

# Board & Administrator

## FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## 5 tips to resolve dysfunction at the board officer level

When a board is dysfunctional at the board officer level, this creates problems for the entire team. It can be a board president who can't run an effective meeting or a board officer who fights and backbites.

If your board is trying to work through dysfunction, the full board needs to commit to moving the group in a positive direction. If this takes place, the board officer should see he needs to shape up. Here are five tips that can help resolve board officer problems.

**1. Avoid a public showdown.** In addressing the issue, the board needs to understand that censuring a board member is a very troubling thing to the public. The media and stakeholders will begin to doubt the effectiveness of any board that fights so blatantly in public.

**2. Select your most trusted board member to meet with the board officer.** Ask this board member to meet with the president in a non-threatening environment to discuss how the board is performing and to express that the board is not getting as much accomplished as it should.

This conversation should eventually focus on the officer's behavior and how it sets a negative tone for board meetings.

**3. Arrange a meeting between the superintendent and board president.** The administrator can suggest that the state association's board training has been improved and is worth a look for all board members as a way to improve meeting efficiency and productivity. If the president is fighting with other members or has trouble running board meetings, point out that this increases the length of the board's meetings and decreases board effectiveness.

**4. Include positives in the meeting agenda.** Use the agenda-setting process to include good news to help shape the positive tone of the meeting.

**5. Defuse upcoming meeting conflict.** The board can use its work sessions to head off open confrontation at meetings by working on issues that will likely create contention at the board meeting. Get these matters resolved before the board meets in public. ■

### Improve board decision-making by understanding role

The Texas Association of School Boards' online publication *Understanding Your School Board* has sound advice on board members' responsibilities within the context of board decision-making.

According to the publication, "A school board is a local governmental body that can take action only by a majority vote at a legally called public meeting. The individual board member's major responsibility is to study issues facing the district, evalu-

ate needs and resources, and, after due consideration, vote in the best interest of all students at such a meeting. A trustee who attempts — without board authorization — to speak for the whole board, direct school staff members, or make other individual decisions is exceeding his or her authority."

For more information, visit [www.tasb.org/Board-Service/Role-of-School-Boards/Understanding-Your-School-Board.aspx](http://www.tasb.org/Board-Service/Role-of-School-Boards/Understanding-Your-School-Board.aspx). ■

## Make board votes transparent to ensure public trust

School governance consultant and school board member Rick Maloney of University Place (Wash.) School District said his board views dissent as another opportunity to prove the board is transparent in how it operates.

"We do not use the board speaks with 'one voice' norm as a means of silencing those with dissenting views," Maloney said. "But we do expect that minority opinions will be accompanied by a caveat such as, 'My view was X, but the board decided Y, and I support the process by which the board reached its decision.'"

Maloney said the board's view on dissent is that a high level of transparency is healthy because the public is more trusting of candor than they are of board members "clamming up and spouting the company line." So speak up if you feel differently as a board member, but then support the majority's decision.

Additional benefit to this approach: "Contentious issues are resolved more realistically when the board admits its decision-making is as complicated as the issue the board was facing," Maloney said. ■

### Board meetings run smoothly when members request items properly

"No surprises" has always been the best rule for boards to live by. That should apply to how board members request that items be placed on a meeting agenda. This should be done in an organized, planned fashion, rather than bringing up an item at

a meeting when colleagues have not had a chance to prepare.

The board should use an agenda-request form like the one below to get trustees' items of interest placed on the board meeting agenda.

Next board meeting

Day:                      Date:                      Time:

To: Board president

Cc: Superintendent

Items I would like to have placed on the agenda:

Item                      Explanation of what the item is and desired outcome from placing it on the agenda

Priority (circle one):

1. Very high priority. Place on next meeting's agenda.
2. High priority. Would like to have on next meeting's agenda, but the following one would be satisfactory.
3. Lower priority. Any future meeting would be satisfactory.

Signature of board member ■

### Board calendar keeps meetings on track

A board work calendar is a governance tool many boards use to identify the issues they will be working on for each month of the year. But the board work calendar can also head off a communication problem: the board member who veers off track at board meetings.

By approving a board work calendar, the board agrees to focus on certain topics each

month. If a board member springs an unplanned issue on the board, she will need approval from the full board to get her issue onto the meeting agenda.

This way, the board reinforces the principle that the full board determines what it wants done, and the individual board member doesn't have any special authority. ■