

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Tackle your biggest challenge as a board member

What's the biggest challenge in serving on a school board? You have to be aware of what is going on in the school district without being involved in the actual operations.

You don't teach or select bus routes, for instance. The board member's job is to set policies and let the superintendent and her staff members carry out those policies. It's tough sometimes not to step in, but remember, you hire the superintendent to manage the district.

Think for a moment about your responsibility as

a board member: Your decisions can dramatically impact the lives of many people — students, staff, and the entire community.

That's why when you are voting, your responsibility is to the entire school district. You can't serve effectively if you are beholden to a special interest group, consider only the interests of your own neighborhood, or spend time worrying about students' playing time on the district's sports teams.

So always base your vote on what is best for students, the school district, and the community. ■

Can I use school board service for my personal advantage?

In short, no.

It's unethical to use your position on the board to advance your interests.

As an example, let's say the board approves a new elementary school building project. The construction company you work for submits a bid for the project. What is your responsibility in this

situation? You should abstain from voting on the purchase bid.

To do otherwise is a clear conflict of interest because you could benefit financially from your relationship to the board.

This would reflect poorly not only on yourself, but on the district's image in the community. ■

Handle that unpopular board decision

Making a controversial board decision is difficult. You will likely generate unflattering media coverage and face some wrath from irate constituents. Sometimes, that is what comes with the territory.

The key thing to remember is the board should not automatically cave if it has made an educationally sound decision.

You can stand by your position as a board team if:

- * You did your homework. If the board did its research before the vote, the board is likely to remain unified in the

face of public pressure.

- * You based the decision on facts. If the board votes based on facts, it will likely withstand the emotions of a hot and bothered public.

- * You follow through. Groups in town may be slighted by a board decision. That doesn't mean the board should reverse itself. In the long run, voters will respect a board that listens and then does what it believes best for students — even when it means making the occasional unpopular decision. ■

Spending decisions and the board's role

What can an individual board member do if she disagrees with a purchase the superintendent makes?

Not much, really. If the annual budget has a line item for major purchases and the board has approved the budget, the board has given the superintendent the go-ahead to make a big capital purchase.

There are instances, however, when a board member should bring a purchase to the attention of

the board: If funds have not been allocated for the purchase in the budget or if the purchase clearly does not fit into the district's strategic plans.

But if the superintendent purchases one brand of tablets for the district and you prefer a different brand, you should not object simply because you don't care for the manufacturer.

The board has done its work once it approves the budget. How funds are spent is the superintendent's responsibility. ■

Outsider can head off board and superintendent battles

If unprofessional board behavior becomes a problem, the challenge the superintendent faces is that he is basically talking to his boss, school board member and board consultant Bob Hughes of Kirkland, Wash., said.

The problem can be compounded when board members run for election on a platform of, "Let's get rid of the superintendent," Hughes said.

So the initial difficulty the superintendent can face with a new board member is that she may not be inclined to listen to what the superintendent has to say about the board member's responsibilities. That's when serious board-superintendent problems can begin.

Once a board member is elected on a platform, she may be convinced that is the reason she won. "She now has action items to carry out," Hughes said.

That is the reason Hughes believes it is best if another board member discusses role issues with a new board member or someone from outside the district with board experience is brought in to talk about board behavior with the full board.

Hughes recommends the board team arrange for another superintendent or a person from the superintendent's association as an outside mediator to address board and superintendent relationship problems. ■

Ease candidates into board service

Use these ideas to introduce potential candidates to what board service is all about.

1. Let them be a "board member" for a day. Invite potential candidates to tour the offices, meet administrators, and then sit in on a board meeting.

2. Ask candidates to serve on a school board

committee. People who serve on a committee get a better feeling for what serving as a board member is like.

3. Have candidates serve out unexpired terms. When a board member must leave the office midterm, the board president can recommend a qualified candidate to fill the term. ■

Create a comfort level with district finances

It's not the board member's job to pore over financials each month to make sure the district is spending its money properly. That's the superintendent and her staff's job.

The board member, however, should reach a comfort level with how the district manages its money.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to become comfortable with the district's fiscal fitness.

1. Are we on target with planned expenses and revenues?

2. Are we solvent?

3. Can we meet debt obligations?

4. Do we use an experienced auditor?

5. Does the superintendent communicate to the board regularly about the state of the district's finances?

If a board member is comfortable with the answers to these questions, he shouldn't feel the need to dig into the district's finances too deeply. ■