

7 Signs of Effective School Board Members

By Kathryn Blumsack and Terry McCabe

Congratulations! You're now a member of the Board of Education. If you're like most new board members, you've worked hard to reach this point. You've listened to your community, and come to understand its values and concerns. Above all, you've embraced the transformative power of a great board to improve public education. Local control of education through elected school boards is a deeply held American political tradition. School boards may be small and local, but they represent perhaps the most important daily civic commitment we as citizens make to our communities, our children, and our future.

As a new board member, you bring sharp questions, innovative ideas, and fresh energy. You'll look at established routines and policies with new eyes, you'll challenge old assumptions, and you'll have the opportunity to share your perspective with your fellow board members. At the same time, you'll learn how to make a positive difference in the work of the board, and how to contribute most effectively to lasting change. We want you to be the most effective possible advocate for your community's educational vision and values. To help you succeed, we're going to share with you the seven practices of highly effective boards.

1. Going solo's a no-no

You were elected to your board as an individual. You've got issues that are priorities for you. And you'll get a lot of individual attention early on from friends, school employees, and community members who want you to tackle particular problems. The early temptation will be to say "yes" and use your power to fix things.

Except you won't have any power to use -- not as an individual, at least. As a school board member, you have no individual legal authority to fix problems or decide issues. One of the wisest things you can do is to help others understand that you can only get your work done as part of a team. We're not saying you can't try to take the lead on a particular issue, or that you have to stay silent -- not at all. In fact, the more you communicate and share with your fellow board members, the more likely you'll be able to gain support for your priorities and ideas.

Look at the long term: Your success as a board member is inextricably tied to the success of your board. You will be judged by what it accomplishes, not by what you as an individual tried to accomplish. In all the years (decades!) we've worked with school boards, we've never heard anyone say something like, "That's a bad board -- except for Mary Smith."

What do boards work on together? Everything. Consider the three main areas of board responsibility: legislative, administrative, and judicial. The first area of responsibility, legislative, refers to policy making. Effective boards adopt policies that give direction to the superintendent and staff, enabling them to manage the district. The board should seek appropriate input in the development of policy, and after adoption should hold the superintendent and staff accountable for its implementation.

Administration is the second area of responsibility. It includes approving and monitoring the budget, approving and monitoring district contracts, and hiring and evaluating the superintendent and appropriate staff. The administration should present the draft budget based on the goals and objectives outlined by the school board. It is up to the board to ensure that goals and objectives are truly aligned with the spending outlined in the budget. As for contracts, many states give final approval and responsibility for major contracts to the local board. It is important that you understand the bidding process and follow ethical guidelines in approving all contracts.

Finally, the board's judicial responsibility refers to hearing formal appeals sessions brought forward by staff, students, or parents. Naturally, these appeals require confidentiality, impartiality, and a full understanding of school law and regulations. The judicial function is sporadic, but handling appeals properly is critical to the effectiveness and fairness of a school board.

2. Respect the team

You were elected as an individual, but you'll work as part of a team. The best way to succeed as a board is to practice collaboration and respect. Because boards deal with extremely difficult and vexing issues -- from budgets to grievances and everything in between -- it's common for emotions to sometimes run high. Keep in mind that you're in this for the long haul, and the best way to succeed is to be part of a strong team. Boards whose members treat one another with respect tend to be the most effective. Those whose members give in to acrimony tend to get less done.

Collaboration and respect don't mean consensus. Boards vote, and majorities rule. (But remember: This year's majority could be next year's minority.) There is honor in casting a sincere vote, win or lose. But, after the vote, effective boards move forward together. When you're new, every challenge will be a first-time challenge. But you'll come to realize that boards confront major issues all the time, and that a long-term commitment to collegiality and respect is critical to effective board governance.

The impact of respect goes beyond the board. The board sets the tone for the entire school system. Staff, students, parents, and the community are watching carefully to see how the board functions. Effective boards don't only handle their own work well -- they establish a model of collegiality and collaboration that builds confidence across the community that everyone is working to do what's best for students.

3. Understand the difference between board and staff

Effective board members refrain from trying to perform management functions that are the responsibility of the superintendent and staff. As a board member, it is your responsibility (along with your fellow board members) to ensure that the schools operate well. But it is not your responsibility to run them. That's what the superintendent is for.

Boards do have great power, but it can seem a strange kind of power to new members because it's not the power to order individuals to "do this" or "stop doing that." It's the power to establish goals and policies, and then the power to demand accountability for reaching those goals and executing those policies.

The fundamental reason to refrain from trying to perform management functions is so you can hold the system -- and above all, its leader, the superintendent -- accountable for results. Accountability is the key, and many recent educational reforms aim to clarify and strengthen accountability.

