

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Agenda construction: Eliminate what's unimportant

When board members don't understand priorities at a board meeting, the meeting itself can become very unproductive. That's because board members will use meeting time to discuss the "unimportant," rather than the district's pressing business, said attorney and long-serving board member Gary R. Brochu. The challenge for the board president and superintendent is to craft a board meeting agenda that focuses the board's attention on important issues and "crowds out the nonsense," Brochu said. In Brochu's early experience as a board member, he hated wasted time on board discussions about approval of a class field trip that the district had been taking for 20 years.

The meeting should be the time when the board discusses performance, results with data, and the superintendent's reports, and not which class is taking a field trip and where, Brochu said.

If setting the meeting agenda is important to district operations and the school's success in educating children, there should be a proven process in place to develop the plan of work for the meeting.

The agenda the superintendent and board president put together should not only result in a smoothly run board meeting that accomplishes important work, but helps ensure good communication with the board.

Here is a process for creating the meeting agenda:

1. Start agenda creation well in advance. Depending on your district's size and complexity, creation of the agenda may begin more than one week before the regularly scheduled board meeting. For instance, the superintendent may need to meet with his or her staff to review a tentative agenda and gather their input.
2. Gather board input. The superintendent, board president, and sometimes the board vice-president meet to review the agenda.
3. Following board leadership approval of the agenda, the superintendent should make additions/changes based on their input. Then, he will submit it to the board leadership for final review.
4. Post the agenda to the district's board portal and make arrangements if necessary for delivery to board members. This should be done in advance to give board members plenty of time for agenda and background materials review as they make their final preparations for the meeting.
5. Don't forget to think long-term about the district's meeting agenda. It's a good idea to anticipate any issues that will create public debate and possible controversy. This allows the board president and superintendent to plan and approve an approach to working through a difficult issue. ■

'Hash it out' when role disagreement arises

A terrific technique for the board and superintendent to mutually agree upon roles is to "hash things out" when views differ. That's the advice from BoardEffect:

"One way to gain full board agreement is to start a discussion

by asking board members to say a few words about how they perceive their role on the board. These discussions can form the basis for a general discussion about the role of the whole board."

For information, www.boardeffect.com. ■

Protocols, process necessary for effective meetings

For an effective board meeting to occur, the board needs an agenda that keeps the board focused on high-priority items to the district.

In most districts, the superintendent and board president meet roughly a week before an upcoming board meeting to work out the agenda. This meeting allows the administrator and president to ensure they are both on the same page as far as the agenda, and to be certain that the agenda items are pertinent and a high-priority for the district.

Often the superintendent and president will get together the day of the board meeting just to ensure that nothing last-minute has come up. At that point it becomes the president's job to keep the board focused on the meeting's business.

This is one of the president's key responsibilities -- presiding at meetings. He or she should keep the meeting moving along, on task, and focused on the issues laid out in the meeting agenda.

Governance education over the long term also helps to keep the board focused on important work at its meetings. Board members who have received education understand that their job at the meeting is not to wander off into the weeds or to create their own agenda for board meeting.

To have your issues placed on the meeting agenda, a board member should follow certain board-approved protocols. Here are some examples.

Protocols for effective school board meetings:

1. Place requests to include your items on the meeting agenda in the manner outlined in board policy.
2. Review and approval of the board meeting agenda by the board leadership and superintendent should take place at least one week before the scheduled meeting. The meeting agenda should be in front of board members to allow plenty of time to prepare.
3. The board should use a consent agenda to approve items not requiring discussion by the board. This facilitates effective use of meeting time by disposing of a group of routine agenda items with one motion and vote.
4. Any board member may request that items be placed on the agenda in the manner specified in board policy. Any board member may ask that an item be pulled from the consent agenda and discussed by the full board at its meeting. As a courtesy, notify the superintendent and president in advance of the meeting to discuss the consent item and ensure "no surprises." ■

Board sets direction, superintendent whacks away the weeds

If a school board suddenly found itself in the midst of a jungle, what would it do? Would trustees pull out machetes and start clearing a path through the vines, or would they rely on their guide to do this kind of work after the board had strategized the best way to get to its destination?

The board needs to make plans for the district about where it wants to go and support the superintendent as he works to achieve the board's vision. The board's job requires it to let the superintendent hack away the vines and weeds, after the board determines the best destination.

Here are some strategies the board and superintendent can use to ensure each party is doing what it is best suited for:

1. Have a conversation (board and superintendent), or bring in a consultant, to talk about roles. During these talks, Betsy Miller-Jones, former executive director of the

Oregon School Boards Association, advises reviewing the district's policy on roles and talking about why they are in place and why it is important they be followed. "It's important to understand the consequences to the district when there is a 'confusion of roles,'" she said.

2. Develop an operating agreement that spells out who does what in the major governance and operating areas. "The process of developing the agreement involves talking directly about who does what and why, which goes a long way to clear the air and set appropriate expectations," Miller-Jones said.

3. Make sure the school district has policies in place that clearly define roles and are supported by the written operating agreement.

4. Review operating agreements and policies annually and make it part of a new board member orientation program. ■