

# Board & Administrator

## FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

## Developing board-superintendent operating principles

Operating principles for the board and superintendent define the beliefs, values, and methods of working together. Once implemented, the manner in which the board and superintendent conduct their relationship and the district's business becomes a model throughout the district and serves for staff and the district's "customers" as an example of how problems are solved.

In order to develop a positive, proactive, unified team approach, both the school board and superintendent must know, understand and respect their respective roles. This role clarification can become clear through board work sessions, individual one-on-one sessions with each board member, and the development of board-superintendent operating principles. The time spent together developing such principles and the ensuing discussion create an open, honest dialogue that builds trust and confidence between the superintendent and the school board, and lays the foundation for working together.

The following role definition and example of a "communications" operating principle convey the philosophy of the type of cooperative behavior that has been developed and mutually agreed upon by the board and the superintendent in Freeman, Wash., School District.

As members of the leadership team, we are committed to upholding these principles.

### Leadership Team Roles

| Freeman School District Board                    | Freeman School District Superintendent          |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>GOVERNS</b>                                   | <b>LEADS</b>                                    |
| Reviews and Suggests                             | Decides How                                     |
| Requests Information                             | Seeks and Provides information, recommendations |
| Considers Issues                                 | Recommends and Carries Out Policy               |
| Creates, Reviews, and Adopts Policy              | Reports Progress                                |
| Monitors Progress                                | Evaluates Personnel                             |
| Contracts with Personnel                         | Formulates and Implements Budget                |
| Approves Evaluation Criteria, procedures, budget | Acts in Public Interest                         |
| Represents Public Interest                       |                                                 |

### Principle: Communication, Cooperation and Support

Open communication requires trust, respect, and a fundamental belief in goodwill among board members and the superintendent. We will work to minimize misunderstandings and reduce conflict by: supporting each other constructively and courteously; maintaining confidentiality; focusing our discussions on issues, not personalities; constructively dealing with disagreement; upholding the integrity of every individual; pursuing knowledge thorough understanding; and avoiding promotion of individual agendas.

Michael Dunn, Ed.D., is the NorthEast Washington Educational Service District 101 Superintendent in Eastern Washington and has served as an educator for 37 years. Randy Russell, Ph.D., is the Superintendent of the Freeman School District in Rockford, Wash. Reprinted with permission. ■

## Effective school board members have commitment

To accomplish great things as a school board, trustees must have a strong commitment to the mission. Most districts convey their mission through mission statements. If you distill it into its simplest form, a board member's mission is to ensure that all children receive a high-quality public education.

To accomplish this, board members must always:

**1. Demonstrate engagement.** Prepare for meetings, stay informed on the issues, and always attend board meetings.

Participate in meetings by stating your views and actively listening to those who sit at the meeting table.

**2. Represent the community.** You will work with school staff and spend more time with them as a board member than you will with the general public. Always remember, however, that you represent the community when you make decisions for the school.

**3. Understand the collective nature of board work.** As a board member, you not only represent yourself and your views, but work as a member of a

team. If the team fails to do its job, you bear responsibility as much as any other member of the team.

It is also important to remember that the board's power comes from its collective action — a vote — during the board meeting. As an individual board member, a trustee has no power to take action.

**4. Remember the “two hats” principle.** Let's say you have special skills in the area of accounting. Use these skills to help the board make better decisions (your board member hat).

On the other hand, you should never tell the business operations staff how to do their job. If you want to offer your skills in this area, you should state clearly that you are doing so as a volunteer, wearing your volunteer hat, and not as a board member. Also, remember that it is the superintendent's prerogative as to whether your offer of volunteer assistance is accepted.

**5. Behave responsibly.** Always consider how district patrons will view board behaviors that are dishonest or self-serving, and then act accordingly. ■

### Strategy for contentious public meeting

If the board is facing an issue that generates high emotions in the community, the board needs to be prepared for a different kind of public meeting.

The board might expect to hear from several groups on both sides of the issue looking to make their case with the board. Here are some issues for the board to consider when emotions run high in the district leading up to a meeting:

**1. Plan for a venue change to accommodate a larger-than-normal attendance.** Consider whether a local or district auditorium may be a more appropriate location.

**2. Limit groups' speaking time.** Work this

out with your superintendent. Is five minutes enough? Do you need to stretch presentation time to 10 minutes on hot-button issues?

**3. Understand that board members should not debate or make motions based on a group's presentation.** Board members should ask questions for clarification, as needed. They do not need to respond to individual presenters.

**4. Limit a group's number of presentations in a school year.** A group will return regularly if the limitation is not stated in board policy. One presentation on a given topic per year is a good rule of thumb. ■

## Communication is best when board members know their colleagues

Good communication occurs when teammates on the board work together effectively. One key to this is respect and understanding, as well as practicing skills such as:

- Listening to each other.
- Taking time to consider viewpoints with which you are not in agreement.
- Allowing the minority voice to have its say.

There is another ingredient that goes into the recipe for effective intra-board communication, however, and that's solid understanding of who the people are that are sitting on the board with you. Having board members share information such as their educational backgrounds, hobbies, and “pet peeves” can help board members familiarize themselves with one another.