

Board & Administrator

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School district is a 'team': The best ones know their roles

How does an "organizational chart" best fit together in a way that makes clear to everyone what their role is in providing an education to students?

A district's educational "team" is made up of the student, the parent, the school's employees, and the board of education.

When team members attempt to do the jobs of others within that team framework, the team will founder. That's because confusion of roles hinders the team in accomplishing its goals.

Each member of a team must stay focused on his role. Here's a brief description of each.

Students. Students must understand that they are responsible for learning. With the necessary materials, instruction, and practice, students must do their assignments in order for learning to take place.

Parents. Parents must provide for students' needs, so their children can give their attention to

their education.

Employees. Each employee has a written copy of the position's job description. Employees perform their jobs so that the team can be successful.

Each member of the team must understand and fulfill her role in order for the team to be successful.

The board. A board of education sets policy for the district and has oversight of the total educational program. It is the direct connection between the community and the district. The board should plan, set goals, and ensure that the goals are met. The board does this without taking an active role in managing the district's day-to-day business affairs.

The board relies on its superintendent and district staff to ensure that it is aware of all regulations and laws. The board must follow the laws and regulations as specified in state law. The board's duties are also spelled out in state law. ■

4 strategies that boost board teamwork

Effective boards have a commitment to improving their skills. Strengthen the board's knowledge base and cohesiveness by trying some of these board education activities.

1. In-house training on governance. Orient all new trustees to board service, and continue to emphasize board education whenever possible on the board's annual calendar.

2. Participation in association educational opportunities. School districts and boards usually belong to state associations that offer educational sessions for board members. Select the topics that best apply to your board's needs

to help board members improve their governance skills and keep them current on developments in education in your state.

3. A news service for board members. The superintendent can provide board members with articles and other resources that discuss governance and other information important to the board.

4. Exchanging information received at meetings and conferences. When a board member attends a conference and picks up handouts, make it the board's practice to distribute these resources to the rest of the board. ■

Improve your board's problem-solving talents

When the board faces a difficult issue, it's important that board members offer input into finding a solution.

The first step in this problem-solving process: The board needs to understand its role in order to successfully address problems. There is no need to overreact to any issue or problem, and the best way to handle this as a board is to expect the superintendent to manage the matter and to keep the full board informed.

If a board member sees a difficult situation that she believes requires board action, she should still follow the chain of command. The individual board member should communicate directly with the superintendent to seek additional information about the issue.

If the problem is related to an area of policy, the board should get involved. For example, if an individual staff member is upset about her working conditions, then that's a superintendent problem that he will work through a supervisor to resolve. If the district's teachers are unhappy with working conditions, however, that is potentially a board policy issue or contractual matter.

To improve the board's problem-solving skills, consider board education. Board development will prepare both individual board members and the full board for difficult issues before they arise.

In addition, board veterans can "mentor" new board members on how the board typically handles thorny issues. ■

The Board Doctor Q&A: Evaluation leads to heated discussion

Board member question: During a board self-evaluation, discussion among the trustees became heated over some travel expenditure abuses by a board member. The debate hasn't really simmered down in the months after the evaluation meeting, and we are wondering how to proceed.

The Board Doctor's answer: To address an issue such as how the board spends the public's money, the board should find agreement on what it really stands for and to whom it is accountable. On an effective board, trustees spend their time on the work the public expects of the schools, not bickering about board member stays at five-star hotels.

To determine what is most important to your community, revisit the board's core values, and then ensure that the board's policies on board travel limit the potential for board member abuse.

Whenever the board discusses its values, one area where it should work for agreement is in the value of

professional development to the full board team.

And when it comes to spending the public's money, the board needs to revisit the trust it has been granted by the public. No board member, by virtue of office, deserves special treatment when spending the public's money.

In the policy area, boards typically have the following controls built into a travel expense reimbursement policy.

- Approval of travel expenses by a board officer, such as the president or vice president, prior to submitting a request for travel or an expense for reimbursement. It's not fair (or prudent business practice) to a district employee to have requests for travel reimbursement come directly from the board member.

- Authorize the district's business office to notify the board president if an expense in the travel reimbursement request exceeds a preapproved amount or the amount that an employee would receive for a similar expense. ■

Work through construction issues completely

The Iowa Association of School Boards, in its 2013-14 *Board Member Handbook*, recommends the board consider the following six areas when beginning work on a building project.

1. "Involvement of the community in all steps of the process."
2. "Description of all educational facilities."
3. "A study of the student population in terms of educational need and enrollment projections."

4. "An examination of the existing educational facilities."

5. "A study of the financial situation of the district."

6. "Conclusions and recommendations about facilities, students, educational programs and recommended steps for a board to take."

For more information, visit www.ia-sb.org/uploadedFiles/IASB/Publications/Handbooks/2012-13%20SBM%20Handbook.pdf. ■