



Five Lessons for Successful School Board Service

Advice on strengthening your districts through good governance

Robert Rader

Boards of education exist to connect the will of the community to the education of its children. That sounds easy, but the devil is in the details.

Board service is an art and therefore less precise, less easily measured, and more subjective than a science. The success of a board and its members is more a result of channeling a person's skills, abilities, and hard work than any easily quantified factors.

A coalition representing a majority of a board is required to adopt a policy, develop a budget for the district, change the board's relationship with the superintendent, or take any other action. Regardless of how much influence or persuasiveness a single board member has, the bottom line is that the board member will need to build a coalition to accomplish whatever is on the member's wish list.

Despite that difficulty, many boards and board members leave successful legacies resulting in the strengthening of their districts and public education.

Here are some recommendations that should help boards and board members as they tackle this challenge:

I. BOARD MEMBERS SHOULD ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THEY HAVE NO MORE AUTHORITY THAN ANY OTHER CITIZEN AWAY FROM THE BOARD TABLE.

Members are elected or appointed with their own, and, often, their constituencies' dreams of what they want to accomplish. However, once on the board, they quickly learn that all the other board members, as well as the superin-

tendent, have their own expectations and goals. Sometimes these are in direct conflict. Therefore, we urge candidates and sitting board members to remember that they should not promise what they will accomplish. Experienced board members know that only by building coalitions, amounting to a majority of the board, can they accomplish their goals.

What does this mean in terms of board members away from the board table?

Away from the table, a board member is just like any other citizen, with the same rights as anyone else, but no more. Only at a meeting of the board does a board member have any authority—and then the authority is only exercised when voting in the majority.

Members of the community and even staff may perceive a board member as one of the "bosses" of the district. Yes, on an organizational chart the board is on top. That represents the board acting by majority vote, not by the authority of any one member.

Board members should pay attention to all the requirements to which other citizens must comply, such as signing in when visiting a school (and it's a courtesy to provide a heads-up to the principal or superintendent first). When asked by a member of the public about a specific concern, a board member's response needs to incorporate two different points: one, that the board member has no more authority on the issue than the citizen who asked, and that, in most cases, the citizen should follow the district's chain of command to get the concern addressed.

That doesn't mean one should ignore the concerns of

the citizen. However, at some point, that board member's role may require sitting in judgment on the issue. That could create a conflict of interest if the board member has appeared to have already "prejudged" the situation.

Depending on the issue, the superintendent and the board chair or president may need to be informed that an issue may be brewing. Superintendents need board members to help be their eyes and ears in the community. It's also appropriate to ask for a report from the superintendent indicating that the concern has been addressed.

II. BOARD MEMBERS AND THE SUPERINTENDENT SHOULD ENSURE THERE ARE INFORMATIVE, HELPFUL, AND TIMELY COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TEAM (THE BOARD AND THE SUPERINTENDENT).

Like any successful team working to achieve excellence, the district leadership team operates best when the members trust one another and share relevant information in a timely manner.

Boards and the superintendent, of course, are subject to their state's sunshine laws, ensuring that the public sees the work of the board as it does the people's business. Your state school boards association can provide information about how best to communicate without violating any laws.

Regular, frequent reports on district activities and news from the superintendent to the board, sufficient, timely information to prepare members for board meetings, and reports of concerns in the educational community provide board members with the information they need to make good decisions and to avoid surprises when members of the public ask them about specific events. In this day of widespread digital sharing of information, the latter is more difficult and more important. Few interactions with the public are more embarrassing than a board member first being told by another citizen about an important event that the public and media are already discussing.

Not surprising the superintendent or other board members or staff is another key rule. In other words, board meetings are not venues to request information or other unexpected data that should have been provided to the other members of the team in advance of the meeting.

Similarly, a superintendent should not surprise the board at a meeting. Relevant information for making decisions should be provided to the board in advance. Board members should call or email before the meeting when they have a question or to enable others to prepare.

It is a basic rule of good governance that when a board member requests information of staff, it is provided to ALL members of the team. When so much information is requested by individual board members that staff cannot satisfy the request without jeopardizing its "regular" work, a discussion with the board, led by the board chair, is appropriate. Many times, a policy to address the situation, including enabling the chair to screen such requests, is appropriate.

