

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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More insight into the superintendent hiring process: Part 5

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

When I got to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the district's annual operating budget was \$1.2 billion. The largest share of the operating budget comes from the state and the exact amount is decided each year by the North Carolina General Assembly. State money represented about two-thirds of the CMS annual operating budget, with slightly less than a third coming from Mecklenburg County and the remainder from the federal government and other sources.

The annual budget was one of the district's biggest challenges. We typically started the fiscal year each July with a budget based on a very conservative estimate of state funding. In years when the legislators were particularly quarrelsome, it could be September or October before we had a firm number for our state funding!

In addition, we had to present and defend our budget not only to the Board of Education but also to the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners — one of many political challenges that I will discuss in detail in later chapters.

Fortunately or otherwise, the budget for the coming year had been approved when I arrived in Charlotte so we could begin planning for the next one right away. It's also worth noting that the county allocation was so far below the district request that the outgoing interim superintendent held a press conference before my arrival and said that I was being given the keys to a car that had no gas.

The budget was one of the first and most significant ways I learned about the political, intel-

lectual, and emotional challenges of serving nine members of the Board of Education. In seeking the Charlotte job, I had interviewed the Board of Education as much as they had interviewed me. I thought — naively, as it turned out — that I understood how to effectively and smoothly work with the Board of Education. I didn't when I started — but I learned a lot in Charlotte about it.

But one thing I did have when I got to Charlotte was an entry plan — a comprehensive and detailed one with a lot of moving parts.

My planning for entry into Charlotte began during the interview process. As I spoke with the nine members of the Board of Education, I was already collecting information about the job; the district and the area helped me develop a formal entry plan. An immediate challenge I faced was that everyone wanted to know my plan for the district. What did I think of the work done by my predecessors? What was I going to keep doing? What was I going to start doing? What was I going to stop doing? I did not have a plan for the district; instead, I had an entry plan so that I could gather information and then work with the CMS team to develop an informed plan for the district.

The next few columns will discuss that plan in detail.

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Total agreement isn't necessary

I've seen school boards that strive so hard to reach consensus that they break down from the strain and cease functioning like a team.

That's irony, when the process of avoiding board splits results in a broken board riddled with irreconcilable differences. It's OK to not have consensus on a board issue.

It can be very difficult to move forward if board members have to agree on every point. No board member should have to compromise her convictions so the board can be unified.

Consensus may not be best for everyone on the board. So just follow this rule: Vote like you feel on the issue, but always support the majority's final decision. ■

Board Self-Assessment

Mark "Yes" if the statement is true all of the time. Mark "Some" if the statement is at least partially true. Mark "No" if the item is never true.

Role and Responsibilities

- Each board member has a copy of her job description.
- Board members understand their legal responsibilities as trustees and representatives of the school district.
- Board members are advocates for the school.
- Board members talk positively about the school to the public.
- The board holds yearly self-appraisals.
- Board members attempt to exercise authority only at board meetings.
- The full board evaluates and approves the annual evaluation of the superintendent.
- Board needs are communicated clearly to the superintendent.
- New board members are oriented before they attend their first meeting.
- Officer terms are limited to a maximum of two consecutive terms.
- Board members represent the entire district, not just special interests.
- Board members understand that communication with staff should be channeled through the superintendent, not around the superintendent.
- The board has an annual, systematic process for the evaluation of the superintendent.
- The board recognizes the administrative duties that belong to the superintendent.
- The board and superintendent publicly support each other.
- The board directs concerns about the school system to the superintendent, and not to other administrative personnel.

Comments: