

Board & Administrator

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Insight into the superintendent selection process: Part 4

When my wife Sue and I arrived for the second round of interviews in Charlotte, the schedule was packed, including an awkward 15 minutes first start to the day where the three finalists and two of the spouses were all sequestered in a conference room together. Let's just say the atmosphere was pretty cold in that room!

Once the day officially began, Sue went out for a tour of the city with a member of the district's communications team, and I embarked on a full day of activities, which were all public and attended by a crowd of people. It was like taking a physical exam in public. The day included another interview with the board and a series of panel interviews, including teachers, parents, elected officials, the business community, and students. The most pointed question that day came from a teacher who asked what I was going to do about managed instruction that had "sucked the soul out of teaching."

The whirlwind day ended with a public forum. Each candidate made an opening statement, and then the floor was open for questions. Most people asked very specific questions about education, but I distinctly recall fielding one question about my favorite barbecue. (For the uninitiated, barbecue is a topic fiercely debated in Charlotte, where different styles of sauce have strong advocates!)

That evening, Sue and I returned to our hotel and debriefed, each of us reporting our experiences to the other. It didn't take long for us to reach a shared conclusion: We wanted to be part of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community.

The next day, I met first with the board chair,

who told me that I had been received well and the board planned to make a decision quickly. I then had a series of one-on-one meetings with board members, who asked a series of follow-up questions to go deeper on various issues.

The morning after we returned to California, I called my attorney; I wanted to talk through the status of the process with her.

I trusted my attorney's guidance. A few years earlier, I had interviewed for and was offered the position of superintendent in one of the country's 25 largest districts. We negotiated a contract and after agreeing to the contract, the district wanted to change the terms of the contract the day before my family and I were to fly out and be introduced to the community. My attorney advised me to withdraw from the search, citing integrity issues. She said if they change the rules of the game when they are courting you *before* you are hired, imagine what will happen later. To this day, she is still my attorney and trusted adviser.

On the first day I was back in California, the board's general counsel contacted me and said that I was the board's choice.

My skills, experiences, attributes, temperament, and who I followed helped me be the right choice. The nine members of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education wanted a superintendent who would be the face of the district.

So I was fully prepared on all fronts. But I also quickly learned that having nine bosses — the nine members of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education — was going to be far more challenging than I had anticipated. ■

Advisory committees: Direct them with guidelines and rules

Advisory committees to the board need rules to guide them, always keeping in mind the board is the board and the committee doesn't have the same power.

The board may appoint standing committees; however, no individual member or group comprising less than the full board membership shall exercise the powers of the full board. (Note: This provision clearly limits the authority of the advisory group.)

With the approval or at the direction of the board, the board president may appoint temporary ad hoc and/or advisory committees to assist the board. (Note: An important provision to include, because the board president's authority comes from the full board.)

The following guidelines shall apply to all temporary ad hoc or advisory committees:

- Committees shall be appointed for a specific and well-defined purpose. Their authority shall be limited to that assigned to them by the full board. (Note: This clause clearly states the committee works under the authority of the full board.)

- All committees shall be fact-finding or advisory in nature, and do not have decision-making authority. Committees and committee members shall not have the power to make monetary or other decisions for the board. (Note: An important limitation on the power of advisory groups — they don't make decisions, they make recommendations.)

- The board will provide such committees with a suitable meeting place and administrative support. The administrator or the administrator's designee shall be a member of each advisory committee. (Note: A vital rule, because it makes the superintendent a participant in the advisory group's work.)

- All reports of any advisory committee shall be made in writing to only the board and superintendent. (Note: This provision clarifies reporting responsibilities, and includes the administrator in the chain of command at the top.)

- Committees shall be dissolved upon completion of their assigned tasks. (Note: A must-have guideline.) ■

Disruptive board members: What are the board's options?

Attorney Gary Brochu in his webinar, Board Member Boot Camp: Board Member Conduct, discussed what a board can and cannot do when faced with disruptive board members.

Brochu (Shipman & Goodwin LLP, Hartford, Conn.) cautions that these recommendations apply to Connecticut school boards, so be sure to check with your own counsel for what is legal in your state.

What a board cannot do:

- Vote off or otherwise remove a board member from the board.
- Suspend a member from board service or prevent him from attending or participating in meetings.
- Prohibit a member from voting or otherwise exercising her statutory rights as a board member.

What a board can do:

- Prevent a board member from visiting schools or attending school events, Brochu said.
- Direct that all board member communications go through the president or superintendent.
- Prevent a trustee from meeting with staff members as a board member, Brochu said.
- Publicly express disapproval of a member's conduct, Brochu said.

What are some of the main reasons for board

member misconduct?

- Members are unfamiliar with the law or board procedures.

- The board member doesn't understand board member's roles and responsibility. "This is one-half of the concerns we hear," Brochu said. "Some board members want to run the district as opposed to lead it."

- The board member feels compelled to represent the interests of a single group.

- They are focused on a single issue. They have complaints about a sports team or want to get rid of a specific staff member, Brochu said.

- The board member has a personality conflict with other trustees or staff, Brochu said.

- The trustee is not respectful of the board as a collective body. "They think they have authority as an individual and believe they can work independently," Brochu said.

- They are not a nice person, Brochu said. "They are mean or vindictive," he said.

For information, <http://www.shipmangoodwin.com/board-member-boot-camp-board-member-conduct-empowering-good-behaviordealing-with-bad-behavior>. ■