

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

Board member doesn't like superintendent's purchase

A board member considers his top responsibility to make sure the district doesn't spend money unnecessarily. He sees the reason he was elected as a mandate to protect the taxpayer's pocketbook.

This leads to some tension between the board member and superintendent because the board member likes to closely monitor bills. In the report on district expenditures, he finds a purchase he doesn't understand and stops by the office to discuss the matter with the superintendent.

The board member is doing nothing greatly wrong here except wasting time — his and the superintendent's.

Here's a question some board members and even the full board struggle with: What's the board's responsibility for district finances? The answer is that the board is responsible for

monitoring all the finances of the district.

Too often, however, board members believe monitoring means approving each expenditure — and that's not practical.

Board members need to keep in mind that they approve a budget. When they do this, they approve the expenditure of district money to meet board goals. From that point on, the board's role is to monitor the budget — not track down each and every purchase to ask for an explanation.

On a month-to-month basis, monitor how well income and expenses conform to the budget plan. Ask your superintendent to explain month-to-month and year-to-year variances. Make sure the board has an annual audit. Trust your superintendent to spend the district's money. That is the proper way to monitor the district's finances. ■

Negative topics bring negative attention

Let's say your board is dealing with a controversial topic such as a school closing or a legal issue involving a teacher and a student. The community is hot and bothered, and the board is under the microscope. How do you proceed?

The first step a board should take when it is in a tough spot is to refer to board policy. The board's policy should outline what to do. Then, let the superintendent implement the policy, and let it work.

It's also important to communicate effectively as a board team when the district is sailing through rough waters. Sit down with the president and superintendent to map out strategy. It's important

for the board to speak with one voice, so seven different board members are not out telling seven different versions of the board's story.

If the board's policy is good and internal communication is good, then plan for media relations. It's probably a good idea to alert the local paper's editor about a sensitive issue and to let them know the district will keep the media informed.

Finally, expect your board meetings to have more public participation. Review the board's procedures for listening to public comment. For some tips on how to receive public input at meetings so that the board stays in control of its meeting, see *10 tips for receiving public input* on page 2. ■

10 tips for receiving public input

In January, about 200 parents and students showed up at the Portland (Ore.) Public Schools board meeting in support of teachers in their contract negotiations, Portland television station KOIN reported. All heck broke out, with supporters shouting, "If you strike, we do too," KOIN reported.

When hot topics arise in the district, the board needs to be prepared to face public scrutiny at its meetings. The board will better handle input from citizens at its meetings if it has strategies and procedures in place that allow the board to remain in charge of the proceedings. Here are some tips that will help you do that.

1. Recognize what you are facing. If you know you have something extremely controversial, choose the appropriate time and place. For instance,

consider a community forum just for that topic if a school closing looms.

2. Manage board time effectively. If you have several speakers on the same topic, ask if they can choose one individual to speak for them.

3. Impose per-speaker time limits.

4. Impose per-topic time limits.

5. Ask that speakers limit repetition in their comments.

6. Allow only one individual to speak at a time.

7. Allow no interrogation of board members.

8. Accept no public statements about individuals (the superintendent, board members, teachers, staff, etc.).

9. Require all speakers to be recognized.

10. Allow NO personal attacks. ■

Keep a list of board responsibilities handy

When boards become conflicted about their job, it's often due to a lack of focus on the board's primary responsibilities. One way around that is to make sure every board member stays familiar with these responsibilities.

It can help to keep handy a written list of your board's responsibilities for easy reference. The board should discuss what it believes its responsibilities are to develop its own list.

Here are responsibilities the board and superintendent could discuss to help create their own list.

- Establish broad policies for the district that ensure student needs will be met.
- Hire the superintendent.
- Delegate to the superintendent the authority

to carry out the board's policies.

- Provide the superintendent with a job description.
- Evaluate the superintendent's performance annually.
- Lobby elected officials for legislation favorable to the schools.
- Maintain complete records of board meetings.
- Ensure financial solvency of the school district.
- Approve contracts.
- Make sure the district meets all legal requirements.
- Evaluate board performance in relation to board-approved goals.
- Plan so as to give the district a viable long-term future. ■

During orientation, teach responsibilities, district background

In the Illinois Association of School Boards' *Orienting New School Board Members on the Way to Becoming a High-Performing Board Team*, the association recommends board members learn their roles and responsibilities and key data about district operations. Here are some examples of what the association suggests covering when new members receive their orientation.

- Open meeting minutes from the previous year.
- Most recent annual financial report, auditor's report, and other financial information including tax increment financing schedules.
- District and school improvement plans.
- Contracts, including any collective bargaining

agreements between the district and certificated (teachers) and non-certificated personnel, and the superintendent's contract.

- Important calendars, including regular board meeting and budget calendars.
- Important handbooks, such as personnel and student handbooks.
- Summary of pending district litigation.
- Special reports, including facilities assessments, curriculum studies, results of recent community surveys, enrollment trends, and NCLB status of schools and district.

For information, <http://www.iasb.com/pdf/orientingnewbdmembers.pdf>. ■