



Skills for an Effective School Board Member

Board members must learn the ins and
outs of boardsmanship

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Looking back at my first annual conference and its training for new school board members, if I thought the information I received in those initial sessions would be enough I was sorely mistaken. In addition to knowledge gained in conferences, actual practice in the boardroom gives meaning to what is learned in lectures about boardsmanship. It took me several years to acquire the skills I needed as an individual board member.

There are multiple sets of skills that must be learned to effectively serve as a school board member.

The board member exercises boardsmanship. Newly elected board members have a full set of individual skills to master. If unplanned, learning the full set of these skills can take an entire first term (about the time when the average board member's tenure ends) so it behooves all board members to ensure the learning journey begins early and is well planned. Even when the journey is carefully mapped out and diligently pursued, it still takes time to go from introduction to competence. Boardsmanship skills enable board members as individuals to:

- **Connect with and learn from the whole community.** Reach out and listen to community members, including students, parents, and those (approximately three quarters of the population) who have no direct school

connection. Learn the concerns, values, and priorities of the community that focus on student learning. Incorporate them into your vision of student needs.

We need to understand: Most candidates connect at some level with members of the community while running for office. Our challenge is to establish and maintain a genuine communitywide connection while in office, because the extent of community contact achieved on the campaign trail and at board meetings can be rather narrowly defined.

- **Advocate on behalf of the community** for students' best interests. Reach out to colleagues on the board (for policy internal to the district) and to state and national policymakers (whose policy decisions impact student learning from outside the district).

We need to understand: A major reason we represent others is to give voice to their values and their vision for desired student outcomes.

- **Prepare for and contribute to board meetings.** Read board materials before each meeting. Follow adopted protocols (making a motion, debating motions, etc.) in the board's adaptation of Robert's Rules. Maintain civility and treat others with respect. Actively engage with colleagues while deliberating and discussing



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board-level issues. Take and declare a position, sharing reasoning, on action items, then be willing to consider others' views. Debate the merits of a motion, then after acknowledging and considering conflicting values, vote (with a willingness to support the board's ultimate decision) and move on.

We need to understand: Board meetings are where the board conducts its business, so we must focus on doing well what goes on in the boardroom.

- **Refer complaints, concerns, and suggestions to the appropriate level for resolution.** Refer board level (policy) issues to the board chair and colleagues because policy is only created by the full board acting collectively in board meetings. Refer other (program-related or management) issues to the superintendent and/or appropriate staff at a level where they can be most successfully resolved.

We need to understand: Board members cannot do everything by themselves. In fact, usually there is someone else in a better position to handle each issue brought to a school board member. This powerful application of the "chain of command" management principle places decisions and

actions at the most appropriate level for resolution.

While the following are essential competencies, their effectiveness is heavily influenced by the board member's inclination and willingness (their disposition) to use these skills. So they are just as much a matter of will as they are of skill:

- **Maintain confidentiality** of protected sensitive information (e.g., personnel file data, negotiation strategies for collective bargaining or real estate purchases, etc.) from illegal or imprudent disclosure.

We need to understand: We have a duty to protect the rights of individuals and meet our responsibilities as public officeholders.

- **Proactively support transparency for all nonrestricted information.** Publicly share background information and board process while it is ongoing. Share information that forms and shapes our views and publicly explain our thinking to colleagues.

We need to understand: Transparency in public work is a positive force that acts in the public interest. It

is not an unwelcome hindrance to our work that is “inconveniently” imposed by state law. Expedient decisions made in secrecy may not always be worse than those reached in public and transparent deliberations, but that will usually be the case.

- **Disclose potential conflicts of interest** and refrain from voting when they come up for decision.

We need to understand: State ethics laws protect the public from officeholders’ abuse of their office. We need to avoid even the appearance of any conflict of interest.

- **Assure continuous improvement** in individual skills through an ongoing pursuit of professional development. Take advantage of opportunities to increase boardsmanship skills. Encourage the full board to seek and create such opportunities.

We need to understand: We have a moral obligation to pursue every means of improving our ability to do our job.

- **Support and abide by law and board policy decisions**, honoring the ‘one voice’ concept, including recognition that the board’s designee speaks on behalf of the board.

We need to understand: Respect for majority rule and compliance with the law are not optional; they are at a minimum a “must do” part of our job.

The board member contributes to the board’s governance capacity. Because “the board member” is not “the board,” the exercise of boardsmanship (a set of individual skills), while important, is not the same as the exercise of governance (a set of collective skills that only the board as a whole can demonstrate.) However, the board member is part of “the board” so our effectiveness as individuals also includes an ability and willingness to contribute to the board’s collective governance role.

- **Collaborate with colleagues on the “top team” of board and superintendent.** Build and maintain productive relationships with board colleagues and the superintendent—together they constitute the district’s top leadership team. This requires an ability to listen to and engage in policy discussions.

We need to understand: Because board members have no power as individuals, we have to figure out how to work together to get things done. As a bare minimum, board members must achieve a board majority of similar

views in order to get anything done in the boardroom.

- **Support the “board process,”** including the integrity and transparency of that process and protect it against potential undermining by the words or actions of others, including colleagues.

We need to understand: Respect for the board process reinforces the fact that “the board” (not any individual board member) is the paramount authority, so its process must be protected if we are to trust and support decisions.

- **Support the board chair** in their role of facilitating board work. Honor the chair’s role as board spokesperson and the “one voice” principle. Board decisions “speak clearly” for the board, and the chair is charged with the responsibility to communicate those decisions.

We need to understand: Respect for the role of the board chair is respect for the board process and the collective will of the board.

- **Promote and support continuous improvement** in the whole board’s capacity to govern through collective professional development (PD) to increase the board’s governance skills.

We need to understand: All PD is not the same. Boardsmanship PD is only part of the picture. Support for whole board development (governance PD) is also our responsibility.

An effective board member works through the full board to assure, on behalf of the community, that the school district “works.” The board member must be able to contribute to the full board’s effectiveness, collaborating with other board members as a team performing collective governance skills. To do this, the board member must fully understand the board’s governance role.

The board member skill set, then, includes individual boardsmanship skills of board members acting alone, plus their ability (and willingness) as individuals to contribute to the board’s collective governance skills that are needed when the board takes action to govern the district.

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