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FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Avoid micromanagement by developing a policy focus

Believe it or not, some boards wrestle with their superintendents over issues such as the length of cheerleaders' skirts or how often the grass is getting mowed at the elementary schools. In a smooth-functioning board-and-administrator relationship, those issues would be left to the superintendent and her staff.

One way for a board to maintain a strong focus on the governance of the school district is to encourage your board to concentrate on professional development.

Here are three ways you can sharpen your board's focus on policy through professional development:

1. Encourage the board to make professional development a priority. You can do that by bringing in the occasional expert from your state's school boards association, but a better way is to take the "home-cooked" approach to give board members more ownership of their own professional development. The board can form a professional development committee. This committee can design, implement, and evaluate a professional development curriculum that meets the board's needs.

If this committee is doing its job properly, the board should develop an increased professionalism about how it does its work.

2. Perform regular self-assessment. When *Board & Administrator* recently surveyed superintendents about board governance practices in its *Annual Survey on School Boards*, the number of boards that annually evaluate themselves was low (44 percent). And many boards never perform a self-appraisal. See chart at right.

A school board should take an annual, formal look

at how well it is focusing on the district's strategic priorities, its own culture as a governing unit, and its commitment to maintaining a strong focus on the needs of the district's stakeholders.

3. Provide regular professional development.

This should begin with a rigorous orientation of new board members (and an introduction to board service for school board candidates), regular continuing education activities, and an annual board/superintendent retreat.

Regular professional development activities don't have to be fancy or expensive. Some boards use book readings and discussions. Other ideas include regular discussions between the board and the district's top administrators about the challenges and opportunities facing the district.

To get started, survey board members about the topics they wish to learn more about and the times that would work best for professional development.

How often does your board evaluate its performance?

The chart below shows the frequency with which boards evaluate their performance. How does your board stack up? ■

Frequency of board self-evaluation	% of responses
Annually	44%
Every 2-3 years	18%
Never	38%
Total	100%

One school board 'no-no' along with a tip to fix it

Board members need to remember that when they are speaking of "the board," they are talking about a unit, not five, seven, or nine individuals. When board members forget that the board acts only when it votes, they make mistakes that can best be characterized as unprofessional conduct.

An example is violating the district's chain of command by bypassing the superintendent and issuing an order to the director of buildings and grounds. One way to fix an issue like this is to learn how other boards conduct their affairs.

Ask your superintendent, as part of the board's regular professional development curriculum, to schedule a visit to another school district to discover what their board has learned about what makes good governance tick. ■

Assess resources during planning work

During strategic planning, too many board members dream big without first asking, "How are we going to pay for all this?"

To prevent this, review your available financial resources prior to writing the plan's goals and objectives.

The superintendent should lead in this area by discussing the revenue picture with the board.

When you write a plan that fits your budget, it's much easier for the administrator to accomplish the plan's goals. ■

Board that practices openness is transparent

If the board wants the community to trust it and consider it a governing body with integrity, it needs to practice openness. Here are some tips on how to do that.

- Conduct board business in a fair, respectful, and responsible manner.
- Consider the interests of students, staff, and community stakeholders while keeping the chain of command in place.
- Withhold judgment until all perspectives are

heard and the superintendent makes a recommendation to the board.

- Practice "no surprises" to ensure all members of the board and the superintendent have the same information.
- Communicate decisions to all who are affected by them.
- Keep confidential information confidential.
- Disclose conflicts of interest, and recuse yourself from decision-making if necessary. ■

The board's role should be clear and distinct

A board's job is to ensure the school district is successful in meeting its mission — however the board defines that mission. If the board collectively understands this, it should be no great leap to understand that the board needs a superintendent to manage the district's daily operations so that the mission is met.

Simple enough, but you'd be surprised at how often a board member struggles to respect this concept. Here is a role analogy that can help clarify the board's job.

A board wants to take a vacation. The board determines its destination, what it is willing to pay, when to take the trip, and the method of travel. The board decides to take a cruise.

Once the board has made these decisions and has boarded the cruise ship, it's time to let the

ship's captain steer.

Point: The board decides where the school district is headed; how it gets there is the superintendent's job.

Another idea: Look at the question of, "Who does what?" Apply it to the board's most important responsibility: setting policy.

- The board develops and reviews district policy, while the superintendent recommends policy, implements it, and enforces it.
- Once policy is set, the board recognizes that the actions of the board remain in effect until the board changes them. The individual board member supports the action, even if he was in the minority. The superintendent supports the actions of the board by implementing its policies. ■