

Board & Administrator

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Getting an Education From (And About) the Board

By Dr. Peter Gorman

When I arrived in Charlotte, I naively thought I understood how to work with the nine members of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. After all, I'd interviewed them as much as they had interviewed me. But I hadn't taken a few things into account.

That's the reason that there's something called "superintendent math." It works like this: Keep the four board members who want to fire you away from the five others who aren't sure yet.

When I arrived in Charlotte, the Board of Education and I had reached some broad agreements. In 2005, the year before I arrived, voters had overwhelmingly rejected a school bond request, and "a lack of faith and trust in the Board of Education" was cited by most voters as the main reason they voted no.

It wasn't surprising. In 2006, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education was a house divided, with two very conservative members, one somewhat conservative member, a handful of centrists, and a couple of divisive, unhappy members who spent a lot of time arguing with the conservatives. Meetings ran to six hours, with a lot of shouting and arguments.

I'd been told that if the front door — board of education meetings — is a mess, don't go inside. But I was up for the challenge, and it looked like some of that could change even though people don't often leave their baggage at the door. So there would be a lot of work to do. The Board of Education had been through reform governance training with the Center for Reform of School Systems, passed several policies to support reform governance, and heard the voters' reasons for not approving the bond. The Board of Ed-

ucation had agreed that we needed to work together to push the board off the front pages of the *Charlotte Observer* and push me onto the front page.

But the reality was this: I had nine bosses. I needed to quickly determine the Board's level of commitment to improvement. This meant determining what motivated each member as well as the role each played on the board. Were they always going to vote against something, even if they had no chance of winning? What were their worries and pet peeves?

I had to treat each board member equally — but I had to treat each one differently, based on their roles and motivations. I had to customize my relationships.

All of this relationship-building took place in a context of a consensus around the need for improvement. The nine board members didn't always agree on what improvement looked like — but every member agreed improvement was needed. It was a place to start.

I developed an extensive strategy to work well with the Board of Education in Charlotte. Rule one: Communicate, communicate, communicate. The Board of Education needs to hear things first, and they need to hear them from the superintendent, not the media reporter calling for comment (or the principal who is up in arms). Without information, and the Board of Education's trust that you will provide it, you'll encounter resistance every step of the way.

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Board responses to member misconduct

In his webinar “Board Member Boot Camp: Board Member Conduct,” Gary R. Brochu (Shipman & Goodwin, LLP, Hartford, Conn.) outlined the types of misconduct board members typically engage in:

- Arrests that are related to their job, including crimes against children or the misappropriation of board money, and those unrelated, such as a motor vehicle violation. The latter arrest occurs more frequently, Brochu said, and the board can feel real pressure to act because of it.
- Violations of federal or state law, including FOIA.
- Violation of board policies.
- Disruptive or inappropriate behavior. This

can occur during or in between board meetings, Brochu said.

“Misconduct can be frustrating for the community and for the board itself,” Brochu said.

Possible board responses include:

- Removal from office.
- Censure. Brochu said that a Burlington (Wis.) Area School District board member was censured for commenting that “school personnel were like cattle and should be struck with a 2X4 so as to get their attention,” according to board meeting minutes.

- Removal from a board officer position.
- Removal from board committees.

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Does your board understand confidentiality?

If the coffee shop regulars know what was said in confidence during a closed board session, it’s time for the board to have a frank conversation among itself.

When information shared in confidence becomes public knowledge, it has a chilling effect on all future discussions among board members as well as communication between the board and superintendent. Everyone be-

comes unwilling to speak out — even in closed sessions.

Discussion in open board sessions may also violate confidentiality standards. Comments on personnel especially may be construed as libelous and are difficult to defend. As a school board member, there’s legal liability as well as a moral responsibility to keep some things in confidence. ■

Role tip: Leave management to your superintendent

When a board member worries about day-to-day issues affecting the district rather than making policy and monitoring results, micromanagement is often the result. Approval of spending decisions is one area where this commonly occurs.

Remember, you are not discussing topics of importance to the school district’s mission if you spend your time on bill approval. It’s taking time away from important board discussions.

Here are two methods to ensure you concen-

trate on policy:

1. Tie the items on the board’s meeting agenda to the district’s strategic goals. This forces the board to spend time on important, big-picture items.

2. Think about the legacy you want to leave as a board member. Do you really wish to be remembered as a great counter of paper clips? Or do you want people to remember that you cared deeply about children and were a great advocate for public schools? ■