

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Train board members to watch what they do, say in public

A school board should train new board members to think before they speak in a public setting. If a new board member says the wrong thing, the board may end up having to devote time to issuing apologies and explanations. But more importantly, a board member's hurtful or inflammatory comment can erode public trust.

This past August, a new board member appeared to derogate LGBTQ students and students who use wheelchairs in a town hall meeting. Her comments were shared on social media. The result was that the board issued public apologies for the comments and disavowed them.

One parent of a student who uses a wheelchair believed the board member was referring to her child. This raises another issue: if a board member says something critical about one student, parents may perceive the comment more globally. In the above situation, for example, the comment could cause parents of students with

disabilities to lose trust in the district's special education program. Or, parents might start wondering whether the district is really providing their child services and whether the district is genuinely seeking to meet its obligations under the law. The result can be friction between parents and staff, due process complaints, Office for Civil Rights investigations, and even costly litigation.

It's not always easy for a board member to know in the moment that a comment may be insensitive or hit a nerve. For that reason, training should cover, and board members should emphasize to new members, that they don't stop being a member of the board when they step into a restaurant, go to an interview, or type something on social media.

Some training topics might include: 1) abusive or foul language; 2) the social media policy; 3) the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. ■

Know your (financial) strengths and weaknesses

Being a school board member comes with a variety of responsibilities, including maintaining — and hopefully improving — the district's financial health.

School boards have an obligation to keep the district's finances on track. That can be especially tough as sign-on bonuses, pay raises, and other financial incentives are proposed to get — and keep — top talent. However, a school board failing to

consider the district's long-term financial goals will enter a minefield.

When pressure is mounting to increase salaries, renovate campuses, or purchase textbooks, take a hard look at what the costs really mean for the district. A district may be able to afford those expenditures now, but what happens if enrollment declines? Are the benefits of delaying renovations outweighed by the costs of operating inefficient buildings?

What is the proactive school board to do?

When in doubt, the best course of action may be to seek out the experts. Consultant firms can help school boards analyze their current financial health. They can also forecast projections showing a range of outcomes and options. Even if you think the district is on track, a second opinion will show areas that can be improved. Moreover, referring to analysts' reports during your meetings can help others understand your rationale, particularly if you are advancing an unpopular opinion. Speak with your superintendent and see if they would like to be involved in this process as well.

Board members who lack the financial fluency to follow the projections can seek financial training. What good is all this data if you don't understand how to interpret it? These consultant firms can point you in the right direction. You might also find that other board members want to join you.

Those who have deeper financial literacy or a strong financial background can best help their district by coming to the meetings prepared. Know what the spreadsheets say. Know what the projections mean, and be ready to articulate your interpretation of those numbers. ■

Look inward to examine potential causes of staffing woes

School boards dealing with issues such as high staff turnover, teacher strikes, and frequent searches for new superintendents may want to consider whether they're setting the right tone for their districts.

Although the board does not supervise district employees, it does supervise the district's superintendent — the individual responsible for managing day-to-day operations. This means that any difficulties between the superintendent and board members (or within the board itself) can affect the "climate" of the district as a whole and impede the district's ability to attract and retain qualified personnel.

That's not to say that all of a district's problems can be blamed on the board's "culture." Some factors, such as economic conditions or natural disasters, are beyond the board's control. Still, board members may want to think about how their relationships with the superintendent and each other might be affecting employee morale. School boards currently dealing with internal strife should:

- **Be honest about shortcomings.** Self-reflection can be difficult, especially when individuals need to

consider how their own actions may have strained their professional relationships. Board members should be willing to work on any personal issues, such as communication style, that might affect board culture or climate.

- **Discuss solutions as group.** School boards need buy-in from all affected individuals to reform the board's culture. Make sure each board member has the opportunity to provide input on the changes they'd like to see, and be sure to document any resulting changes in the board's practices or policies.

- **Consider need for consultant.** Some boards may want to have an outside agency offer an objective opinion on the source of their difficulties. For example, the board of trustees for the Clark County (NV) School District voted to commission a "culture and climate" study following a highly publicized dispute over the superintendent's continued employment. While such arrangements may not be necessary in all cases, school boards with a lengthy history of strained relationships might find an outsider's perspective helpful. ■

Respect board meeting start, end times

Are you struggling to get along with other board members? One way to develop and maintain a positive relationship with your board colleagues is to be mindful of the ways you indirectly communicate with others. For example, being tardy to board meetings or leaving meetings early

may convey to other board members that you don't respect their time or that board meetings aren't important to you. To avoid leaving this impression, arrive to each board meeting on time and only leave after the meeting has officially concluded. ■