

BECOMING A BETTER SCHOOL BOARD CHAIR

Tips from a veteran of school board governance

Robert Rader



While being a school board member comes with many obligations, the position of president or chair comes with heightened responsibilities. Chairs often are called upon to be the official spokesperson to the media to ensure that the board speaks with a unified voice. Board chairs work closely with their superintendents to set the tone for the leadership team. Chairs and superintendents set meeting agendas, and chairs preside over meetings, keeping order and making sure discussions stay focused on the set agenda.

These tips for school board presidents or chairs grew out of a similar list I created to help provide orientation for school board members. I have worked for the New York State School Boards and the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education for over 40 years. I hope this list is useful for new chairs and that it can serve as a good reminder for those who have been chairs for much longer. It also can help new board members understand the role of the chair.

① Focus your board on student achievement and continuing growth, the primary mission of all school boards.

② Put your students' needs first. Be true to your district's mission.

③ Help set a "professional" culture with your fellow board members. Have high expectations of them. They should know their roles and responsibilities, as should you.

④ Ensure that your decisions and those of your fellow board members are based on the needs of your students, not party affiliation or political ideology.

⑤ Remind other board members that the board represents ALL the children in the district, not just those whose parents voted for them.

⑥ Be a great role model: The eyes of the district and the media are on you. Use "we" rather than "I."

⑦ Know your roles and responsibilities as chair, including how to handle public comments. Use the gavel sparingly and only as necessary.

⑧ Develop a strong relationship with your superintendent.

⑨ Know where your board members are coming from. Understand why they got on the board. Their interests and concerns will drive their actions and will help provide a roadmap for progress.

10 Communicate often and honestly with other members of the board and the superintendent but be mindful of your state's sunshine laws. Informal one-to-one conversations, away from the board table, are best for building relationships.

11 Inspire others with your empathy, caring, and understanding. Walking in someone else's shoes can give you a completely different perspective and helps build trust.

12 Strengthen your board's image. Conduct yourself with respect and civility. Be appropriately humble.

13 Let others shine, whether board members, superintendent, or other staff.

14 Dale Carnegie told us, "A person's name is to that person, the sweetest and most important sound in any language." Use board members' names in addressing them. Remember that everyone likes to see their name in print in a positive way.

15 Speak your piece, generally after other board members have said theirs, without dominating the conversation. Actively listen to others speak their pieces.

16 When confronted by a mistake, whether by another board member or someone else, generally assume incompetence rather than malfeasance. Your first reaction should be to give the benefit of the doubt.

17 Never criticize others in public but be willing to privately speak to board members and others to help them better understand how to work as part of the governance team. Be inclusive, rather than exclusive, with all board members.

18 Pick your battles. Often others just want to vent and will feel validated by someone else listening.

19 Apologize when you know you should.

20 Be aware of your own implicit biases. We all have them.

21 Don't expect every vote to be unanimous. If they were, we would need only one board member. Dissent and slow, thoughtful discussion can spur better decision-making.

22 Encourage your board to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Board members need to be lifetime learners to keep up with educational issues, trends, and events.

23 Do not try to solve every problem you hear about and help other board members follow your example. Explaining that there is a chain of command should be board members' mantra.

24 Follow the money. Your budget is your most important policy document.

25 Keep and use your sense of humor to defuse situations. Try not to take yourself too seriously.

26 Take time for yourself and your family. You need to recharge, too.

27 Lastly, focus on the big picture with optimism and think long term. Although this may be difficult in light of your current concerns, strong leaders are optimistic and build their legacies one step at a time.

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