

Board & Administrator

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Board use of social media: Rules for sound communication apply here, too

Today's tech tools make it easier than ever for school districts and board members to engage community members and stakeholders. But trustees should think before they press "send" with their social media communications, said attorney Peter Fagen of Fagen, Friedman & Fulfroost LLP.

Fagen advises board members to avoid getting swept up in the ease of use technology offers and remember that all trustee communication should be mindful that the same rules that apply to any form of board communication should apply to social media as well.

The board does not need policies for each communication tool that becomes popular, Fagen said. "I don't like the idea of device-specific policies or media-specific regulations," he said. "The technology will always be changing, and your policies won't be able to keep up with the technology," he said.

The best way to approach the issue is through training and consistency. "Embed the principles of the way people are supposed to behave and interact, and apply them across all communication platforms," Fagen said.

The need for established principles can play out with social media just like it does in other areas of communication that can potentially create violations of open meetings law. "You want to guard against even the slightest perception that you are conducting work, deliberating, and discussing items through social media," Fagen said.

"There is nothing wrong with having a Facebook page and being friends with board colleagues," he added.

Problems can arise for board members when two or more trustee-colleagues are followers and someone attempts to influence a school board vote, he said.

"It's all about board member judgment," Fagen said. Board members should understand their potential audience, and concepts such as that when a trustee posts, she loses control of the message.

For example, when a board member posts something on social media and a follower or friend of the board member shares it, the information gets moved on to others. "This could potentially be a violation," Fagen said.

Communication about the schools should be left to the superintendent. The administrator should publicize news about education, great programs at the elementary schools, and pictures of classrooms. "Districts do that all the time, but that should be left to the staff, not board members," Fagen said. He explained that the overarching theme when posting on social media is to use good judgment. Think about what you post, he said.

"Even if I 'like' something, I am very conscious about it," he explained.

Proofread a post several times before you submit the item. "And when doing this, consider how your message will be received," he said.

This holds doubly true these days for public officials and the superintendent, too, Fagen said. Across all forms of communication, thoughtfully consider your messages and be mindful that you can build or compromise confidence in the school district, he said.

For information, visit f3law.com. ■

'Best practice' is for superintendent to start job in May

When Superintendent Eugene Schmidt took a new job with the Farmington, N.M., Municipal Schools, the board asked him to start in May.

"I consider this a national best practice," he said.

It allowed Schmidt to meet with principals, walk the classrooms, and speak at three graduation ceremonies.

"This enabled me to build rapport, participate in the budget process, jump right into the restructure of central office, and select four new principals," Schmidt said.

"Building trust works two ways as the school board must extend a hand as well," he said. "In this case, the extended hand gave me two months' head start on superintendents that traditionally start on July 1." ■

Agree to these points in a board-superintendent relationship policy

In order to foster an effective relationship, the board and superintendent need to come to agreement on how they will interact and engage. Many school boards put this into writing, in the form of a board-and-superintendent relationship policy. Here are the key points the board and superintendent should consider when developing this type of policy:

- The board governs, while the superintendent manages the day-to-day affairs of the district.
- The board should respect the superintendent's knowledge of educational matters.
- The superintendent should respect the board's responsibility to stakeholders.
- Both parties should honor confidentiality requirements.
- Both parties should seek to create an environment of openness, honesty, and trust.
- The superintendent works for the full board, not the board president or any other individual member.
- Decisions made by the full board at a board meet-

ing are the only ones that bind the superintendent.

- Board members request information through the superintendent. When one board member requests information, the superintendent copies all board members on the response.
- The superintendent treats all board members equally.
- When the board sets goals for the district, it considers available resources.
- The superintendent manages the district's staff.
- Individual board members do not "give orders" to district staff.
- The board evaluates the superintendent each year.
- The board evaluates itself every two to three years.
- Stakeholder concerns and comments are handled at the appropriate level in the district, and not by board members. Board members should pass citizen concerns on to the superintendent. ■

Most boards use operating principles

A set of operating principles can go a long way in helping the board and superintendent agree on matters of who does what.

The role of the school board is to:

- Prioritize and keep district resources focused on student learning.
- Set policies.
- Approve the budget.
- Hire and evaluate the superintendent.
- Listen to and represent the community.
- Be an advocate for public education.
- Be supportive of students, staff, and administration.
- Support participation and involvement in decision-making.
- Direct concerns or criticisms to the superin-

tendent in a timely manner.

- Support actions taken by the board and clearly differentiate personal opinion from board decisions when speaking in the minority.

The role of the school board is not to:

- Carry out policies or micromanage.
- Create surprises.
- Abdicate board responsibility.
- Press narrow personal agendas.
- Make promises as an individual board member that would appear to be binding upon the board and/or district.

In the *Board & Administrator* network, nearly 90 percent of boards are using operating principles, according to data from *B&A's Survey on School Boards* conducted late last year. ■