If the superintendent understands that he or she will be held accountable by the board to reach goals and execute policies, then the board has achieved a key part of its work. If board members muddy accountability by trying to involve themselves in management functions, then any individual "win" in a particular case has the larger effect of undermining overall system effectiveness.

Here's a common situation for a new board member: You've been approached by concerned parents or community members about fixing an issue. If this happened during an election, you may have assured the concerned individuals you'd tackle this issue right away. You should listen to such concerns and questions, but rarely if ever will it be appropriate for you to directly contact a principal, a teacher, or a coach to try to solve the problem. That's one of the main ways board members unintentionally diminish their effectiveness.

Part of your job is to help educate the school community about your responsibilities, explain the chain of command (or "chain of accountability," as some board members call it), and direct concerned individuals to the appropriate staff person.

A useful guide for new board members is your school system's policy on how to handle concerns from members of the public, to ensure that every concern gets a fair hearing and timely resolution. And if a concern merits board consideration, you should bring it up with your fellow board members.

4. Share and defend your views, but listen to the views of others

Your board sets the standard for communication within the district. Do you want your district to be open to a thorough discussion, or are you more interested in your own point of view? School board members must have the ability to compromise. You won't "win" on every issue you care about. More importantly, sometimes you'll find that the information, perspectives, and ideas others have may change your mind, or lead to a new and even better collaborative idea.

In the charged and urgent arena of public education, expect to be flexible, even as you seek to honor your deepest values and commitments. There will be times when changes must be made, when tradition cannot be honored, or when pressure must be resisted. Sometimes, you'll measure the true success of a board not by agreement, but by respectful disagreement and spirited discussion followed by a difficult vote. And after a difficult vote, effective boards embrace the decision and move forward together.

5. Do your homework and ask tough questions

Members of effective boards come to meetings prepared to engage in discussions, ask questions, and seek clarification. A lot of background information is required to make policy and assess accountability. In meetings, asking sharp questions can help clarify issues not just for yourself, but for students, families, the community, and even school system employees. Here are some good questions to keep in mind:

- What is the goal of this initiative?
- How does it align with our vision, mission, and system goals?
- How much will it cost? What data tells us it's important enough to merit the cost?
- What data supports the notion that it will achieve the desired results?
- Are staff ready to implement it? If not, what's our plan?
- How does it fit with our existing activities? Does it conflict with anything we're already doing?
- How will we evaluate the results?

Board members are not career education professionals. Sometimes this feels like a handicap because of all the jargon, technical language, and policy details that board members, especially new board members, may not know. But keep in mind that, in American public education, local board members are not expected to be experts. They are responsible for serving as a bridge between lifelong education professionals and local communities.

To build the bridge, some board members like to ask plain questions. Michael Harvey, a board member in Maryland's Kent County, likes to encourage clarity and simplicity by asking, "How would you explain this policy to a parent?"

6. Respect your oath

Local school board membership is a public office and a public trust. New members swear an oath to uphold laws pertaining to public education. An important aspect of the public trust is to maintain confidentiality when appropriate. Many issues considered by school boards must be handled in confidence, in executive or closed sessions. These commonly include personnel issues, legal matters, negotiations, land acquisition, and grievances.

Your state education laws determine which items must be considered in executive session or in appeals hearings, and specify the process for entering and exiting such a session. Everything discussed is confidential, with the exception of the summary public report the board president makes after the executive or closed session. If an individual board member divulges information from a closed or executive session, he or she may be held legally responsible. Significant costs and legal challenges may arise for the individual member, the board, and the entire school district.

Note that, while executive or closed sessions are permitted, most states require any action as a result of that executive session to be conducted in a public forum. Just as it is important to adhere to confidentiality for matters that should be confidential, it is important to ensure that no open-session topics are discussed, or actions taken, in executive or closed sessions. When in doubt, consult your board lawyer.

7. Keep learning

Effective board members participate in professional development and commit the time and energy necessary to be informed and effective leaders. You should understand your school system's vision, goals, and policies; its current successes, challenges, and opportunities; and the educational environment in your community.

Most importantly, you should know the aspirations and expectations of the students and parents. At the national level, American public education is undergoing major and rapid changes. Understanding and translating them for your community's schools will require steady, ongoing work.

Many resources are available to you in this new position. You need to know about your state statutes and the organizing documents for your district. Work closely with your board chair and your superintendent to better understand district and board responsibilities. Your state school board association is a great resource for information

and professional development. There are additional resources available through NSBA (www.nsba.org) and this magazine (www.asbj.com).

OK, new board members. That's our advice. Congratulations again on your new job and new responsibilities. It'll be exhausting, challenging, and sometimes painful. But, with luck, you'll share the experience of many other school board members in the great American tradition: the most rewarding job you will ever have.

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