

Getting New School Board Members off to a Running Start

The responsibility to oversee the educational program for the school district is on the shoulders of the Board of Education. Having this responsibility does not mean that board members have to know how to teach school or administer a building, develop a curriculum, and determine which textbooks to purchase.

It does mean that each board member must carefully read material on a variety of subjects prepared by the staff, draw preliminary conclusions from the reading, and be ready to ask clarifying questions during board meeting discussions before voting on each agenda item.

Be Prepared

Prepare for board meetings by reading all the materials before the meeting. In some cases, the material will contain information and educational terms unfamiliar to you. When this happens, keep a note pad on hand and jot down questions when they come up. Once you've read all the materials contact either the board president or the superintendent to discuss your questions. When topics come up for discussion at the board meeting, jot down additional questions that are not answered to your satisfaction and ask questions before voting. Listen to and get involved in the discussions and keep asking questions until you understand the issue.

Know Your Policy

Review the board policy manual and all the handbooks used in the district. Don't expect to read everything in one sitting but refer to these as questions or concerns arise. Take notes about particular areas needing clarification or which are of concern to you. Discuss these questions and concerns with the superintendent to get his/her perspective. As board and district operations become more familiar, it may become apparent that some policies need to be changed or clarified. Find out when the board reviews the district policies and what the process is for revisions.

You & the Superintendent

Being able to trust and support the administration is of primary importance for all board members. If the working relationship between the board and the administration is not good, the entire district will suffer and the educational program will not be a priority. If there is a general lack of support of the superintendent, the superintendent deserves fair treatment, honest and open evaluations, and a chance to improve the situation. Without these discussions and an organized method to deal with the problems, board members who want to change administrators and hope that the perfect superintendent will apply and be employed will probably be disappointed. The board, not the individual members, needs to give direction to the administration about what it wants done.

Personal Agendas

Everyone has "personal agendas." However, personal agendas that waste board time and interfere with the district's operation can be a problem. New board members need to be honest about their concerns, but it should not be a surprise if the rest of the board will not support these concerns at the very first meeting.

In most cases, new members will find it wise to wait a few months before beginning any campaigns to change things. Board members who are patient, who thoroughly study the issues and who support their arguments with convincing evidence may succeed in turning campaign issues into board issues sometime during their first term.

It's the Law

Conduct legal board meetings. Board members are bound by the Open Meetings Law. It's important to understand the notice requirement, executive sessions, board-member liability and the privacy rights of employees and students. Ask your superintendent or AASB staff if you're not clear on these.

Listen...

Handle complaints professionally. Be prepared to hear a lot of opinions and problems from the public. Being familiar with board policy and procedure will help to answer specific questions, but many complaints from the public will be difficult to handle. The best advice is to listen and thank the person for calling. Let them know that the matter will be referred to the administration, and encourage them to talk to the superintendent (if it's a general policy or procedure concern) or to the district employee who can help them with the problem. Resist the urge to promise that "something will be done."

You Can Make a Difference

People run for office because they want to make a difference and can become overwhelmed by all the restrictions placed on a school district. Take the time to learn about the district. Be patient, persistent and keep in mind that the public has entrusted you, together with your fellow board members, the responsibility to ensure that each child in your district is served.