

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Tips, tricks to ensure online posts reach residents with disabilities

As public servants and members of the district's governing body, board members may need to frequently communicate with students, parents, and residents to keep them apprised of important school news and events. Although social media is an effective tool to disseminate information, online or digital content may not always be accessible to individuals with disabilities who rely on assistive technology.

To ensure that your Facebook, Twitter, and other social media posts reach all stakeholders, including those who use screen readers and voice-to-text applications, consider the following tips from the Center on Knowledge Translation for Employment Research:

1. Use uppercase letters for the first letter of each word in a hashtag to ensure they are understood by text-to-voice apps. For example, the hashtag #mentalhealthmatters is not readable by text-to-voice technology, while #MentalHealthMatters is.

2. Because screen readers and text-to-voice apps read the descriptions of emojis out loud as they appear in the text, limit the use of emojis and place them at end of a post to prevent confusion.

3. Be clear, concise, well-organized, and use plain language so stakeholders can easily understand your post the first time through.

4. If available, fill in the "Alt-Text" field for images so individuals using a screen reader can hear a text-based description of the image.

5. When publishing videos to social media, use the built-in closed captioning feature, have a vendor provide professional closed captioning, or provide a text-based version of any dialog.

6. Refrain from posting animations or videos that contain strobe effects or flashing lights, as they can be harmful to some people with disabilities. ■

Consider public opinion before ending superintendent contract

As a school district's governing body, the school board has the discretion to terminate the employment of the superintendent if it is dissatisfied with his performance. However, before the board votes to remove its top administrator, it should first assess how students, parents, and residents perceive the superintendent. The sudden termination of a popular and beloved superintendent, even if his philosophies and methodologies conflict with those of the board, may spell trouble and fan unrest in the district.

That's what happened in Douglas County (Colo.) School District RE-1. On Feb. 4, 2022, the board voted 4-3 in a special meeting to terminate the employment of Superintendent Corey Wise with-

out cause and without public comment. The move gave rise to allegations that the board violated the state's open meeting laws. It also sparked outrage and resulted in the district's temporary closure when 1,000 teachers, staffers, and parents protested Wise's termination. Additionally, numerous school board directors from across the state published a letter condemning the board's decision.

To avoid a similar situation, consider the following tips:

✓ **Meet with the superintendent to discuss the board's concerns.** In some cases, disagreements and disharmony between the board and the superintendent can be assuaged through an hon-

est discussion about priorities. This is especially true if multiple members of the board have been recently elected and seek to take the district in a different direction from past leadership.

✓ **Use the superintendent's evaluation to obtain, offer feedback.** If the superintendent's annual review is coming up, use the evaluation process to help the superintendent identify the areas in which he needs to improve. This process also provides the

board an opportunity to conduct a survey among school staff about the superintendent's performance.

✓ **Listen to the public, stakeholders.** As elected officials, board members are accountable to their constituents. Before terminating the superintendent, individual board members should consider whether the termination is in the district's best interest or whether it will be detrimental to the district's goals or reputation. ■

Paint a realistic picture of the role for prospective board members

No matter how excited a potential board candidate is about the prospect of joining the school board, letting that individual know the unvarnished truth up front can prevent a lot of disappointment and board dysfunction down the line.

Consider conveying the following realities so potential candidates can make an informed decision and to reduce the chances of someone becoming a candidate who would be a poor fit for the position:

- **A board member lacks individual power.**

Board decisions are only made through a majority vote. Thus, a board member doesn't have individual decision-making power. As a result, if a candidate is interested in joining the board because he or she has a personal agenda to push, that person should reconsider.

- **Board members are likely to face friction and animosity.** A board member may face verbal attacks because of how he or she votes. This is especially true in the era of COVID-19 and disputes

over face-mask requirements. A board member may even face intimidation, such as verbal threats.

- **Being a board member comes at a cost.** First, being a board member is time consuming. A board member typically spends a great deal of time in meetings and attending school events. He or she will be expected to spend adequate time preparing for and actively participating in board meetings and will be expected to attend every meeting. Second, the effort a board member devotes to the role and the friction he or she experiences with members of the public is likely to create emotional and physical strain.

- **Board members have to abide by a code of conduct.** They code may require, among other things, that board members show respect for the opinions of members of the public and other board members. This requires members to exercise restraint and may prevent them from engaging in emotional outbursts on a topic, no matter how passionately they feel about it. ■

Plan for the unexpected when budgeting

During school year budget preparations, the superintendent and board members should consider all possible, maybe even improbable, expenses for the coming year. The district's budget should incorporate a "cushion" for unexpected expenses that may arise from emergencies and unpredictable events.

For example, districts may not have predicted inflation and increases in transportation expenses as a result of a pandemic and war in Ukraine, much less the need for funds to address serious staffing shortages, COVID-19 litigation expenses, and security for politicized board meetings.

To accurately determine potential needs and possible contingencies, the board and superintendent must weigh the superintendent's identification of the district's most pressing needs and board mem-

bers' identification of stakeholder and community concerns. Board members should set aside time in a closed meeting with the superintendent to discuss extraneous issues that may affect the district's budget. Part of that discussion includes noting suggestions for funding sources for any additional expenses.

There may be new expense categories the district should consider that weren't included in last year's plan. Districts will probably require additional funds to offer teachers and administrators, including superintendents, higher salaries to motivate them to stay. To cover all the bases, the board should refrain from using "cookie cutter" budgeting spreadsheets and from limiting budget conversations to the historically typical expense categories. ■