

Board & Administrator

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What is the board's response to a candidate with a vendetta?

Too often, candidates run for the school board with a single-issue: firing a teacher, a coach, or in some cases, the superintendent.

When the board has a member who sees this as his one job on the board, the body needs to be prepared to ask a pointed question: What will be your next act if you are successful in your desire to oust an individual from the district?

The board should stress to its members that the position of board member requires the board to represent the best interests of all the district's stakeholders.

The key here is for the board to work at professionalism in its approach to school governance. This is an expectation that the community has of its board: Professional behavior, with no distracting sideshows at board meetings, no members using

their board seat to pursue a vendetta, and no member seeking personal gain from board service.

To achieve this:

- Come to meetings prepared.
- Contact your superintendent before the meeting with any questions you might have about the agenda.
- Make a commitment to keep board meetings orderly and business-focused.
- Never become verbally abusive of another board member, school staff or the superintendent.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Communicate. Practice "no surprises."
- Keep your focus on students.
- Respect the chain of command.
- Review and sign a conflict-of-interest statement annually as a reminder to the board. ■

Don't let personnel issues create confusion

Staff problems often create conflict between the board and superintendent. To clear up any confusion surrounding the relationship between the board and employees, keep these thoughts in mind:

1. Who manages individual staff members?

The superintendent hires, disciplines, fires, and evaluates employees. She is the person ultimately responsible for actions in these areas. The board manages only one employee: the superintendent. The board gives the superintendent a contract to manage the district.

2. What problems can occur when board members give direction to employees? Giving orders to school staff is a sure-fire way to disrupt the chain of command and compromise the superintendent's authority. To compound the problems, interfering with staff sends them the wrong message: "I can

turn to a board member anytime I have a problem."

When this occurs, it wastes board time and diverts the board from its proper role. To many board members and potential board members, this is a colossal waste of time.

3. What are some productive ways for board members and staff to interact?

It's always informative and engaging when teachers and other staff address the board about their work, and give examples of their accomplishments with students, for example. The board should also recognize employees for their achievements.

Finally, when the board and superintendent engage in strategic planning for the district, it is a good idea to gather thoughts from employees about what they consider the top challenges the schools face going forward. ■

Serve your board as a general, not a detail-focused sergeant

By Paul Vranish

Why is micro-management a problem with some boards? Most people who have been elected to a school board have not held a position on a corporate board; they have no experience in strategic or philosophical management. However, they may hold a mid-management position themselves, and have experience in task management.

It is quite natural that such people will gravitate to a mode where their life experience provides a foundation for their actions. Unfortunately, even a small school district is a multi-million-dollar business. Like any similar business, the district functions best when its corporate board is providing guidance, values, philosophies, and direction at the level of a general, not a sergeant.

Consider the following two examples.

Military

A sergeant will gather his men before going on patrol and disseminate instructions similar to these orders. "People, we will be on patrol for two days, with a high possibility of enemy contact. Each of you should carry eight clips of ammunition, two frag grenades, one smoke grenade, and a two-day supply of water and rations. Are there any questions?"

While these orders are critical for a unit on patrol, a general would never get involved in such "down the ladder" information. A general would focus his efforts in a more global mode: deciding which military units to deploy in which situations, ensuring that supply chains are established and maintained, and seeking overfly privileges from foreign countries. The big stuff.

School District

A trustee leans on the fence at a football game and converses with a friend. They agree that the football

coach should be fired. After this conversation, the trustee pursues an agenda to fire the coach; nagging and lobbying the superintendent and the remainder of the board. Well, we have a small-thinker here; actually, beneath the operational smarts of a sergeant.

Another trustee is also concerned about the football program, but this trustee thinks like a general. At the next board meeting, during an appropriate time, she poses the following questions to her colleagues and the superintendent:

- What do we expect from our football program?
- If we had the program to the level we wish, what would that look like?
- By what parameters is the football coach evaluated? How are all coaches, and their programs evaluated? And, who conducts these evaluations?
- How much of our resources, within the budget, are we willing to commit?
- How long, reasonably, would it take to achieve this desired state?

This trustee is a general, and an effective board member. The students and the taxpayers are the ultimate winners when this type of high-level thinking is prevalent on a school board.

If you, as a trustee, find yourself wanting to be on the campus to "check on things," giving directives to school employees, or needing to directly command the operations, then you are a "sergeant." The best way to fulfill your attraction to this mode of operation is to get off the board and into a school position.

Until you are ready to be a strategic thinker, a "general," you will reduce the effectiveness of your board, harm the students' school experience, and live in a state of perpetual personal frustration.

Vranish is a retired superintendent and school board consultant. ■

Establish guidelines for communicating with the public

Between board meetings, trustees can expect questions. Usually, the board president serves as spokesman when official board comment is requested. But as a board member, you may need to speak to the news media at some point in your service. Remember these three tips when dealing with the media:

1. Know the facts and have them ready. When interviewed by a reporter, provide accurate information. If you have any doubts, tell the reporter

you need time to check your information and will get back to him.

2. Don't finger-point. Remember that you have an obligation to support the majority's decision. Bad-mouthing other board members does your position no good and damages board teamwork.

3. Don't feel you have to talk to the media. If you are unsure of what to say, refer the reporter to the superintendent or board president. ■