," she said. ■

Allow angry constituents to cool down

Even with a clear policy and procedure in place, unhappy citizens who wish to address the board can disrupt the smooth flow of a board meeting.

Here's a way to prevent this from happening: Give stakeholders who wish to address the board a "cooling off" period before they speak.

Ask those who wish to address the board, at the beginning of the meeting, to identify themselves and their issue.

That's it; just ask for their names and issue. Then, later in the meeting, during the public comment portion, they can share their views.

The interlude between introducing themselves to the board and public and actually raising their issue should have a calming effect. It gives someone who is revved up a chance to cool off.

By giving someone the extra time to think about what they have to say -- and how they want to say it -- the board can avoid emotional outbursts. ■

The board must face up to board member misconduct

In Gary R. Brochu's webinar, Board Member Boot Camp: Board Member Conduct, he said, "Board member misconduct should be dealt with by board members, not the superintendent."

Brochu, Shipman & Goodwin, LLP, Hartford, Conn., recommends boards take a series of steps to address member behavior the board deems inappropriate. They are:

- Identify and address misconduct by trustees, but don't necessarily do it publicly.
- Use a progressive response. Brochu recommends this first be a private meeting with the president about the behavior, or a board peer or small group of board members.

Then, try remedial actions such as a training, workshops, or retreats, Brochu suggests.

Use informal approaches at first, then move toward a more formal response if those fail.

- Speak with one board voice about the trustee's misconduct.
- Be alert to the practical and political impact of the board's response.
- Don't ignore misconduct. That only empowers it, Brochu said. It says to others "That is our bar, our expectation," if you do nothing about it, he said.

For information, https://pgi.webcasts.com/viewer/event.jsp?ei=1160556&tp_key=579725304b. ■

Communicate well with district's internal stakeholders

The board should give thought to how it communicates with the district's various employees: administrators, teachers, supervisory staff, and the maintenance staff, for example.

These communication principles can help:

- Show appreciation.
- Demonstrate respect.
- Make use of a recognition program.
- Be liberal with praise.
- Ask their opinion, using forums for dialogue. ■

Tips for inexperienced school board members

When a board member is first elected, it is wise to listen and observe for a while. So rather than charging off to make change, remember these tips:

1. When you are new, take it slow in the beginning. Even if you campaigned as a "reformer," it takes time to make change. "Listen and observe" is a good practice when new.

2. The board's only authority comes from its collective action in a duly called board meeting. An individual board member has no legal authority to do anything unless the board grants it.

3. Teacher management isn't your problem. The board has hired a superintendent to manage staff issues. ■

Learn as a board and superintendent team

Do the district's board and superintendent engage in learning activities together?

According to the Lighthouse Project, a study conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards and the Iowa Education Foundation, these characteristics are clearly seen in high-achieving districts:

- The board learns as a team.

• The board and superintendent make time to learn together as a team.

- They also talk about "what is most important."
- The board engages "in policy development."

For information, <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards>. ■