

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Always remember why you serve a school board

Boards deal with hard issues. Sometimes it can seem that meetings are dominated by talk about lack of money, buildings and grounds that need constant attention, or challenging student populations. And these days, some districts even face scrutiny because of teacher-student sex scandals.

It's enough to make a dedicated board member wonder why he or she serves. So here's what your board might do: The board can spend time at each

meeting (or before or after) devoted to reminding members why they are in public service.

One easy way to do this is to print the district's mission statement on the meeting agenda, or to have the mission statement printed and placed near board member nameplates.

The board can also engage in pre- and post-meeting interaction with board colleagues, the superintendent, and school staff, and as part of this conversation reflect on what the district is doing right. ■

The president should deal with unprofessional board 'manners'

As the board begins a new school year, resolve to ensure the district's image remains pristine.

When two board members bicker and fight publicly, for example, they reflect poorly on themselves. But they also have a negative impact on team cohesion and reflect poorly on the school board and the district.

When this occurs, it's the president's job to issue a crash course in "good manners." Do this by:

- Assuming that the higher purpose of school board service will always prevail. Elected board members almost always come to board service with the best of intentions -- they want to make a difference for children. Use this to probe and get to the bottom of what is frustrating a board member: Are his views being heard? Is he being

shut out of board discussions? Are his contributions appreciated? Does he have a special interest need that could be met by committee service?

- Setting rules for meetings and discussions. Everyone should have a say. Pick away at ideas, not the people who state them. Encourage the board to develop a set of norms for its meetings.

- Taking charge with confrontation. If two people fight, it is OK to show your frustration about it as the leader of the board. Do this in private, however, and be sure to clearly state the negative consequences of argumentative behavior.

Editor's note: The board's president must always set the example in the areas of board behavior and meeting decorum. The president is the head of the board, not a voting bloc. ■

Boards make decisions collectively

As an individual school board member, you are a person without much power to accomplish anything. Even though voters have elected you to a seat on the board, you will not simply take the oath of office, find an office, roll up your sleeves, and start issuing orders.

As a member of your community's school board, you collectively set direction, make policy, establish goals for the superintendent, and act through voting to lead the district.

To understand the board's role in a way that allows an individual to be effective, the board member should be clear on one point: A board is a board only when it meets and votes.

Boards make their decisions — they speak — through voting.

When the board is not meeting, it acts through its written decisions — board policy, the direction and goals it sets for its superintendent, a written strategic plan, etc.

Another way to keep your role as an individual board member clear is to consider that the board acts through others by the directives it issues: the board gives the superintendent her marching orders, or the board gives an assignment to a board committee to study a curriculum issue. Again, this is the board acting collectively.

The effective school board lets the superintendent (or a board committee) perform her assignments. But they control what the superintendent and board committees do by issuing clear instructions (plans, goals, and objectives) about what the board as a whole is trying to accomplish.

Once the board delegates responsibility to the superintendent, it has an obligation to ensure adequate resources necessary to the accomplishment of goals. The board's role here is then to maintain its support for the superintendent. ■

Clarify roles through regular discussion

When there is a disconnect between how the board and superintendent understand their roles, the school district will be negatively affected.

That is why boards and superintendents should make time for thorough discussions of each other's role. It's a discussion that needs to take place regularly to ensure clarity.

The following chart can initiate a mutual give-and-take between the board and its administrator about who does what in the district. Clarifying the board's and superintendent's responsibilities eliminates confusion, and frees up each party to do its job effectively.

Board

Understands duties board delegates to administrator.

Makes final decisions on policies related to personnel, finance, curriculum, services, planning.

Provides expertise in areas like strategy and leadership.

Sets mission and vision for the district.

Represents the district in the community.

Ensures organization has adequate finances, monitors district's financial figures, approves budget.

Evaluates results.

Evaluates work of board.

Evaluates superintendent.

Superintendent

Makes day-to-day decisions required to manage organization.

Carries out work authorized by board.

Provides experience and professional skills required to manage school district.

Pays bills.

Consults with professionals as required.

Directs work of employees, defines their duties, evaluates their performance, hires employees, and fires employees.

Provides board with support necessary to evaluate its performance.

Provides board with annual superintendent self-appraisal so that the board has all the information it needs to perform its governance duty. ■