

Training Your Board To Lead

BY DONALD R. McADAMS

A trained board is a better board, but training does not guarantee good governance. Superintendents know some board members have personal or interest-group agendas. Some are unstable. Some are just mean-spirited. We all know board members with negative interests who don't want to change their behavior. But training almost always improves a board, and sometimes it can make a great board.

Unfortunately, few boards make board development a priority. Most states mandate continuing education for school board members, and some states require board/superintendent teams to participate in annual team-building sessions. Boards will do what the law requires, but my experience is that many board members put mandated training on par with a trip to the dentist.

So what's a superintendent to do? Take responsibility for board training! Of course it will be necessary to work through board leaders. Effective superintendents know how to plant ideas, drop suggestions and subtly push. They do it all the time. A strong superintendent should have no difficulty convincing board leaders to make board training a priority, especially if the training is designed to meet the specific needs of the board.

Educate First

As a component of board training, start with board education. Superintendents need to show they are learners and invite board members to join them in the quest for knowledge. Share with board members the periodicals you find useful. Invite board discussion around important articles or books on major issues facing your district.

Next, use board training as a means to focus on the building blocks of good governance: board meetings, agenda reviews, consent agendas, board committees, board workshops, board services, and so forth. Building blocks are important. If the processes by which the board does its work are flawed, it is almost impossible to do good work.

Why not schedule board workshops to review all board processes with the help of an experienced board president from a highly regarded neighboring district? The National School Boards Association and your state school board association can make recommendations.

Building on effective processes, your board needs to clarify roles, responsibilities and relationships. This is an enormously problematic area and needs much attention. Board members have numerous complex relationships to manage and are under considerable pres-

sure from constituents to meddle in management.

Thinking through all these relationships, explicitly drawing the line be-



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tween legitimate constituent service and micromanagement, and developing protocols for managing communication between board members and senior staff is difficult and sometimes sensitive work, but it must be done. Strong board/superintendent teams can do this work by themselves. If the board is weak, a consultant is required.

A consultant can help board members recognize that they should not get involved in personnel issues, student discipline cases or the letting of district contracts. Nor should they try to solve management problems or communicate about district business directly with district employees below the superintendent's cabinet. Protocols should be in writing, and important communication between board members and the superintendent (or the designated problem solver) should be documented.

Agenda Construction

Where and how does all this training take place? The board president will probably have a recommendation on where to meet. Off site provides a wonderful opportunity for building relationships, but I have participated in successful training sessions in school district boardrooms.

Superintendents will want to help build the training agenda. Most board

presidents will be happy to defer to the superintendent in agenda development, but the superintendent should insist that the board president chair the session.

Board training is for the board and superintendent. They are the governance team. Other district officers may be invited to participate in discussions about specific issues where their expertise is required or where they will be part of a protocol that is being designed.

Board training must be ongoing and focused on the needs of the board and district. Effective superintendents know that in addition to everything else they do, they must lead the board and take re-

sponsibility for its training. It is a paradox. The superintendent works for the board, yet the superintendent must accept responsibility for educating the board and showing the board how to lead.

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Resources

Don McAdams recommends various writings by Michael Kirst, Paul T. Hill, Rick Hess and Diane Ravitch on school governance.

Board members should be aware of publications by the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution (202-797-6569, www.brook.edu/gs/brown/brown_hp.htm); the Education Trust (202-293-1217, www.edtrust.org); and the National Center for Educational Accountability (512-232-0770, www.nc4ea.org).