

# Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## Keep election-year board politics at bay

School board elections can easily influence the dynamic between board members or between the superintendent and board members, said Rick Maloney, a Washington state school board member and school governance consultant. Here are some considerations the board should keep in mind to handle the varied dynamics of board service and school board elections professionally.

- **Are sitting members running for reelection?** “One potential difficulty can occur if others tend to dismiss the relevance of a lame-duck board member’s opinions,” Maloney said. The board should keep in mind that the lame duck’s votes still have equal impact on board decisions, he said.

- **If a board seat is contested, do any candidates seek and get endorsements from other board members or key administrators?** Hard feelings often occur when a board member or administrator endorses the opponent of the board member seeking reelection, Maloney said.

“Even endorsing an incumbent can create future problems if the challenger is elected because the newly elected board member might carry a grudge against a perceived ‘enemy,’” Maloney said.

While endorsement of a candidate is protected free speech, board members may want to establish a personal policy avoiding such endorsements and declining on principle any requests for endorsement, Maloney said. “People, even if they are friends with the board member or superintendent, will generally understand such a personal preference to avoid the antag-

onistic perceptions that are inevitable in an opposed election,” Maloney said.

- **If a sitting member does not file for election, is it still a contested election between two or more newcomers, and what should be the board member response?** “Again, even when there is no incumbent involved in a contested election, it may be prudent for board members to stick to a policy of ‘no endorsements’ either for or against candidates,” he said. The rationale here is that the “opposition” candidate might prevail, and the new board members’ colleagues might be perceived to be an enemy of the opponent, Maloney said.

- **Board endorsements can rip open a frayed relationship.** “I have observed instances in which the endorsement by a board member of an opponent exacerbates what might already have been a strained relationship with the candidate being challenged,” Maloney said. In each such instance, the calculation of the board colleague was that the relationship was already negative, so why not publicly say so, and in so doing perhaps influence the election in a way that promises to improve the board in the future, he said.

**Tip:** School board politics are a good reason for the board to place an emphasis on continuous improvement — much like many schools ask of their staff and students. To do this, regularly seek out educational opportunities in the form of national- and state-level school board conferences and outside speakers. Then, be sure to include a line item in the district budget for board training annually. ■

### 3 reasons anonymous staff input about superintendent's job performance won't work

Never spring a surprise on your superintendent when it comes to her performance appraisal. That's part of the "no surprises" rule most school boards and superintendents live by.

It's a bad strategy for a school board to include staff input in the superintendent's evaluation unless the administrator is prepared for it. If the board opts to use staff insights in the superintendent's appraisal, it should work this out in advance with the superintendent, and then proceed with caution for these three reasons.

1. Staff evaluations of the administrator can become a gripe fest. Little things can become big things to employees, and giving them a chance to "evaluate" the superintendent allows immature people an opportunity to vent. It's always good to remember that it is the board's responsibility to evaluate the superintendent.

2. Superintendent evaluations should focus more on the high-level aspects of governing a school district — not the nitty-gritty of managing day-to-day operations. That means focusing on whether goals were met. Staff will generally be more concerned with the day-to-day aspects of their interactions with the administrator.

3. Staff input in the superintendent's appraisal confuses the chain of command. When employees communicate with the board directly on something as important as the superintendent's performance, there is the risk they will start coming to board members with all of their issues, complaints, and concerns. There are plenty of school board members (and potential board members) out there who will refuse to serve on a board that operates in this way because it wastes their time. ■

### Board development helps board do its job

Thinking about cutting training dollars? That's like a business cutting advertising dollars, according to the Alabama School Boards Association.

The ASBA in *Why Get Training*, a post adapted from an article by Linda Dawson, director of editorial services for the Illinois Association of School Boards, states that board development helps the board better do its job.

"Make certain school board training is part of your school system policy and include a line item in your budget for these expenses," according to the blog post. "By including expectations for your own learning both in policy and the budget, you let your community know up-front that it is important."

For more information, visit [www.alabamaschoolboards.org/aasb/whygettraining1.html](http://www.alabamaschoolboards.org/aasb/whygettraining1.html). ■

### What public wants isn't what public automatically gets

New Hampshire School Boards Association staff attorney Barrett M. Christina passed along the following advice on setting the meeting agenda.

Most boards have a policy on setting the agenda, Christina said, and in his experience, such policies state that the chair and superintendent will develop the agenda and that any board member can ask that an item be placed onto the agenda.

If a member of the public wishes to place an item on the meeting agenda, however, that's a board discretion issue, Christina said. The citizen would need to contact the board chair or superintendent in advance of the meeting with her request. "But that doesn't guarantee its place on the agenda," he said. "It would be a request pending the desire of the board majority."

For more information, visit [www.nhsba.org](http://www.nhsba.org). ■

#### How to cool off hot-under-the-collar colleague

When board member tempers run high, use first names to defuse the tension.

You'll find that addressing people by their first name often has a calming effect.

For instance, say, "Jean, I understand what you are saying," and then talk to your board colleague like a friend. You will find that tension will soon simmer down. ■