



FOUNDATION OF KNOWLEDGE

New school board members need background knowledge quickly to serve effectively from the start

Rick Maloney

When I became a school board member, I wanted to be as effective as possible, as early as possible. Like many other board members beginning their first term, I was eager to fulfill campaign promises and contribute to district success, so I signed up for new board member training. At the time, I didn't know what I didn't know. And I had little time to get up to speed.

School board members need to learn the skills of effective boardsmanship. We also need dispositions (values and attitudes) that point us in the right direction and motivate us with the will to get where we need to go. But first we need a foundation of knowledge that informs our work.

A FOUNDATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Basic knowledge for school board service is by itself a tall order, and state-mandated training (where it exists) only scratches the surface. It includes laws defining board purpose and functions, student and employee rights, open public meetings, the public's right to information, and many others.

Other sources of information include *Robert's Rules of Order* as adapted by the board; the district's current strategic plan with board-defined vision, mission, and long-term goals; active collective bargaining agreements; board policies; district results from any mandated assessments of student learning; the most recent superintendent evaluation, and (if available) board self-assessment.

For my own introduction to the knowledge needed for school board service, my superintendent gave me a copy of NSBA's publication *Becoming a Better Board Member*. NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards* also can help launch this knowledge journey. Reading these encyclopedic references to fill your knowledge gap can seem like drinking from a fire hose. But even if you're able to memorize every point, you'll still need more knowledge for board service.

META-LESSONS: SOME ESSENTIAL TRUTHS

In addition to basic knowledge as described above, I needed to learn some broader lessons that ordinarily reveal themselves only after on-the-job experience, including making mistakes and reflecting on them. However, unless we learn them quickly, these major lessons can elude many board members (whose average term of service is only about four years).

As an individual board member, I am not the board.

Authority over everything in the school district rests with the board. Over time I came to realize that because I had no authority as an individual, doing what I wanted to do (positively impact student learning) required that I fully comprehend the fact that "I am not the board" and that I needed to learn to work through the board majority (on my five-member board that means being able to "count to three") to get anything done. Because we have no authority as individuals, board members must work through the board to influence district outcomes.



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I am not only one part of the board; I am one part of a system.

A school district has many parts that simultaneously interact, each impacting the other parts of the system. In addition to knowing what effective board members do, I needed to learn how my role fits into the school board as a subsystem that is greater than the sum of its individual members, and how the school board role fits into the overall school system. I also needed to understand that changes in one part of the school district inevitably affect other parts of the system. Acquiring and applying knowledge about boardsmanship (for the individual board member) and governance (for the whole board) takes time because of the complexity of the system we work in.

I must acknowledge and respect other key roles at every

level in the system.

Another important lesson was knowing how far I was from the classroom where teaching and learning take place. We must take responsibility for supporting success at every level, and we must appreciate how each role affects the student learning for which the school system exists.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT KEY NONBOARD ROLES

Throughout my first and subsequent terms, I acquired background knowledge about key roles at every level between myself and our students. I needed to appreciate what other key players do and what they need to be effective, because the board cannot do it all. It is important to be aware of these roles and their need for support, but it would be foolish to think board members can or should

fully understand them. The references I offer are for background information. As board members, we don't need to know their full contents, just that they do exist, they can be learned, and they can be applied by those we employ.

What do students need for their learning?

While district staff have the job of supporting or delivering instruction, the student is the most important actor in any learning that occurs. Our future graduates need to become productive members of society, prepared for whatever awaits them after high school. States and local communities have expectations. In the former case, those expectations are written in law and regulations directing graduation requirements; in the latter, they are written in board policy.

Our students are active participants in the system, in the role of learner. We must acknowledge their role, not as passive recipient of knowledge (a vessel into which information is poured) but as active agent of their own learning. We must do our best to ensure the district delivers effective instruction and a positive structure of support for that learning. We can learn these requirements by understanding state laws and regulations and local board policies that define expected student outcomes.

What does an effective teacher do in support of student learning?

Instruction is the responsibility of the teacher, who needs support at school and district levels. Teachers have the most direct role in and are the most important factor in effective instruction.

There are many research-supported instructional factors for which research has demonstrated an impact on student learning, as cataloged in *Visible Learning* by John Hattie. For teacher competencies see *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* by Charlotte Danielson or *The New Art and Science of Teaching* by Robert Marzano.

What does an effective principal do in support of student learning?

Leading instruction within each school is the principal, who needs district support. Professional associations for principals — the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) — have identified principal competencies. They include professional growth and learning; student growth and achievement; school planning and progress; school culture; professional qualities and instructional leadership; stakeholder support and engagement.

There are research-supported school leadership factors

that show positive impact on student learning, which you can read about in *School Leadership That Works* by Robert J. Marzano and Timothy Waters.

What does an effective superintendent do in support of student learning?

Large school systems have one or several intermediate links in the chain of command above the principal. The board's first link in that chain (in small districts, perhaps the only link) is the superintendent, who manages the district on behalf of the board and is answerable to the board for district results. AASA, The School Superintendents Association, has identified superintendent competencies to include policy and governance; planning and assessment; instructional leadership; organizational management; communications and community relations; and professionalism. Note that the first competency area described above reflects the fact that boards require support to effectively perform their policy and governance functions. It is an unavoidable truth that when the board fails to do its own job the superintendent still must find a way to assure a governance structure that supports learning.

Research demonstrates the positive impact of effective district leadership on student learning. *District Leadership That Works* by Marzano and Waters is a good source of knowledge about the board's role in assuring the success of "district leadership."

LEARNING NEVER ENDS

A guided journey with carefully selected references that introduce essential knowledge can help new members get up to speed much more quickly. Providing a new board member helpful information about the work is an important start, but not nearly sufficient without the learning and reflection that occur over time and on the job. Experience gained while "doing" school board service helps us make meaning of the knowledge acquired from training sessions, conferences, books, or webinars. Knowing early on what board members need to know enables intentional learning to come sooner; it will be less random and more complete. Our learning journey never ends.

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