

From Strength To Strength

Effective board service is an evolutionary process

BY BARBARA A. MURRAY

I have been trying to figure out school boards all of my professional life—as a teacher, as a principal, and, of course, as a superintendent. Now, at the safe distance afforded by a faculty position at the University of Central Florida, I've continued to reflect on the school boards—and individual board members—I have watched over the past 22 years.

Some board members I've observed have been remarkably effective; others have been less so. What is the difference between the effective board members and their less-effective colleagues? It's tempting to say one had better luck or just happened to come along at a better time. But effective board members seem to create their own luck and develop their own good timing.

The most effective board members, I've noticed, are the ones who are expert at winning the cooperation of school district personnel. (Note the difference between cooperation and agreement: Staff members don't have to like or agree with a board policy in order to carry it out properly.) To be most effective, board members need the respect of the district staff.

You can win—and lose—that respect one day at a time, from the moment you declare your interest in serving on the school board to the moment you retire. And at different points along the way, effective board members show their effectiveness in different ways.

Let's look at the stages of your life as a board member:

The candidate

What causes someone to consider running for or accepting a position on the school board? The answer to this

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question often determines how effectively that person will serve. If, as a candidate, you want to work with others to improve educational opportunities for children in the community, that's a good sign of future effectiveness. But if you simply want to fire a specific teacher or ban a certain book, you're not likely to be an effective board member.

It's also a bad sign if you make unreasonable promises to voters and expect great power to come with a seat on the school board. Experienced board members know authority lies with the board as a whole, not with any individual board member.

At this stage, as a promising candidate for the board, you would do two things:

- Try to learn about the role, responsibilities, and duties of a school board member.
- Prepare an ethical platform appropriate to the policy-making function of the board.

The new member

Once elected or appointed, new board members usually feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues facing the board. Tempting as it is to see a simple solution to every complex problem, you must learn that the simple solution is usually wrong.

Beginning board members also must learn the difference between the board's proper function of setting policy and the administration's equally proper function of carrying out that policy.

As a novice board member, too, you might be surprised to learn of the "sunshine laws" or "open door policies" most states have adopted. These laws forbid private school board meetings, decisions, or actions except in certain matters (usually involving personnel). Unfortunately, some new board members try to circumvent the sunshine laws by holding secret "unofficial"

meetings or telephone meetings with other board members. They might also try to perform administrative functions such as teacher evaluation and personnel counseling. And they might encourage citizens and school personnel to bring concerns directly to them, rather than follow the established chain of command.

District personnel (and the public) are right to be wary of new board members who disregard the law and established procedures. To win respect as a new board member, you should do two basic things:

- Learn the difference between policy-making and administrative functions.
- Avoid even the appearance of impropriety by communicating with the superintendent and other board members within the limitations of the law.

The experienced member

By the end of your first term, you're probably beginning to feel more comfortable with the job. The novelty has worn off, and, as a responsible board member, you're now more concerned with "the big picture" rather than whatever specific agenda drew you to the board in the first place.

At this stage, some board members still try to circumvent the sunshine laws and still try to usurp administrative authority by micromanaging the district's affairs. These board members encourage the development of "cliques" to divide the board, and they vote with their clique rather than on the basis of sound decision making.

But district personnel (and the local news media) are wise to these shenanigans by now. They mentally dismiss such board members as ineffective.

Meanwhile, as a more effective board member, here's what you would continue to do:

- Accept the responsibility of basing your decisions on facts.

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- Recognize the value of consistency, consensus, and majority rule.
- Watch what you say in public.

The leader

If you're like most board members, after five or six years of service (or more), you're likely to see your position on the board as one of responsibility rather than power. By this time, most veteran board members are motivated by a sense of duty rather than a drive for ego satisfaction.

Admittedly, a few board members hang on to their positions for the wrong reasons. They might have lost whatever effectiveness they had (assuming they had any), but they still enjoy the personal gain or prestige that comes with a seat on the school board. They might even see themselves as "super" superintendents. (Observers, though, see them as micromanaging the district's affairs.)

But effective board members are in their glory now. Comfortable with their position and responsibility, they display the behavior that underscores good board service.

As a board leader, here are key things you should do:

- Work closely with the superintendent to support the mission of the schools.
- Assist in orientations for new board members.
- Become more active in state and national education organizations.
- Serve as leaders on the board and in the community.

If you've been an effective board member, at the end of your service, you'll know you've served your community wisely and well. And you'll know your legacy lives on with the children educated in your schools. 