

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Encourage high-quality board decision-making

Consensus during board work may not be desirable if it results in a poor decision. By trying to please every board member, you can end up with poor outcomes. Encourage high-quality board decisions with techniques such as these:

1. Be sure the board has complete information to make a decision, and be sure this information is given ahead of time to allow board members time to do their homework and be prepared for discussion on the topic.
2. Discuss the pros and cons of the issue. Ask the superintendent for a recommendation and to justify it. Be prepared to discuss alternatives and pros and cons for each.
3. Don't rule out a compromise. Depending on the issue, the decision does not always have to be an either/or decision. There are times when combining alternatives can result in a third option that merges the strengths of others.
4. Get all board questions answered in clear and transparent terms.
5. Take personalities into account. Every board

member comes to board service with his or her own personality. They may have strong opinions shaped by personal life experiences.

While these experiences can often be beneficial, they can also taint the decision-making process if not based on fact. Often, it is necessary to center the discussion around these facts. Something that occurred five years ago will not necessarily occur in the present.

6. Do not be afraid to table a subject to another meeting. This is helpful if tempers rise, if more information is needed, or it is obvious there is a stalemate. Often this additional time is all a board needs to let the issue marinate and complete the dish at the next meeting.

7. Make sure your board, along with stakeholders, has created a clear and effective mission statement accompanied by core values. When decision-making is difficult, go back to the board's core values.

When the board has a decision that is tough, refer back to your mission and values to clarify the direction for the board. ■

President selects committee chairs

Part of the job description for a board president should include the responsibility of selecting committee chairs. Here are several strategies for the president to consider when doing this:

- Avoid people with agendas. The best chair candidates buy into the mission statement and put that ahead of their own interests. Avoid

someone who will grand stand, they will just be trouble.

- Aim for diversity of thought. You don't want people who share the same point of view. You want a variety of opinion that represents your stakeholders.

- Emphasize talent. Then match board members' skills and interests to the committee's work. ■

The board's advocacy efforts can make a difference

Board members make the best advocates for the school district, for two reasons:

1. You're a volunteer, who donates time to something you believe in: Public education. This gives you a special credibility, more than a paid lobbyist or employee.

2. You are a community leader with access to other people who vote. Elected officials respect this.

Here are some tips to assist you in your lobbying work:

1. Show that your goals match those of the people who lobby.

2. Develop an attitude that you're an aide to the decision maker who can offer informed help.

3. Take the one-to-one approach. That is when advocacy is most effective. Know the decision makers who have influence and concentrate your work there.

4. Make year-round efforts at advocacy. If you do it only in times of crisis it's not as effective. ■

How are your communications to the community?

These are characteristic behaviors of boards with effective communication with their constituent community:

- Establish and use a key communicators system.
- Involve community in strategic and long-range planning.
- Establish policy, and follow it, for well-functioning board meetings, e.g., rules for public input.
- Establish communications policy, and follow it, e.g.,

how to handle complaints from parent to individual board members.

- Provide opportunities to get parents into the school, e.g., answer the question: To whom does the school belong?
- Watch board meeting room set-up and body language during meetings.
- Be leaders. Provide the vision. Be creative and articulate. ■

Recommit yourself to board service

Board service is hard work. Dealing with budgets and student performance can create wear-and-tear on a trustee.

If you are feeling this way, try some of these ideas to re-energize yourself.

• Change where you sit. It's a small issue, but symbolic of the ruts boards can get into. Board members need to view things from the other side of the table once in awhile -- both literally and figuratively.

• Get to know your board colleagues better. It's easier working with friends than with

strangers. I'd start by being a better listener. Instead of tuning out a colleague I disagreed with in the past, I'd listen harder.

• Don't over-analyze. Recognize that your superintendent and her staff are a resource to the board. It's crazy to rehash details month after month before accepting her recommendation.

• Remember a school board's purpose. It should be fun, exciting and rewarding to make major decisions that will affect the future of the children in your district. ■