

# Boardsmanship Review

## Parliamentary Procedures: Key to Democratic Decision Making on State Boards

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Parliamentary procedures are a collection of meeting rules and norms designed to engage groups in democratic decision making. State boards of education often have important responsibilities for decisions on education policy, among other duties that require consensus. A grasp of the basic elements of parliamentary procedure is therefore important for the well-equipped board member. There are also more complex procedures that can be confounding even to experienced members, but these are less likely to arise during most state board business.

State board members bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences to the board table, including varied experiences with parliamentary procedure. Thus, the mere mention of it can feel disenfranchising to those with bad experiences or poor understanding of these procedures. Others may desire to expand their knowledge and skill set in this key aspect of meeting management. This brief is designed to aid both groups.

### THE WHY OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

For a state board to be effective, its members must know the agreed-upon rules for engaging with one another and governing how they make decisions. When hearing the phrase parliamentary procedure, many board members' minds may turn to procedures used at their meetings. While in-meeting procedures are important, the foundation of parliamentary procedure comes from the board's governing documents—in other words, its rules.

State (and sometimes federal) laws are the highest order of rules that a state board must follow. These include the state constitution and statutes, including open meeting (or

sunshine) laws. But state boards often have bylaws as well, and these second-order rules should designate a parliamentary authority. For many organizations, this is *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR)*. At the time of this publication, the 12th edition is current (2020). *RONR* can be overwhelming, and it is unrealistic to expect many people to read it. A more practical resource for state board members is *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief* (3rd ed., 2020).

The rules established in *RONR* are designed to balance the rights of individuals or groups within an organization's total membership. The rules address the rights of

- the majority;
- the minority, especially a strong minority greater than one-third;
- individual members;
- absentees; and
- all of these together.

While the will of the majority prevails in the end, there must first be an opportunity for full and free discussion that protects the rights of all members, even those who are absent (*RONR*, 12th ed., xlix).

### WHEN DECISIONS CAN BE MADE: A QUORUM

The quorum is the minimum number of members that must be present to conduct business. Quorum rules protect members' rights. In some instances, state law or state board bylaws prescribe the quorum. If not prescribed elsewhere, the quorum is usually a majority of members—that is, more than half. Without a quorum, a policy cannot be adopted.

The board may be able to meet without a quorum for hearings, programs, presentations, and to take up some procedural matters. Having a quorum present is key to the fidelity of a state board's decision-making process. (The quorum should not be confused with the number of votes required for a measure to be adopted by majority vote.)

### HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE: HANDLING A MAIN MOTION

Many board members have experience making a main motion. The main motion is generally how business comes before the board for deliberation and action. It may come as a result of a committee recommendation.

First, a board member must obtain the floor. Depending on the size and custom of the board, this may be done by raising a hand, turning on a light, or more formally, standing. Once the board member has obtained recognition by the chair, there are six steps for handling the motion. Steps 1, 2, and 3 outline how a motion is brought before the board. Steps 4, 5, and 6 describe how the board considers the motion.

**1. A member makes the motion.** Often, the main motion is related to a topic that is on the agenda, which is published ahead of time pursuant to the state's open meetings laws. Main motions should be prepared ahead of the meeting as well. Knowing that a main

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motion is stated in the form of, “I move...” as opposed to, “I make a motion to...” shows a savvy board member.

## 2. Another member seconds the motion.

Note that motions from a committee do not require a second. A second does not imply that the seconder agrees with the motion. A second is only an indication of a desire to debate the motion.

**3. The chair states the question on the motion.** In other words, the chair repeats the main motion to the entire board. At this point, the fate of the main motion is now up to the board; it does not belong to any individual or committee.

**4. Members debate the motion.** Note that the maker of the motion gets to debate the motion first. An astute chair will immediately call on the maker of the motion before asking any other member if they wish to debate. It is at this point that amendments may be offered to the main motion. Amendments should be in writing in order to ensure clarity and accuracy of an intended change to the main motion. Amendments are offered as a motion (“I move to amend...”), require a second, and are debatable. If an amendment is made, the amendment must be voted on before the main motion can be voted on. Even if an amendment is adopted, the main motion must then be voted on. This can be confusing because it can seem like the board is voting on the same thing twice.

**5. The chair puts the question**—in other words, puts the motion to a vote. State law may dictate how votes are to be taken. In many states, a recorded roll-call vote is required for the sake of transparency. Usually, a majority of members who are present and voting is required for a main motion to be adopted. Abstentions should be rare and only used when a true conflict of interest is present.

**6. The chair announces the result of the vote.** The motion is either adopted or lost.

## WHAT ARE THE RULES OF DEBATE?

Debate, rightly understood, is an essential element in the making of rational decisions of consequence by intelligent people. In a deliberative assembly, this term applies to discussion on the merits of a pending question—that is, whether the proposal under consideration should, or should not, be agreed to. That the right of debate is inherent in such an assembly is implied by the word *deliberative*. (*RONR*, 12th ed., 43:1).

The right and responsibility of members to debate or discuss main motions are key for state boards of education and an important reason for their existence. Members should know, understand, and exercise their rights to debate policy matters at the board table. Some boards may have special rules that govern debate. General rules governing debate are as follows (*RONR*, 12th ed., 43):

- No member should speak more than twice to the same question (motion) on the same day.
- No one should speak a second time before all members have had an opportunity to speak once.
- Members should limit each speech to no more than 10 minutes.
- Members should focus their comments on the merits of the pending question (rather than using debate as an opportunity to grandstand on an unrelated matter).
- Members should address all remarks through the chair. This helps keep the debate professional and not personal.

## LAY ON THE TABLE, POSTPONE DEFINITELY, POSTPONE INDEFINITELY

The use of the motion to “lay on the table,” often referred to as “tabling” a motion, is often misunderstood. From time to time, the need arises to delay action on a main motion. The motion to lay on the table is often confused with the parliamentary devices for delaying action on a motion to the next meeting or killing a motion entirely.

**Lay on the table.** The motion to lay on the table is used to temporarily lay aside the

pending question “when something else of immediate urgency has arisen or when something else needs to be addressed before consideration of the pending question” (*RONR*, 12th ed., 17:1). The motion to lay on the table is neither debatable nor amendable. It allows the board to halt consideration of a question with the intention of taking it up again after the matter of urgency subsides. If this motion is used to try to kill a motion or intentionally put it off to another meeting, it takes away members’ rights and is out of order. There should be an evident matter of urgency for using this motion.

**Postpone definitely.** The motion to postpone is used to put off a pending question (such as a main motion) to a definite session, day, meeting, hour, or after a certain event. This motion is debatable and amendable. Debate should focus on whether the main motion should be postponed and to what time.

**Postpone indefinitely.** The motion to postpone indefinitely is “a motion that the assembly decline to take a position on the main question” (*RONR*, 12th ed., 11:1). This is the motion to kill a main motion. This motion is debatable, and debate can be about the merits of the main motion. Postpone indefinitely is useful in killing “a badly chosen main motion that cannot be either adopted or expressly rejected without possibly undesirable consequences” (*RONR*, 12th ed., 11:1). This motion is not amendable; there is nothing to amend, the board either intends to kill the main motion or not.

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