

A photograph of a long, polished wooden conference table set for a meeting. Several microphones are positioned along the table. In the foreground, there are two clear plastic water bottles, a pen, and some papers. The background shows blue upholstered chairs and more of the table extending into the distance.

13 MISTAKES BOARD MEMBERS MAKE

Ensure that you and your board colleagues aren't making these common board service errors

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In my role as a trainer/facilitator at the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education for the past 30 years, I have met and trained thousands of board members.

Working with school boards has been a dream career. Boards of education are made up of incredible people doing important work. However, certain issues seem to crop up regularly, even among the best-intentioned board members.

I should know. I've made several of these mistakes myself as a board of education member in my own community. This is my current list of the 13 most common errors that I've observed over the years.

1. Lack of patience

Board members are movers and shakers. You want to do it all *now*, and you want to know it all *yesterday*. Keep that enthusiasm but understand that it takes a while to learn the issues, the politics, and the people. It could take a year for a new board member to be up to speed on such things as budget or policy. Meanwhile, take advantage of training opportunities presented by the board, your state school boards association, or NSBA. Those experiences will help you a lot.

If you're a new school board member, this may be the first elected office you've held. Joining a decision-making team is new for many board members. We choose leaders to run for the board, and they often are used to making decisions by themselves. We take these individuals and put them in a room with a half-dozen similar individuals and ask them to come to a consensus on decisions that impact children and adults.

It takes time to learn to appreciate the opinions of those with whom you disagree. Try to understand what motivates others and have patience with ideas different than your own.

Finally, election to a board of education does not automatically entitle you to respect — civility, but not respect. That is something to be earned on your own — by your behavior and your ability to learn.

2. Poor behavior

I have seen board members throw temper tantrums, use off-color language, throw things, threaten or insult other board members, the superintendent, staff, or the public on a number of occasions. I remember a board totally stopped in its tracks for six months because one board member made a disparaging remark to his colleague, and the board

wouldn't discuss anything else until there was an apology or censure, neither of which ever took place. They finally got tired and moved on, but it cost them half a year of work on behalf of children. Many of those same board members would be the first to object if they saw their students acting the same way.

I have only met a couple of "troubled" board members who I don't think cared about children. The others behaved poorly for a variety of reasons, starting with not understanding the role of a board of education. In many cases, board members act out due to frustration because they feel that they have no voice in the board's actions. Members of the majority need to examine their behavior to see if they are consciously or unconsciously contributing to the problem.

Treat visitors at board meetings with respect. On the list of "things people are afraid of," public speaking was No. 1 (No. 7 was death!). Many members of the public who come to a board meeting to share their ideas are very uncomfortable when they are in such a position. It takes a lot for them to come out and approach the board with an issue. They deserve your careful attention. I remember a board member falling asleep during a public hearing. He didn't make any points with the public that day.

Likewise, show your professional staff courtesy when they are presenting to the board. Staff members, including the superintendent, treat presenting to the board as an honor, and they will be very proud of the work they are showing you. Board members who criticize staff at meetings are alienating an important part of the team. If the board has an issue with an action of the superintendent, talk to them offline, or in executive session later. Don't air dirty laundry in public.

Your community will judge the quality of your schools by the behavior of the board. Give them something to be proud of.

3. Challenging the board after a vote

Emotions run high when the board makes a difficult decision. Board members tend to be committed to doing what they think is right, and sometimes a majority of the board may see things differently than you and vote accordingly. There are few things more destructive than a board member publicly chastising board colleagues for making a "bad" decision. The subtleties will be lost on the public, who will only see a board in chaos. My advice is to fight hard for what you believe in, and then accept the will of the board and publicly support that decision after the vote.

4. Acting like the Lone Ranger

Occasionally, board members appoint themselves “protector” of the school district. I recall one board member, an administrator in a nearby school district, who often went on “raids” at the high school, trying to find mistakes. She would appear at board meetings, legal pad at the ready, with a report to the board of all the problems at the school. The staff panicked whenever she arrived at the door. Don’t be THAT board member!

Whether a board member improperly acts as a spokesperson for the board or as a one-person auditing firm, board members need to remember that the *corporate entity* known as the board of education is empowered to handle various responsibilities. In general, individuals have no more authority than any other member of the public. This is management territory, and board members are guests, not the boss.

5. Can’t see the forest for the trees

Probably the greatest complaint by superintendents is that of the board micromanaging the administration. I’ve seen boards argue about the size of the engine needed on a snow blower or what wattage light bulb to purchase. The more the board concentrates on *vision*, the less it should be in day-to-day activities. Setting goals, monitoring their implementation through policy, and empowering the superintendent to manage the district is critical and under the board’s domain.

6. Dropping a bomb at a board meeting

Occasionally, a board member will try to make points in the community by embarrassing the superintendent or board chair by dropping a bomb: a surprise question that cannot be quickly answered. The intent isn’t to gain information, only to embarrass someone.

The board of education makes decisions based on information it acquires through reading, hearing presentations, and asking questions. Board members need to feel comfortable making a decision and should get answers to questions prior to voting. If the intention is to gain knowledge on an issue, then any question is fair game.

