

Board & Administrator

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Study the board-superintendent relationship to understand what makes it work

A misunderstanding of the difference between the board member's role and that of the superintendent often lies at the heart of a school district's problems. That's what makes it worth taking the time to study the board-superintendent relationship, and each party's respective role.

It's worth the time to do this, because when the board and superintendent each understand what the other does, the board and superintendent team begin to develop trust.

The superintendent will manage the day-to-day operations of the district. The board is elected to ensure the district meets its mission — giving children an education.

Here are several principles that can help ensure an effective relationship between the board and its superintendent:

1. Treat your superintendent as a vital team member. This means the superintendent should participate in all board discussions and activities.

A board should never meet without its superintendent. These meetings, called closed sessions, destroy any sense of board and administrator trust and teamwork.

2. Stress effective and open communication. Team members must be honest with each other and replace rumors with facts. Open channels of communication must be constant.

Board members should request staff assistance through the superintendent to ensure a coordinated flow of communication.

3. Work at building trust. Trust is a key element in a healthy board and superintendent partnership. To strengthen it, hold an annual retreat for the board and administrator away from your regular meeting room. At this retreat, discuss the board and superintendent's mutual responsibilities. Develop a statement of roles and responsibilities (job descriptions) for the board, individual board members, and the superintendent. ■

10 rules for boosting community trust

It's been said often, but bears repeating, that the board and superintendent should practice "no surprises" in the conduct of their relationship. Effective communication forms the basis of a productive relationship between the two parties.

There is another area where the board should emphasize effective communication in order to lead the district effectively: Communication with the district's stakeholders is how the board creates trust and practices accountability. Here are 10 rules for sound communication with the board's constituents:

1. Be honest.
2. Listen.
3. Seek first to understand.
4. Never make promises.
5. Be accountable.
6. Practice respect in your interactions.
7. Create a clear vision for the district.
8. Welcome discussion with the community.
9. Involve your stakeholders in the schools.
10. Support the district's staff in your public comments. ■

Policy review can protect district on bullying issue

What is the appropriate board policy response to the issue of bullying?

Brad Banasik, legal counsel and Director of Labor Relations for the Michigan Association of School Boards (Lansing, Mich.) said Michigan passed an anti-bullying law in 2011 that required all school districts to adopt and implement an anti-bullying policy. The state also has a Model Anti-Bullying Policy.

The policy gives a definition of what constitutes bullying and what districts are required to include in their policy and reporting procedures, he said. In 2014, the law was amended to cover cyberbullying, Banasik said.

Here is what Banasik advises his member districts to do policy-wise about school bullying: The board should review its policy on bullying annually, the district should provide annual training on the issue, and the policy's reporting steps and procedures should be reviewed to ensure everyone is on the same page as far as policy content and enforcement, he said.

Everyone from the board on down should be involved here, Banasik said. "I think clearly that building administrators, teachers, support staff and anyone who may be in a position to witness, report on, and put a stop to bullying on school property should be part of this," he said.

Cyberbullying is much more difficult for districts to regulate, as it often occurs away from school, Banasik said.

That's because there is a line the district cannot cross when it comes to disciplining for off-campus conduct, he said. "The district has to show that the type of electronic communication the student engaged in crossed the line into cyberbullying that impacts a student's education," he said.

It is often a judgment call for administrators and boards on what constitutes cyberbullying off campus that does indeed impact a child's education, Banasik said.

Courts do typically give deference to administrators on those judgment calls, he said.

"But deference on what impacts an education isn't a free pass for the district to discipline any type of electronic communication," Banasik said. The district must still show that there is a negative impact on the operation of the school or the child's ability to receive an education, he said.

To view the state of Michigan's Model Anti-Bullying Policy, visit http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE_Model_AntiBullying_Policy_Revised_9.8_172355_7.pdf. ■

School board accountability: Does your board measure up when the gavel falls?

Certain activities by the school board create an impression of accountability in the public's mind. Use the following checklist to determine how accountable your board is with its meeting performance.

Board meeting accountability

1. The date, time, and location of the meeting are published.
2. The meeting agenda is sent to board members, school staff, and the media in advance of the meeting.
3. The board comes to meetings prepared.
4. Legal or professional counsel is sought when necessary for decision-making.

5. The district's financial statement includes a list of bills paid.
6. The meeting begins on time.
7. Board members behave professionally toward each other.
8. Board members behave professionally toward the superintendent.
9. Closed sessions adhere to state law and regulations.
10. Public participation is welcomed and consistently scheduled at an appropriate time.
11. Board meeting minutes are accurate.
12. The board supports majority decisions. ■

Asked to comment on a school issue? Keep these guidelines in mind

If a reporter contacts you seeking information about a crisis at a school, here's what you need to ask yourself: Am I the person who should be speaking for the district on this topic?

In most districts, that responsibility belongs to the board president and the superintendent.

Here are a few more guidelines that can help you work better with reporters on less loaded topics:

Plan what you will say.

Write down the points you want to make and commit them to memory.

Limit your thoughts. A few key messages always suffice.

Concentrate on facts.

If you don't have an answer to a question, promise to get back to the reporter with the information. ■