

# Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## Nip political polarization in the bud

While school board members might agree that the board room is no place for political rhetoric or campaigning, it's important that the board address the issue and discuss agreed-upon parameters for political discourse. Firstly, there should be no political "debate" in a board meeting. Members should develop policy that identifies what constitutes prohibited partisan rhetoric and precluded political conduct during the conducting of board business. Secondly, while politics may invariably come up, members should abide by predetermined guidelines in addressing those sensitive issues.

Consider documenting identifiers to pin down exactly what constitutes political discourse that is not permitted in a board meeting. Establish guide-

lines that board members must follow to ensure neutrality when discussing politically-infused matters. If a political "hot topic" must be broached, the board should make sure that every viewpoint is shared and given the consideration and respect it deserves. It is a good idea to require members to provide advance notice of their intention to provide input on such issues so that it is noted in the agenda and others can prepare to offer a differing view.

It is also important for the board to discuss members' political activity outside the board room and when and whether such conduct can be scrutinized by the team. A board member who is a political activist should ensure that he removes all vestiges of any party affiliation before entering the board room. ■

## Keep student privacy in mind during public events, appearances

As a member of your district's school board, you may be accustomed to discussing your professional or private life with the community or local media outlets. However, keep in mind that students aren't subject to the same public scrutiny. To ensure you protect the privacy of all students attending your district, avoid chatting about specific disciplinary incidents, classrooms, or other student-specific information during public events or appearances.

Consider the recent controversy involving Hartland Consolidated (Mich.) Schools. On Feb. 19, School Board Member Glenn Gogoleski appeared as

a guest on a podcast. During the podcast, Gogoleski allegedly discussed a disciplinary incident that occurred at Hartland Farms Intermediate and how the school handles students who have "meltdowns" in class. He also allegedly made a comment that condoned "grabbing" students "by the scruff of the neck" as a form of discipline, the *Livingston Daily* reported.

Gogoleski's statements on the podcast ultimately led to concerns that his wife — who works in the front office of Hartland Farms Intermediate — improperly shared personally identifiable student in-

formation with Gogoleski. In a district newsletter, Superintendent Chuck Hughes said that the district is investigating the Gogoleskis' actions to determine whether they violated FERPA.

Be cautious when you speak at public events or make a guest appearance on local media to avoid a similar misstep. If you plan to talk about a particular issue or incident that occurred in

your district, the best course of action may be to discuss your concerns broadly and avoid mentioning a specific student or school. Also, regularly consult with your superintendent, legal counsel, and public relations department. They may provide helpful public speaking tips and training that will help you to always put your best foot forward. ■

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## Who's right, who's wrong?

A board member walks into the superintendent's office and asks to see Teacher X's personnel file. The superintendent tells her "No, I can't do that."

How would your board member react to that scenario? Here's what board members need to remember: Outside of the boardroom, an individual board member has no more authority than any single citizen. With that in mind:

1. Understand the superintendent is correct to not turn over the teacher's personnel record. Why? Because a single board member walking in off the street has no more authority to request private per-

sonnel records than does any citizen walking in off the street. Do you want your superintendent to give up confidential personnel information to citizens who request it? Of course not.

2. If the full board believes there is a problem with an individual teacher's performance, the board can ask for a discussion about that person's performance. Then, the board can direct the superintendent to lead a discussion about that individual, using the district's human resources manager and others who understand how that process works. ■

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## Hold parent-feedback meeting on superintendent search

Obtaining parents' input on the type of superintendent they would like to see take the helm at a school district can help build trust with parents and give them a stake in the process. To obtain input, school boards can consider scheduling a parent-feedback meeting before they move their search into high gear, to allow parents to ask questions, voice their concerns, and highlight the qualities they want a new superintendent to have.

Getting feedback from parents is particularly important where the board is seeking to overcome actions by the last superintendent which eroded parents' trust in the district. Perhaps, for example, parents feel that the last superintendent fell short in addressing safety concerns or engaged in actions that led the public to question his or her integrity.

To obtain sufficient input, boards should con-

sider sending out emails and automated messages to parents several days prior to the meeting so that parents who most want to participate have the opportunity to do so. The message should convey that, while the board ultimately will make the selection, it's genuinely interested in and will consider what parents value in a new superintendent.

For example, some parents may place paramount value on a candidate's listening skills, student safety focus, or ability to respond to multiple different viewpoints in a politically divisive environment.

Whatever type of input they provide, parents who feel they have had an opportunity to play some role in the selection process are more likely to trust and respect board members and more likely to support the candidate who ultimately wins the job. ■