

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

April 2016 Vol. 29, No. 12

Editor: Jeff Stratton

Extend a welcoming hand at beginning of superintendent's tenure

When the superintendent is new to a district, it's vital that the board work with her to establish a productive working relationship. Part of this is accepting the changes and new ideas the administrator introduces to the board and district. That means right from the moment a representative from the board calls with the job offer. Here's what board members might expect from their new superintendent as she introduces her leadership to the district:

- **Support an emphasis on family.** With an offer of employment, the superintendent might very well want her spouse to feel like part of the team from the start. It's important that the board understand they are hiring more than a superintendent, but a family who will be making a home in your community.

The board can be supportive by helping the new family move to the community through introductions to realtors and helping assist, if possible, in the various challenges of moving.

- **Let the superintendent take charge.** Expect your superintendent to plant her flag in the community early on. That's a key time in the early tenure of the superintendent, when she acts to establish her leadership during a moment of challenge or when an issue erupts. She needs to show the community, staff, and board that she is in charge and can manage the district competently.

- **Make yourself available to the new superintendent.** Sure, board members have busy personal and professional lives, too. But it is important for a new superintendent to spend personal time with each member. This is time well spent, because it will be put to best use by learning about each other as people, as well as each other's attendant belief sys-

tems about education and the district's future.

- **Expect new vehicles for communication.** Communication will be a top priority for your new superintendent. She will likely introduce a new format for a superintendent's report or newsletter, for example.

The new superintendent may also have an active presence on social media promoting the district, and that is part of her job. For example, she might initiate a running blog on the district's website, or a digital 'time with the superintendent' video series. These will be effective tools for her to introduce herself to the community and explain district issues. More importantly, activities like this will also issue a subtle invitation to stakeholders to talk about the issues that are important to the schools and community.

- **Be available to share your skills.** A new superintendent will often ask board members to serve on district advisory committees, such as a parent advisory group. These types of activities provide board members with the chance to report back to the board about their thoughts on parent input — and to also hear directly from parents about the district.

- **Understand there may be changes in emphasis.** For instance, a new administrator may emphasize data in decision-making differently than her predecessor.

- **Support the new superintendent's efforts to build school culture.** She may ask the board to participate in board "celebrations" of success where students are recognized for accomplishments. Expect these sorts of twists as the superintendent works to build a school culture of focusing on the positive. ■

Avoid closed sessions; treat your superintendent with respect

Your superintendent is a member of the board team and should be treated accordingly.

This means that the superintendent should participate in all board discussions and activities. A board should never meet without its superintendent, because that is disrespectful to the administrator. These meetings, called closed sessions, destroy any sense of board and administrator teamwork.

Closed sessions that exclude the superintendent:

- Destroy trust. Boards and administrators must be committed to open and honest communi-

cation. That only comes from working together and talking things out.

- Closed sessions don't allow superintendents to explain their actions. Without the superintendent's input, you have no idea why a decision or course of action was taken. That's when you begin to undermine the superintendent's position with second-guessing.

- Closed sessions lead to poor decision-making. Your superintendent knows the district best, and when you don't have his advice, you may make plans that aren't workable. ■

5 principles of effective board-superintendent communication

Boards often fail in their relationship with the superintendent because of a failure to communicate.

The following principles can prevent this communication failure if both the superintendent and board team commit to them:

1. Effective communication requires trust.
2. Team members must be honest with each other and replace rumors with facts.

3. Open channels of communication must be constant.

4. Board members should request staff assistance through the superintendent to ensure a coordinated flow of communication.

5. Criticism of individual staff members should not be expressed at public meetings. Criticisms should be directed to the superintendent for his attention. ■

Best way to proceed when airing disagreements

Board member question: "If I disagree with board members or the superintendent, what is the best way to let them know how I feel?"

The foremost strategy to keep in mind when voicing disagreements is to always treat board colleagues and the superintendent with respect. Respect other people and their views.

When this is maintained, disagreements can be voiced and then worked out.

Some board members actually shy away from conflict, forgetting that the true strength of board decision-making is the airing of multiple views and solutions for the issues you face. Considering differing perspectives always results in better board decisions. However, respect is necessary to maintain the climate for this to occur.

When you are discussing school problems and challenges, understand that the best board members always debate issues, not personalities. ■

Take off your 'parent hat' when serving as a board member

In *Essentials of School Board Service*, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association answers a very practical question that speaks to a dilemma parent/board members can face. Here's the question:

"I have children in school. How can I talk with their teachers now that I'm on the school board?"

Here's PSBA's response:

"This is a tricky area. No matter what you say about 'speaking as a parent, not a board mem-

ber,' it's difficult for some teachers to separate your role on the school board from your role as a parent."

PSBA advises that, if married, your husband or wife take the lead with teachers when contacting them about your child.

For information, https://www.psba.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/essentials_school_board_service-2014.pdf. ■