

Board & Administrator

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Respond appropriately to aggressive political groups

By Paul M. Hewitt, University of Arkansas

In a southern district, a newly formed Tea Party-affiliated group contacted board members and asked for district information such as district income, expenditures, debt, facilities age and size, and enrollment trends. The material was all public information. After receiving the request, the board members contacted district staff to provide the material to the Tea Party members.

School board members should recognize a problem with how this information request was handled. The danger is the way the political group injected the board members into the request. It is a fairly common practice for political groups, whether they are teachers unions, political parties, or other interest groups, to try to get a board member involved in assisting them and then claiming the board member as a supporter.

So, how does a board member who has promised to be accessible and responsive avoid being drawn into political games without breaking their campaign promise? Simply state: "We have a procedure in place to deal with that. Please, let me help you by explaining who you need to call to obtain that information. If you have any problems with this please call me back." As a board member, you help your constituent, but avoid becoming involved in the matter.

This phrase "Please let me help you..." followed by directions on whom to contact ensures that outside groups or individuals are routed through proper channels without an end run.

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3 board rules that should never be broken

If the board's goal is a quality education for all children, it should never break these three rules:

- 1. Hold regular workshops with the superintendent to focus on the board's roles and its relationship with the superintendent.** An effective board-superintendent partnership is critical to district success.
- 2. Set policy and direction.** Never try to manage the district. Recognize the superintendent has been hired to manage it.
- 3. Conduct well-ordered meetings.** Never allow anyone to be uncivil. ■

Keep the public engaged in district's business

Unless facing a hot issue, most school boards don't have citizens beating down the doors to attend board meetings.

It's important, however, for the board and superintendent to take certain steps to show the public that they are welcome at meetings. Here are some suggestions:

- **Emphasize convenience.** Hold meetings at a time and place where citizens can participate.
- **Provide plenty of seating.**
- **Have space and time on the meeting agen-**

da for public participation. Some districts have two slots on the agenda for public input, near the beginning and near the end of the meeting.

- **Place copies of the agenda and supporting documentation near the entrance to your meeting room.** Make agenda materials and the minutes available on the district website.
- **Hold professional meetings.** Ensure the district's sound system and graphics presentation are technically adept and enhance the audience experience. ■

Advice for new board president: Know your role

A board president's job is to ensure that the board consistently follows its own rules and the rules and regulations imposed on it by outside authorities. Here are some tips for ensuring that the board's president serves effectively.

- **Prepare to run meetings.** Along with your superintendent, you will help set the meeting agenda. Once the meeting begins, your job will be to rule, recognize, and keep the meeting moving along if it bogs down. You will need to ensure that meeting deliberation is fair and thorough, but also timely and orderly.
- **Know the board's business when it meets.** At meetings, it will be your responsibility to ensure that meeting discussion is focused on items that, according to board policy, belong to the board to decide.
- **Understand your relationship to the superintendent.** You will serve as the board's

liaison to the administrator, and vice versa.

It's important to understand, however, that as president you have no authority to supervise or direct the administrator. That power belongs to the full board.

- **Serve as spokesman.** As board president, you may represent the board by delivering the board's official stance to outside authorities and the media.
- **Know the board member's role.** When board members stray from this role and try to manage the district's business, it's the board president's job to counsel them. For instance, if a board member contacts an employee seeking information about an issue related to a grievance, the board member is out of line. It's the president's job to remind him that the board's authority comes from collective, not individual, action. ■

Ad-hoc committees can tackle tough issues

Some issues, particularly the difficult ones, may not fit into the board's normal decision-making process. When this happens, consider forming a special, or ad-hoc, committee to study the issue and make a recommendation to the board.

If the board forms an ad-hoc committee, it's

important to remember these three rules:

1. Give the ad-hoc committee instruction specific to its task.
2. Provide a short time span for the committee to study the issue and report to the board.
3. Disband the ad-hoc committee when its work is complete. ■