

# Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## Challenges lurk when board members hire family

In his 46-year career in public education, Lloyd Wamhof, member assistance advocate for the Association of California School Administrators, has come to the conclusion that it's best for the superintendent, board members, and school staff that the district avoids hiring relatives of board members.

That's because the practice can bring some very tricky and often uncomfortable dynamics into play throughout the district, Wamhof said.

In one California school system with 2,500 students, 17 members of the staff were related to five board members, Wamhof said. "When the administration either disciplined or attempted to release one of these employees, the board member(s) related to the employee would interfere in the process and enlist the other board members to support them," he said.

And the board would administer consequences to staff who crossed their relatives.

"In this particular district, the superintendent and other administrators paid the price for following proper personnel procedures, and that included be-

ing forced out of the district," Wamhof said.

Board interference in the discipline of relatives is the major issue related to hiring relatives, but it's not the only one, Wamhof said.

Even if a board member recuses himself from the disciplinary issue involving a relative, uneasiness by the supervisor of that staff member lingers, Wamhof said. "In some instances, the supervisor may look the other way instead of following proper protocol," he said. "That may cause other staff members to lose respect for the supervisor."

Wamhof has also seen board members become passive-aggressive. "The board member may not overtly attack the supervisor of the relative; however, the board member may retaliate in response to other, unrelated issues," Wamhof said.

Wamhof recognizes that it may not always be possible for a district to avoid hiring board members' relatives. "If it happens, a very frank discussion with the full board is in order about the possibility of disciplinary issues related to this matter," he said. ■

### Board member conflict of interest policy needs teeth

The preceding story makes the case for why the board should not interfere in the hiring process to benefit board member's families. The board should review its policies and bylaws on a regular basis so that board conflicts are addressed in the open.

Here are two examples:

1. Abuse of the board office. Ensure the conflict of interest policy prohibits using the board office for personal gain. "Board members should not abuse their office by using the district's employees, services, equipment, or property for personal gain."
2. Annual conflict of interest disclosure form. See that the disclosure document asks questions such as: "Did you, during the past year, use your position on the school board to gain advantage for yourself, or your family, friends, or business associates in any way?" ■

## Respect the board and administrator Golden Rule

Support of the superintendent is the responsibility of the board. Communication is the responsibility of the superintendent of schools.

Good relationships between the board and superintendent can break down when you neglect this rule. It helps board members to remember:

- Board members support their administrator by letting him know what they want — they provide direction.
- Board members also support the superintendent by ensuring that money is available for the school district to carry out its mission of educating children.
- Administrators, of course, carry out the board's policies and strategies — they are the board's manager.

For the board to know how things are going, the superintendent must provide feedback and recommend new actions. ■

## Base superintendent's evaluation on principles

The board and superintendent team have a better chance for a positive administrator evaluation process if both parties have agreed to some ground rules. The following principles can give your board a sound base upon which to evaluate the superintendent:

- The evaluation criteria should be in writing, clearly stated, and mutually agreed upon by the board and the superintendent. The criteria should focus on the superintendent's job description and the school district's goals. The evaluation tool should be acceptable to both the superintendent and board.
- The formal evaluation process should be conducted annually at a mutually agreed-upon time.
- Each board member should evaluate the superintendent, and these individual evaluations should then be compiled into an overall evaluation by the entire board. The board president can organize this.
- The superintendent should conduct a self-evalu-

ation prior to discussing the board's evaluation, and the board as a whole should discuss the superintendent's self-evaluation and its own evaluation of the administrator with the superintendent.

- The board can discuss its evaluation of the superintendent in closed session if requested by the superintendent and if the board determines its discussion in open session will needlessly and irreparably injure the superintendent's reputation. Board members should be encouraged to communicate their criticisms and concerns to the superintendent in closed session.
- The board president needs to develop a written summary of the individual evaluations, including both the strengths and the weaknesses of the superintendent, and place it in the superintendent's personnel file to be incorporated into the next cycle of evaluations. ■

## Are you responsible for finances?

School district finances can be frustrating. There are plenty of board members who, after their first meeting, fretted that they didn't have the time or expertise to completely understand every detail of the district's financial situation.

Here's a board-service tip: No board member needs to know where every cent went.

That's a lesson some board members learn the hard way. If the board scrutinizes every bill from \$2 to \$20,000, meetings will last until 2 a.m. A board that spends all its time on bills neglects the big issues and challenges the district faces.

Rather than being bookkeepers, spend board time on being policymakers and tackling the district's strategic business. You will be more productive that way.

Yes, the board is responsible for finance. But you can meet this responsibility most effectively by using a finance committee and delegating the management of finance to the superintendent. Then, monitor results.

Do this by paying special attention to changes: What's different this month compared to last month? Or last year? Ask questions of the superintendent if you don't understand something. ■