

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Know when it's time to take a recess

When school board meetings become heated, consider taking a recess. A "cooling-off" period can help board members and stakeholders to re-focus, organize their thoughts, consider other viewpoints, appreciate a different perspective, and discern the issues.

The board meeting should function as a forum for respectful and effective discussions of pertinent issues. Sometimes, contentious debate can result in a shouting match. Board members may need to remind meeting participants of the expectations of professional conduct, respect, and decorum during a public meeting and stress the importance of listening to stakeholders' comments on the issues.

If the meeting becomes disorderly or gets caught up on extraneous issues, board members should

not hesitate to make a motion to recess. During a recess, members should ferret out the issues, discuss how to focus on important agenda items, and have a plan to maintain order when the meeting resumes.

There may be other reasons to recess a board meeting. An immediate or unexpected safety or health concern, a protest or demonstration, or simply the need to have a private discussion with board members may require a short break. For example, mismanagement of COVID-19 safety protocols recently forced a Collier County, Fla. school board meeting to recess after parents removed face masks in protest of the mask mandate in schools.

When the board reconvenes from a recess, civil and productive discussions are the result. ■

Keep candidates, community in the loop during superintendent search

Although most superintendents will serve in their positions for the duration of their employment contracts, unforeseen circumstances may sometimes require a superintendent to step down before the end of his term. If this occurs, you and the rest of the school board will likely be eager to hire a new superintendent to lead the district.

To start your search on the right foot, make sure you have a game plan to keep potential candidates and the public apprised of the hiring process. For example, when Mark Dziatczak, the superintendent for Birmingham (Mich.) Public

Schools, resigned due to medical reasons at the end of February 2021, the school board promptly shared a timeline of its superintendent search on the district's website. That timeline indicated that the board would select its new superintendent by June 15, 2021.

Consider developing and publishing a similar "superintendent search" roadmap to keep the school community informed. In addition to the date in which you plan to announce the new superintendent, you can also specify in the roadmap:

- The dates in which the board will collect stakeholder feedback.

- The dates in which the board will accept applications.
 - The dates when the board will conduct interviews.
 - The dates when final candidates will do site visits and district tours.
- This will not only ensure that applicants

are aware of important deadlines, but will also assure stakeholders and members of the community that the board is taking action to fill the vacant superintendent position.

To see Birmingham Public School's superintendent search timeline, visit <https://www.birmingham.k12.mi.us/domain/2141>. ■

Address charges of impropriety before they escalate

Misuse of public funds, employment discrimination, fraud, violations of district policy. Such allegations of impropriety can result in a sticky situation for school boards, especially if school board members or the district superintendent are implicated in those charges.

While addressing claims of impropriety may be uncomfortable and may result in conflict between board members, the board should find a way to investigate and, if necessary, remedy those incidents before matters snowball into a public relations nightmare.

On March 30, 2021, Gwyn Gittens, a board member for the School District of Lee County (Fla.), announced in a public interview that she asked Gov. Ron DeSantis to formally investigate issues of waste, fraud, and abuse in the district. Although Gittens did not publicly release a copy of her letter to the governor, she confirmed that she asked state officials to investigate alleged violations of the state's Sunshine Law, the mismanagement of public funds, and abuses of power, among other things. She also noted that she brought her concerns to the governor because other board members were non-responsive.

Here are two suggestions that may help your board avoid a similar situation:

- **Develop a policy on board-related complaints.** With the assistance of legal counsel, develop and publish a policy on how the school board will handle complaints or allegations against itself as an entity and against individual board members. The policy should also delineate the circumstances in which it would be appropriate for the board to hire an independent firm to investigate allegations. Written protocols will ensure the board takes appropriate measures to address potential impropriety and approach all complaints in a uniform and impartial manner.

- **Discuss your PR strategy as soon as possible.** If a board member raises allegations against other board members or against the superintendent, what message should the board send to the public? Before any claims of impropriety arise, make sure you have a plan of action to notify the school community of any ongoing inquiries and respond to concerns. Similarly, the board should determine whether it will release details about board-related investigations as they happen or withhold that information until inquiry has concluded. ■

Ensure board consensus when goals change

As the school board monitors performance on the district's strategic goals, you may find that circumstances have changed, and goals must be modified. When that occurs, it's important that the full board support and approve changes to the strategic plan.

To achieve board consensus on changes to goals, board members should answer the following questions:

1. Does the goal meet the district's mission?
2. Is the goal detailed sufficiently?
3. Does the goal make sense?
4. Is the goal achievable considering district resources?
5. What additional information do you need?
6. Are their additional comments to consider? ■