

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

December 2019 Vol. 33, No. 8

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Understand the board and superintendent relationship

Understanding the distinctions between the board member's role and that of the superintendent is one of the most necessary tasks of school board service. The line that separates the two roles can easily become fuzzy. When either party loses sight of what it is supposed to do, the work of your school district can suffer.

That's why it is worth taking the time to look closely at exactly what the relationship of board members to the superintendent entails.

The job of a school board is typically defined as "policymaker."

Boards establish policies that direct the district's staff to take a course of action to meet the district's mission. The district's employees function within the parameters of these policies: They implement the board's policies under the direction of the superintendent.

A board observes and evaluates how well the district, led by a superintendent, implements board policies and carries out the district's mission of providing an education to all students.

To better understand where boards set policy, consider this case study involving student fundraiser events:

A board should adopt and ask staff to implement sound policies and procedures to limit liability and political problems the district could face in its student fundraising activities. A board's student fundraising policy should:

- Require preapproval by the superintendent, principal or designee. The ultimate call on whether a fundraiser is appropriate should fall on an administrator. That person can make sure that the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed.

- Address door-to-door sales. In your policy, you may want to consider age limitations. Certainly, younger children shouldn't be going door-to-door without adult supervision. That should be addressed in your policy or administrative regulations.

- Provide proper accounting procedures. Make sure going into a fundraiser that there will be appropriate financial oversight. For example, if it's a class fundraiser, the class advisor may be accountable for the event. But your business manager may need to be involved as well as more often than not the money will be deposited in a district account.

- Consider competition issues. Don't compete with local businesses, or you risk losing local support.

- Prohibit soliciting during instructional time. Instead, consider allowing sales during lunch periods, break times, and between periods.

- Limit the number of events. You don't want to overwhelm parents with too many fundraisers or create a nuisance at parents' place of work with candy and gift wrap sales. ■

How policy differs from management

Board policies answer the big-picture questions of what the district will do: Educate students. The superintendent implements the board's policies and determines what individual employees will do while carrying out the board's policies using the district's administrative procedures. Board activities and policymaking should affect the entire

school district. An example: Approving the district's annual budget is a board policy decision. That's a board responsibility. Spending within that board-approved budget is the superintendent's job. By examining financial reports and the annual audit, the board monitors the implementation of the budget they set. ■

Handling public feedback is 'superintendent work'

Here's a great explanation for why the board should completely delegate the handling of stakeholder feedback to the district to the superintendent:

The input the public gives to the schools should be considered "superintendent work" and be properly routed to the superintendent and staff for a response. It is appropriate for the board to ask that it receive the response or a copy of the response, but it is not OK for the board to take over and make decisions in this area. If it does, the board will own the conse-

quences and will be unable or weak in its ability to hold the superintendent responsible for superintendent work.

Tip to ensure all voices are heard at the board table

When a long-winded board member takes over your meetings, other trustees are effectively silenced. If this happens on your board, the president should interrupt to say, "Let's see what everyone thinks about this issue. That's what we are all here for." ■

Is it a policy decision, or is it a management decision?

Assigning responsibilities is an issue that most boards wrestle with at one time or another. How do you identify which member of the board team should manage an issue? Should it be the board or the superintendent?

Here is a method for defining when the board should become involved in an issue and when the superintendent should handle it.

First, determine if the issue is really a board issue or something the superintendent should handle. Boards handle issues that:

- Affect the entire district. (The administrator handles issues that affect individuals.)
- Dictate what the district will do — policy matters. (The superintendent and staff determine how a policy is implemented.)
- Are required by law.

- Are requested by the superintendent.

Second, if it is a policy issue, the board should ask its superintendent to research the issue and give the board her recommendations. Finally, the board makes its decision after weighing the information.

Think about this system in the context of a staff member who is unhappy with being disciplined. Since the issue affects a single person, the board would disqualify it as a board issue. Discipline of staff is the superintendent's responsibility. However, if the discipline of staff appears legally questionable or is obviously not working, then that is a board issue. Handle it by asking the superintendent to report on the policy's effectiveness and make recommendations to improve it. ■