

## Presidential Success

What does it take to be a good school board president?

By PAUL BREDA

Congratulations – you’ve been selected to serve as president of your board of education! Your fellow board members have placed their trust in your knowledge, your leadership abilities, and your sense of fairness as you collectively seek to move your district forward to higher levels of student achievement.

As the board president, the tone you set in managing productive meetings and representing the position of the board will play a major role in your board’s effectiveness. And to your public, the way the board conducts a meeting is a reflection of how the schools operate. Is the public made to feel welcome at meetings? Do all board members come prepared and ready to participate? Is respect evident among board members and the administration? Is the decision-making process transparent, and does it result in outcomes that are consistent with the community’s vision for the schools?

Let’s look at your primary responsibilities, and the principles that must be applied consistently in order to be successful in your role.

**Setting the Agenda** The law does provide the board president with certain narrow powers outside of board meetings, such as calling special meetings of the board. But more routinely, the president will be collaborating with the superintendent to determine meeting agendas. Individual board members should participate in setting agenda items by going through the board president. If your board utilizes a committee system, depending on your by-laws, the board president serves *ex officio* on all committees.

As “gatekeeper” of the agenda, an effective board president realizes that not all issues of the day rise to the level

of needing board attention. This will disappoint some people. Fundamental questions in determining agenda-worthy matters include:

- Will a decision on the matter impact the overall mission and goals of the district, or challenge existing district policy? Vision, mission, goals and policy are the exclusive responsibility of the board.
- Has the chain of command been followed in its entirety, and is it clear that an administrative solution is not feasible?
- Is your chief school administrator seeking board guidance on the issue? Perhaps the superintendent needs “cover” from the board in making an unpopular decision.

**Running the Meeting** The president is responsible for setting the tempo of the board meetings and focusing members’ attention on the issue at hand. But, ideally, the entire team is committed to meetings that are both efficient and productive. For example, establish an agreed-upon process for answering routine management-level questions that individual board members may have for the administration – *before* the meeting, so as not to take undue meeting time or put administrators on the spot for details. If deliberation on a matter is taking more than its fair share of meeting time, chances are the board is micromanaging and infringing on administrative prerogative. The question to ask is: will this matter have an impact on advancing student achievement? Consider adopting a by-law that requires the board to extend the meeting in ten-minute increments after, say, 11 p.m. You’d be surprised how tiresome this becomes – a real motivation

for wrapping the meeting up!

It takes time for new board presidents to develop the skill of managing meetings: to constantly balance a commitment to give every member the opportunity to be heard; to bring the board to consensus; and to end the meeting on time. Let’s face it – nobody wants to be in meetings until 1 a.m! And if six hour meetings become the norm, who’s going to want to volunteer to serve their community as a school board member in the future?

**Dealing with Difficult Board Members** Most boards have them, or will have them someday: the member who is most happy being the proverbial “fly in the ointment.” These members have an equal right to be heard and to be treated respectfully. Similarly, they need to understand that once a decision has been made, the meeting will move on.

This board member will require all of your diplomacy skills if they decide to engage in disruptive behavior, either during or between board meetings. In keeping with your objective of publicly modeling effective management and respect, your first effort to change this behavior should be to discuss it in private with the difficult member outside of the meeting, but preferably with another board member present. He or she must understand that while their positions will be respected, behavior that disrupts or prolongs the meeting will not be tolerated. If this approach does not work, parliamentary procedures (such as “calling the question”) may be used more frequently to keep the meeting moving.

**Serving as Spokesperson for the Board** As spokesperson for the board, the public – and media – will assume that your comments reflect the position of the board

of education. For this reason, to take on the responsibilities of board president you must be comfortable surrendering your personal opinion outside the board meeting.

This aspect of your job will be especially challenging when controversies arise. In all such matters, the board must be perceived as the community's source for reliable, truthful, and – to the extent possible – comprehensive information. If the board has earned the public's trust, it will accept limits to your ability to speak about sensitive matters of personnel or negotiations.

A few tips for dealing with the news media:

- Avoid saying “no comment.” If you are not prepared to make a statement, say that you don't have enough information to comment and you will get back

to the reporter later. Or, if the board has not yet made a decision, say that.

- Anticipate the questions, then prepare a written statement from which you can speak, or issue as a written statement. Once you have prepared remarks that are as comprehensive as the situation allows, stick to the talking points of your statement and don't ad lib.
- Emphasize the good record of your district and your support for school personnel in the proper performance of their duties.
- Don't speculate; don't blame anyone for anything; don't speak off the record.
- Do correct significant inaccuracies in the news media. If you won't, who will? Designating a single point-of-

contact to speak on behalf of the board is sound policy, and does *not* infringe on anyone's First Amendment rights. The place for board members to have their opinion heard is during deliberations at a convened board of education meeting; their statements outside of that meeting must be clearly identified as personal opinion, and not the position of the board.

This is a challenging time to be an educational leader in New Jersey, and you are to be commended for your willingness to step up to the challenge. When caught in the inevitable dilemmas that come along in your role as board president, just remember that you're there to serve a community that placed its trust in you, and to see that student achievement is on a path of continuous improvement. **sl**

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