

Board & Administrator

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Communication protocol helps resolve constituent queries

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

The Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools board used the following protocol to provide excellent service to stakeholders who had questions or concerns.

- Ensure that the administration took responsibility for helping citizens receive the services that the board intended the district provide the public.
- Follow processes designed to facilitate the administration's ability to resolve problems effectively.
- Identify opportunities for systems improvement.

At the same time, the board took the bold step of committing in policy to avoid involvement in management activities or giving direction to staff, even if the problem was serious or the board member's involvement was minimal. In making this commitment, the policy stated that board members recognized that:

- Their involvement in management and administrative matters created confusion among district employees, led to dysfunctional management systems, undermined the authority of the superintendent and the administration, and weakened the board by making it impossible to hold the superintendent responsible for district operations.

Their obligation not to confer special advantage on employees, parents, students, vendors, or any other person or entity outside regular management decision-making processes established by policy or management directive to guarantee fairness and equity. Such behavior by a board member was a betrayal of the board, the district, and the public and subjected the board member to reprimand or censure. To operationalize the constituent service

process, I worked with the board to develop a system for constituent services.

The major features of the system included:

- A protocol for handling constituent requests for information or assistance.
- A primary contact person in the superintendent's office to whom the board services staff member would refer constituent service requests they receive.
- A form for documenting requests.
- An information management system for storing, tracking, categorizing, and analyzing requests.
- An expectation for constituents to be updated on the request's progress within three business days.
- A feedback process so that board members knew the resolution of requests.
- Oversight of the system by my designee, who handled priority requests and kept me informed of matters that required my attention.
- Periodic reports to me and the board on constituent requests, resolution, and patterns in requests.
- Periodic reports on systems improvements made as a result of constituent service requests.

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Dr. Peter Gorman

Curb public grouching about conference expense

If the public ever blasts the board for expenses incurred on board development trips, read on.

Here is an excellent suggestion for pointing out to the public the value of board conference trips. If your board has successfully used ideas from a conference, publicize them in the meeting minutes. Ideas that were used by the district can go into the official record. Then, you can point to this record when the grouching starts.

Also, upon return from the conference, e-mail a letter to local reporters that describes highlights of what the board learned at conference sessions. You should include the name of the speakers from sessions your board attended and volunteer to discuss thoughts on what was learned and how it might apply to your district. Finally, if reporters contact the district or a board member for an interview, be prepared to supply the reporter with conference handouts. ■

These strategies keep meetings under control

Whenever two or more are gathered at a meeting, disagreements are sure to follow. Here are some strategies and tips that can help the board maintain control:

- Get board factions to reach a compromise. This two-step approach can work wonders when the board is split:

1. Remove the discussion from the regular meeting. Set aside an hour at least for a special meeting to focus exclusively on the issue that divides the board. This way, the rest of the meeting won't be neglected because emotions are running high.

2. Use a facilitator to reach a compromise. The superintendent or board president is the best choice for the job, but if he or she isn't, consider hiring a professional who can get board members to consider all sides of an issue.

- Take 10. If discussion becomes too hot, board members can take a 10-minute recess to cool off. It can be helpful for board members to stretch their legs and clear their heads.

- Keep meetings short. The longer the meeting, the shorter board member's fuses. Be sure meetings are well organized and as short as possible. ■

Test your team qualities

Directions: Take a few minutes to complete this short exercise and determine whether you are a team-builder. The fewer "no" answers, the closer you are to being a team player. ■

Do I ...

Listen to fellow board members so I can fit my goals with theirs?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Explain my position on an issue clearly so fellow board members can understand where I am coming from?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Try to know fellow board members on a personal or social basis or look for ways to interact outside the board room?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Let my board colleagues know when I agree or disagree with them to show my concern about an issue?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Keep disagreements about an issue from carrying over to other issues on the agenda?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Respect other board members by not ridiculing them or attacking their motives?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Work for genuine consensus instead of forming cliques with other board members?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Accept the fact that there will be times when I must support a majority decision -- even though I oppose it?	Yes ☐	No ☐
Leave my disagreements at the board table when the meeting ends?	Yes ☐	No ☐