

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Show your appreciation for staff, students

When he started service as a school board member, attorney Gary R. Brochu, a partner at Shipman & Goodwin LLP in Hartford, Conn., never wrote personal notes to students expressing his thanks for coming to school board meetings for recognition and presentations.

Then, Brochu was shamed into it -- by a student.

"I attended a student recognition event for DARE graduation, and afterwards received a thank-you note from a fifth-grade girl for attending," Brochu said. "I felt shamed."

Brochu was at the event as a board member, along with the superintendent and other dignitar-

ies. "After receiving that note, I thought to myself 'I can't be so arrogant as to not learn from something like this,'" he said.

After that, Brochu purchased stationery (about every six months) with his name on it and handwrote notes of appreciation to those who attend school board meetings. He would ask his superintendent for the contact information of attendees, handwrite them a note, and deliver it to school secretaries for delivery during the day.

All these years later, Brochu said he still has that thank-you letter from the DARE student as a reminder. ■

Welcome patron feedback, but handle it properly

A board member should never turn away a district stakeholder who approaches the trustee with a concern. The best approach when this occurs is to offer your help, but to do so in an appropriate fashion.

The Oklahoma State School Boards Association has some good advice on this topic:

"Welcome people who come to see you about school problems," OSBA states in its new school board member materials. "Listen carefully, then refer them to the appropriate person according to board policy."

During this encounter with a patron, do not try to solve a problem, OSBA recommends. "Don't commit yourself to a course of action that you may regret later. The board as a whole may not support your view, and you could find yourself in an embarrassing position of having committed yourself to a stand that the board rejects."

For information, <http://www.ossba.org/new-school-board-member-information1>. ■

Tip: Keep governance-focused job descriptions handy

Like a regular employer provides for employees, your board should have on file job descriptions for the superintendent, board members, and board officers and standing board committees.

These educational tools make for useful reminders if the board reviews them regularly, when it selects new officers, and in the orientation of new school board members. ■

Stay clear on the board's role and the board member's responsibilities

The board's job is a bit different than the individual school board member's. It can be helpful to consider what the board does as the district's governing body, and how the individual board member's responsibilities support the board's oversight work.

As the governing body for the school district in your community, the board meets the mission of educating students while controlling district affairs.

The board does this by:

- Hiring a superintendent.
- Setting policy.
- Approving a budget.
- Approving staff hirings, terminations, and requests for leave.
- Setting curriculum.
- Meeting legal requirements.
- Ensuring staff have the resources (materials, buildings, and grounds) to meet the mission.

The board typically holds an organizational meeting each year, often in January, to elect officers and establish committees as part of its job.

The job description for an individual trustee is to support and fulfill the board's obligations. The board member does this through voting, representing the views of the community, setting goals for the superintendent, and participating in the development of policy and its implementation.

Here are the key points The Board Doctor recommends for inclusion in a Board Member Job Description.

1. State attendance expectations: Attend regularly scheduled meetings, meetings of any committees served, board retreats and planning sessions, and as many extracurricular events as is practical.

2. Stress board obligations as a reminder of the board's work:

- Establish board policy.
- Hire, annually evaluate, and, if necessary, terminate the employment of the superintendent.
- Serve as the voice of constituents and report their issues and concerns to the board and superintendent.
- Monitor finances.
- Plan for the district's future needs.

3. Include specific duties:

- Attend meetings.
- Arrive punctually.
- Prepare for meetings.
- Participate in discussions by contributing skills, knowledge, and experience.
- Listen respectfully to all who have the floor.
- Assume leadership roles such as officer positions or as a committee chair.
- Support publicly all decisions of the majority.
- Represent the district to stakeholders, the business community, and government officials.
- Participate in development opportunities to improve knowledge and board skills. ■

Board's relationship to school staff: "Are they happy?" isn't a board issue

When a board member concerns herself with issues such as staff morale, she often finds herself wandering around in the weeds of day-to-day management. That's a good way to pick up a case of poison ivy.

As a board member, it is important to think of school personnel with a governance mindset: by giving your superintendent clear guidance for the board's expectations on personnel matters.

Here are some tips for setting guidelines in this area:

- State that the administrator should make full use of employee talents.
- Ask the superintendent to establish a culture of respect in the district, starting with his leadership team and extending throughout the district.

• Have the superintendent create an atmosphere of civility and responsiveness where staff concerns and suggestions for improvements are welcomed and considered.

The most important work a board can perform in its relationship to staff is by setting and supporting goals for student learning and achievement. That's where most of the board's attention about staff should be focused.

As a board, ask questions such as:

"Does the superintendent have everything she needs to meet our goals for student achievement?" "Are our goals being met?" "Do teachers have access to the best professional development?" and "If our goals are not being met, why not?" ■