III. LEADERS, WHETHER THEY'RE THE BOARD CHAIR OR ANY OTHER MEMBER OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM, SHOULD GET TO KNOW OTHER MEMBERS AWAY FROM THE TABLE.

One effective way to build the majorities needed to enable the board to function effectively is to remember that everyone on the leadership team has their own interests, usually clarified by how and why they ran for the board. Their interests and desires will contribute to how they will vote. While in some states, political affiliation takes precedence, board members are urged to leave their political membership at the door as they come into the meeting. The focus should be on what is best for the children of the district.

How do leaders build the majorities?

Leaders have to know the interests and goals of those individual board members. Did they run to put more of the district's focus and budget on the gifted and talented program? Are they concerned about how the special education program is running? Do they think the district needs a new high school? Are they concerned about the sports program?

The best way to get to know their interests is to meet individually with each member of the team away from the formality of the board table. Having coffee, lunch, or dinner with only two members of the board will not violate sunshine laws and will enable board members to understand where the others are "coming from." Talking informally about their families, their occupations, and maybe what they did over a summer vacation will enable each to learn about the other, building trust and camaraderie, which will, in turn, let the leader understand what is needed to build a functioning coalition.

A good leader knows how to bring people together around what they want. When the leader works to ensure majorities, he or she will understand what is required for success.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE BOARD CHAIR IS CRITICAL IN ENSURING MEETINGS ARE PROPERLY AND EFFECTIVELY CONDUCTED, SERVING AS THE BOARD'S SPOKESPERSON, AND HELPING TO KEEP EVERYONE "INSIDE THE TENT."

As leader, the board chair has many crucial responsibilities. The chair sets the tone and direction of board meetings (with the help of the superintendent in preparing the agenda), is key to the board's relationship with the superintendent, appoints members to the board's subcommittees, and is often the designated spokesperson for the board (as stated in the board's bylaws).

However, the chair's role goes further than that. In addition to developing relationships with other board members, as previously discussed above, the chair must ensure all board members can present their respective thoughts and ideas at board meetings, even if the board member is dissenting from the majority. Sometimes the dissenting board member(s) will be persuasive and alter the board's view or make suggestions that result in a compromise that works for everyone.

One also can expect that there will be dissenting votes on many of the issues before the board. That is not necessarily a bad thing. I tell Connecticut boards that if everyone votes the same way on every issue, we really need only one board member in each district.

Moreover, it is also the chair's job to try to uphold high standards and a culture of working efficiently and effectively. If there is a board member who does not take the work seriously, talks publicly about issues discussed in executive session, uses inappropriate language or otherwise weakens the credibility of the board, it is appropriate for the chair to talk privately to the board member and try to understand and address the member's unsuitable behavior. If that does not help, there are ways to isolate such a member. It may be time for the chair to discuss the member's conduct with your state school boards association and/or the school attorney.

The chair's job in ensuring everyone has a fair say before a vote should help with Lesson V below.

V. ONCE A DECISION IS MADE, IT'S GOOD GOVERNANCE TO SUPPORT THE DECISION OF THE BOARD.

The idea of good "boardsmanship" is to develop a culture on the board where standards, possibly in a handbook, determine appropriate behavior for board members. These rules are probably considered as best practices in the district, though they might not be legally enforceable.

One example is how board members react to having been on the losing side of a vote. Often members of the media will look for such members to make statements after a decision by the board is finalized. The reporters may be looking to create a controversy between board members and the superintendent.

As we discussed in Lesson I, a board member does not have any more rights than any other citizen once away from the board table. However, the board member does not have any fewer rights, either. A board member retains the First Amendment right to speak about the decisions of the board. However, it is the chair of the board who is generally authorized to speak for the board.

Good boardsmanship holds that once the decision is made, board members do not undermine it. For example, working against the budget adopted by the board will undercut the work of the other members of the team. This will encourage other board members to undermine votes on which the original board member is on the "winning" side. Board members should carefully consider when and whether it is beneficial to work or speak out against the majority vote after the vote is taken.

While board service is certainly more complex, difficult, and time-consuming than in the past, it remains a wonderful opportunity for individuals to provide their unique skills, talents, and experiences to the community. I wish you well in this crucial endeavor.

Robert Rader (rrader@cabe.org) is executive director of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and has over 41 years of serving school boards in New York and Connecticut.