In some cases, it is important to ask your question publicly if you know members of the community have the same concern. You want your community to know that the matter was discussed and that the board took it into consideration. Good board members will call the superintendent and mention they will be asking the following question at the board meeting. Again, the purpose of rais-

ing questions is to help the board decide.

Similarly, many times board members ask questions that were answered in the preparation materials provided in the board packet. If they had read the packet ahead of time, they wouldn’t have had to waste the board’s time going over material already presented. The saddest sound a superintendent hears at the start of a board meeting is the ripping sound as board members open their packets for the first time.

7. Vote along party lines, putting politics before children

School board service is grassroots democracy at its best, or worst, depending on how politics play in your community. I have worked with boards where there is no hint that the members were elected politically and others where politics stymies the board’s ability to focus on children. I have seen boards crippled by the partisan infighting, and the district slowly falter as the lack of vision and leadership keeps everyone from doing what is necessary to improve education.

My advice: Leave politics out of board business.

8. Become a ‘ball carrier’ for others with hidden agendas

It seems that every board has someone who acts as the spokesperson for the staff, or for specific community groups. While every board member wants to be helpful, under no circumstances should they try to circumvent the chain of command. Human nature being what it is, every story has at least two sides. There are board members who misguidedly bring every issue they hear in public to the board’s attention.

In cases where staff or parents approach you, remember that the board is often the last link in the chain of command. Your board should have a clear policy on when it is appropriate for the board to hear a case, and it is usually after other avenues are exhausted. Let the process work. In some extreme cases, your involvement at the wrong time could keep the board from rendering a legitimate decision, or open the district to potential legal liability. Ultimately, your attempt to help someone could leave your board open to more serious harm.

Likewise, when approached by someone you know—a friend, co-worker, neighbor, or political supporter—be very careful not to commit to voting a certain way. You should always vote your conscience, and make decisions based on what you believe is best for the children in your district, but only after hearing all sides.

Memorize this statement: “This problem could end up requiring board action, and if I am involved in it at this level, I will be unable to act on it as a member of the board because it could be a violation of due process. You really need to go through the proper channels.”

9. Have your own hidden agenda

I have known people who have sought a seat on their local board to achieve some goal—fire the superintendent, bring in a new program, or get their brother-in-law a job as football coach. It becomes apparent to most after a short time that the job involves much more than your single issue.

Remember, the superintendent is charged with tasks determined by the board. Individual board members cannot direct any staff, including the superintendent. These ideas should be referred back to the board chair, and, if appropriate, added to a future agenda for discussion and possible action.

10. Speak about confidential issues

My state, like other states, has restrictions on what can be discussed in executive session (or closed session). It is important that board members all understand these sunshine laws and their intention. You are entrusted to do the work of the public, watching over their schools, and their children. Except for a few clearly defined exceptions, the public has a right to watch the board fulfill its obligations. You should be doing most of your work under public scrutiny. In the end, this builds credibility and trust.

It is highly unethical, and sometimes illegal, for board members to divulge the contents of these closed or executive sessions to outsiders. Doing so could open up the district to lawsuits or civil penalties.

11. Hold chaotic board meetings

Your board of education meetings are where you are empowered to act on behalf of your community and to comply with laws of the state that you are sworn to serve. How you go about doing that business is very much on public display. If your meetings are chaotic or ineffective, your community will lose trust in you and the schools you govern. Much of this will fall on your chair and superintendent.

Are the agendas designed to promote the orderly business of the board? Are your agendas aligned with your district goals? Do board members understand Robert's Rules of Order and use them to promote proper discourse and the work of the board?

These are more structural aspects of the meeting but are a good framework to ensure you use your time and your staff's time effectively. If your meetings are loaded with infighting and bad behavior, your district will suffer the loss of community trust and will harm the children in your charge.

12. Ignore policy

When I work with a board I will often ask the members to raise their hand if they've read their policy manual. Many do not (some argue they're allergic to dust). One board chair said, "I don't think we have a policy manual."

I've seen boards of education decide something only to find out it goes contrary to board policy. I have seen boards vote to set aside an existing policy when a situation required it.

Policy is the board's book of law. It is the only substantive thing they leave behind: It is the board's legacy to the community. Boards should refer to policy whenever they make a decision. Rarely is there no connection to policy in a board decision. In fact, if the board routinely deals with non-policy issues, they should start asking whether it is necessary for the board to make the decision, or if they should be letting administration make it. If you find yourselves overruling board policy on a regular basis, rewrite the policy. How can you expect your administrators, teachers, and students to respect the district policy manual if the board does not?

13. Focus on the wrong stuff

I saved the most important for last. The reason school boards exist is to ensure that every child gets a quality education. It's challenging, complex work running a school district, but above all, it's your job to provide each child an opportunity to learn.

Every second that you and your board are spending on other matters is a distraction. Yes, buses need to get kids to school, the lights must go on, but the purpose of all that we do is to provide quality education through our public schools.

Making sure the board establishes a clear vision, provides the resources to support that vision (along with your superintendent's operational plans), holding the district accountable to achieve the vision, and communicating all of this to your community should be the board's No. 1 priority.

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