

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

Place the interests of students far above your own needs

Texas school board consultant Paul Vranish said board members who wish for a high-caliber district should place the needs of the kids first — certainly before their own agendas.

“Those trustees who see the board as a stepping-stone to higher political office, see their role as a means to secure employment for family and friends, ran for the board to ‘get’ an employee, or have a self-centered ego so large that they are willing to harm the district to be ‘right,’ deserve a severe drubbing at the ballot box,” Vranish said.

The board member who approaches board service with a desire to serve appropriately should always consider his role in the district versus the superintendent’s, Vranish said, because that relationship can be a lightning rod for problems if not understood properly.

“The superintendent’s role is similar to that of a travel agent for a group — the board,” Vranish said. “Using careful questioning and listening skills, the superintendent must ascertain where the board wishes to go.”

After determining the board’s vision and the direction they want to lead the district, it then becomes the superintendent’s duty to get that board to the desired destination in a manner that provides the best value for the public funds spent, he said.

Like any travel agent, the superintendent can recommend alternative destinations based on her

expertise in the field (knowledge of the area, trips on sale, etc.), Vranish said.

“The superintendent is duty-bound to communicate these matters to the board, even to risk board members’ anger when giving them information which may flow against their wishes,” he said.

However, when it comes down to the final decision, the direction of the school district lies with the board. The superintendent must comply, or find another district where the values, direction, and philosophies are more in synch with her own, Vranish said.

Board members should defer to their “travel agent’s” expertise on *how* to get to the desired destination. The board should communicate essential information regarding methodology (“I can’t sail, because I get seasick”), Vranish said, so that the superintendent/travel agent can make the best possible recommendation.

“However, as a rule, the superintendent’s operational expertise for school district functioning will surpass that of the trustees — as a group, or individually,” he said. While it is often true that an individual trustee may have specific topical knowledge that is more robust than a superintendent, it is a rare case where the global knowledge of school operation is greater within the board than the district’s administration,” Vranish said.

For information, paul@vranish.ws. ■

Board members represent the entire community

It’s common for board members to come to board service with a passion for a special interest or single issue: Your neighborhood or special needs students, for example.

As a board member, you need to recognize the fact that you represent all interests in the district

— that’s what is best for the public.

Work hard on your interests, but remember that there are other compelling interests in the district as well.

The best way to keep this in mind is simple: Focus on children and serving their best interests. ■

Clarify the board president's duties in board development

The New York School Board Association's *The School Board President's Handbook* suggests three areas where the board president should lead the board toward in developing their skills:

1. Adopting a code of ethics.

2. Ensuring board members understand their roles and responsibilities, giving guidance when required.

3. Making sure board members comply with mandatory training requirements.

For information, www.nysba.org. ■

3 tips for communicating with your superintendent

"No surprises" is always the best communication philosophy for the individual board member to take in his relationship with the superintendent.

Here are three tips to help:

1. **Inform the superintendent of comments and other forms of communication you receive or find on social media from the district's stakeholders.** Communicate both positive and negative comments to your administrator.

2. **Refrain from telling your superintendent**

what you want done. Important point: This is not the individual board member's job.

Because the superintendent is supervised by the full board, individual board members should refrain from giving him orders on how to run the schools. Asking the superintendent for explanations and clarifications is welcome, of course.

3. **Practice courtesy and respect.** Be courteous. Phone or email the superintendent before you visit a school, for example. ■

Discuss problem areas of performance with your superintendent

As part of the annual evaluation the board gives the superintendent, performance issues should be identified, discussed, and fixed. Here's how:

If the board finds areas that need corrective action, the

board and superintendent should agree on specific, measurable actions to take. Put these areas in writing for the superintendent, and have him report quarterly on his progress. ■

Checklist: Dos and don'ts when facing a special interest group

Board members should understand what works and what doesn't when trying to make decisions that attract the interest of special interest groups in the district:

1. Vocal and noisy do not represent the majority of your community.

2. Special interest groups won't go away until they have had their say before the school board.

Use the following checklist to work your way through the challenges a special interest group can present.

Do listen and thank participants for their time and comments.

Don't argue.

Do accept all opinions for consideration.

Don't make promises before gathering all the facts.

Do set aside ample time to address the issue — outside the board meeting is ideal.

Don't ignore a special interest group. It will only get louder.

Do identify the district's supporters.

Don't assume that the board's decision will be automatically supported by the majority.

Do organize and prepare for the special interest group's arguments in advance (the superintendent and staff are a big help to the board here).

Don't get caught off guard in the board room. Unpreparedness leads to bad decisions and embarrassment for the board.

Do know who the special interest group is and the issue it is bringing to the board.

Don't guess on the size of the group or downplay the seriousness of its beliefs.

Do get help from districts that have faced similar groups and issues before.

Don't reinvent the wheel when facing a politically organized group.

Do prepare and distribute accurate information about the issue.

Don't sit on information. This always makes the district look as if it is hiding something.

Do work continuously at building support for the school district.

Don't attempt to do business as usual without gaining community-wide support for the district, its teachers, board members, and administration. ■