

Boardsmanship Review

Five Steps to Being a Better Board Member

JULY 2015

By Kristen Amundson

Joining a state board of education involves commitment. Citizen volunteers routinely dedicate substantial time and energy to this demanding job. The vast majority report that they have taken on this challenge because they want to help all students succeed. When their talents and abilities are used maximally, they believe their service is well worth the personal cost.

New board members may worry that it will take them years to become truly effective. But effective board service is a skill, and like any skill, it can be learned, practiced, and improved.

Here are ways that a new member can make a difference from day one.

1. FOCUS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Does board service make a difference? Research shows it can. A recent study of local school board members found that some boards can help students beat the odds—that is, they help students perform better academically than one would expect, given their demographic and financial characteristics. Yet it is clear that such achievement is possible only when board members make it their top priority.

Many other issues and considerations take up a board's time. But the most successful board members do not allow themselves to be distracted by "bright, shiny objects." Instead, they focus consistently on student achievement.

2. DEVOTE THE TIME

Service on a state board of education is time intensive, and there are times when the demands on a member's time are overwhelming. Agendas are long and complex.

For example, a recent meeting in one state required the state board to consider and act

on high school graduation requirements, subject regulations for mathematics and English language arts, a maintenance-of-effort (funding) waiver for one school district, regulations governing the qualifications for school superintendents and school administrators, science standards adoption, and the statewide school discipline plan.

No single board member, especially not one who is combining board service with a demanding career, can be an expert on all those topics. One approach is for the board to divide the workload by assigning some topics to committees. The members of those committees can then serve as resources for the rest of the board.

In addition to attending meetings, most state board members will also be asked to serve on board committees, visit schools to see how programs are working, and meet with many groups: legislators, business leaders, parents, and teachers. All of these add to the time commitment but also pay off in improved student achievement.

3. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

On occasion, board members express frustration when colleagues do not do their homework before meetings. This reflects poorly on the entire board and slows progress. When a board member is chronically unprepared, it is proper for the chair of the board to speak to that individual in private, letting them know the critical importance of meeting preparation. After all, the board is often under a microscope and must be cognizant of its public appearance.

There is also a responsibility for staff members who prepare materials for the board. Members must receive relevant material in a workable time frame. The board should have an operating policy that guides staff on the materials that will be sent to members.

Boards should use executive summaries, report logs, and other devices to give members a chance to read as much as they can to prepare for a given issue.

The board member who has read and digested the information in the board agenda packet will be able to follow and participate in the discussion at the board table. For members who want to influence state education policy, the first step is to read the board materials.

4. QUESTION

Some state boards are created in the state constitution; others were established by state statute. Members may be elected or appointed. But there is one thing they all have in common: the power of the question.

A new board member may be concerned about asking a "dumb question." But odds are that if one board member is wondering about something, others are as well. And as Albert Einstein once noted, "The important thing is not to stop questioning."

Even if a new board member decides not to ask at a first or second board meeting, he or she should definitely ask the question by the second or third time an issue arises.

At a minimum, new board members should ask the following:

- Does the state board have a strategic plan? How do members learn about progress toward meeting the goals set out in the plan?

NASBE
National Association of
State Boards of Education

- How does the board know if its policies are being implemented in schools and districts?
- What are the ground rules for determining what is board work and what are staff responsibilities?
- How do members place items on the board agenda?
- What can new board members do to help ensure a positive working relationship among all members?

Kristen Amundson is NASBE's executive director and can be reached at kristen.amundson@nasbe.org. This Boardmanship Review is based on a 1997 NASBE publication, "Characteristics of Effective Board Members."

5. MAKE DECISIONS

Effective boards make decisions. These decisions are sometimes controversial. Rather than deal with that controversy, boards may be tempted to put off a decision until the next meeting (or the meeting after that).

In nearly every case, however, postponing a decision will not make the problem go away. It is far better to take a vote and then develop a strategy for explaining why the vote was important and how the policy will be implemented.

For board members, however, the responsibility for a decision does not end when the vote is taken. A member who voted with the majority has a responsibility to see that the policy is carried out effectively. The member will work with the chief state school officer to ensure that timelines are established, benchmarks for achievement are clear, and a regular schedule for reporting on progress is developed.

And what if a member opposed the policy that eventually prevailed? Board members who take part in a democratic process have a responsibility to respect it once the vote is taken. Effective boards share common expectations of their colleagues that they observe during deliberation on the policy and in the representation of the board's views once the policy is enacted. When it meets those expectations, the board is a better institution and the focus of policymaking remains squarely on producing results for students.