

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

August 2016 Vol. 30, No. 4

Editor: Jeff Stratton

The board and superintendent should define board and staff roles

Board members often come to board service with little experience in understanding the basic nuts and bolts of how school districts work.

This is because school board service is much different than the types of work experiences that most board members have encountered. They come from the business world, are small business owners, or are public-spirited individuals who want to use their volunteer time to help children.

When it comes to the board member role, these past work experiences can lead to confusion about how a board member's responsibilities differ from those of an employee. They can create questions in a board member's mind about who does what.

This can affect your relationship with the superintendent, who has been trained to manage the day-to-day workings of the school district, from buses and beans, to curriculum and personnel.

It can be useful to review the following chart for a simple explanation of who does what in the district:

- Who teaches students? Classroom teachers.
- Who supervises teachers? Building principals.
- Who hires, fires, and manages principals?

Your superintendent.

- Who hires, fires, and manages the superintendent? The school board.

There are other effective ways to pin down the specifics that exist in the difference between the board's role and the staff's.

An exercise that can help teach a board the difference between board and staff roles can be a useful learning tool, if the board and superintendent complete the tool together, discuss the

results, and come to agreement on how questions of who does what will work in their district. I've provided a brief exercise below.

In a group setting, board members can answer the following questions on their own and then discuss the results as a group with the superintendent to reach consensus.

Board members should select an answer for each question by indicating Y for yes and N for no.

Since lack of clarity about roles is one of the major causes of conflict and disagreement between boards and superintendents, it is important to discuss roles as a team and establish the roles and responsibilities for your district.

Board Role Review

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. The board should interview teacher candidates. | Y | N |
| 2. Regular review of the policy manual is a board responsibility. | Y | N |
| 3. The superintendent's assistant should take minutes at board meetings. | Y | N |
| 4. The board should approve staff requests for professional development training. | Y | N |
| 5. The board should set a policy on how it wants district telephones to be answered. | Y | N |
| 6. Board members should visit classrooms to offer teachers instructional advice. | Y | N |
| 7. The superintendent is the board's only employee. | Y | N |

School 'adoption' makes board members true ambassadors

One key element of the board member's role is to serve as an ambassador for the public schools in the district. This often takes the form of advocating for the schools with your elected representatives, or speaking at local group events, such as the Rotary Club.

The Farmington, N.M., Public Schools Board drills down a little deeper into this responsibility by 'adopting' a school in their district.

This activity creates a powerful bond between the district's patrons and the board member, while letting the board member develop a more meaningful connection to the schools than would occur by simply attending meetings and voting.

The board member develops a connection to the school he or she adopts and often becomes its "champion" during the annual budgeting process.

Because of their visits to the school, for example, board members know the needs for extra money for facilities, academics, or field trips. They can take this information, based on conversations with teachers and principals, back to the full board.

There is more at work than budgetary needs in this ambassador concept. Board members, in general, are also

ambassadors to the community at large. This is important, because the schools should never operate in isolation.

A school board member can generate good will between the district and the community.

In the Farmington district, the board members become goodwill merchants from stakeholders to the district."

When a board member visits a school regularly over the term of his service, he develops a motivation that impacts his governance work in a positive way, and becomes comfortable sharing what the district is thinking and planning. This pays off when a board member attends open houses or parents' nights and interacts with constituents, who then realize it is OK to give the schools a call.

That kind of familiarity between board members and patrons in a community of 45,000 like Farmington prevents anonymity.

The board is also good about participating in celebrations that recognize the good things happening in the schools. If a teacher or student is being honored, the board member who has a connection to that school will participate in the event.

When a school selects an employee of the month, the board member who represents that school will invite the honoree to a board meeting for recognition. ■

The board-superintendent relationship: It's a lot like hiring an expert tour guide

The most important job for a school board is hiring a superintendent to manage the district's day-to-day operations. This is the person who will be trusted to get the district to where the board wants to take it.

It's equally important, once you hire the district's administrator, to carefully map out for him where you want the district to go and what you want accomplished. By doing these two things, the board is performing its governing role properly: Hiring a superintendent, and planning for the district's future.

If you think of this relationship with the superintendent in terms of taking a trip or vacation, the board-superintendent connection is like hiring a local tour guide who knows the ins and outs of the place you are visiting to get you maximum benefit from the journey you are taking.

A tour director has to be experienced, knowledgeable, and ultimately someone you trust. So

think of your relationship with the superintendent in this way: He's a tour director and will guide you on your journey.

The board's tour director/superintendent will develop an itinerary for your trip, charter the bus, make reservations, and, important point here, present the travel arrangements to the board for approval — because ultimately the board is in charge of approving these arrangements.

If the board agrees it all looks good, then you are on your way. Now, all the board has to do is get on the bus, relax, and enjoy the scenery on its way to the destination.

Point: Once the superintendent is hired and the strategic direction of the district is set, the board's role becomes oversight and governance. Your most important work is complete.

Get regular feedback from your administrator on how things are going and support her as she leads the district. ■