

## Diplomatic Ties

*The school board's role goes beyond governing and oversight. Members also serve as ambassadors of the district to the community, and more*

“**M**eeting the Governance Challenge,” my early bird workshop at NSBA’s Annual Conference this year, focused on the decisions and judgments that are the great majority of a high-impact board’s work, such as shaping and adopting the annual budget or monitoring your district’s educational and financial performance. But we also spent some time talking about the valid nongoverning—what we might call hands-on doing—work of the school board.

I agreed with participants that school boards must be careful and not get so involved doing things that they lapse into what’s popularly known as “micromanagement” or end up devoting too little attention to their governing work. But boards have a very valid nongoverning role in district external/community relations.

We agreed that three kinds of board diplomatic involvement make sense:

- A board speakers bureau.
- Board member facilitation of community forums.
- Board member participation in maintaining high-priority relationships with key groups.

In this column, I’ll summarize some key points raised during our discussion of school board members as a “diplomatic corps.”

### Speakers bureau

The board speakers bureau is a simple, high-yield approach that can serve your district as a powerful communication vehicle and provide you and your board colleagues with an enjoyable, ego-satisfying nongoverning experience. Community groups appreciate senior administrators making the effort to address them, but presentations by unpaid board members tend to have a much higher impact in building relationships. Key components of successful speakers bureaus include:

- The board, led by its external relations committee, oversees the bureau. Participants work closely with the superintendent and communications director/public information officer to identify top-priority community forums and civic group meetings, enlist board members to speak, and develop key messages that focus on your district’s image statement. Speeches are tailored to meet changing district circumstances.

- Board members commit their time and energy to participate, and make an effort to rehearse presentations to ensure they are effective. You should incorporate this participation into both your board’s governing mission and the board member perfor-

mance standards.

- The superintendent and senior administrators provide strong executive support, such as developing specific presentation points, putting together an attractive electronic presentation for the speakers to use, providing pertinent handouts, and setting up formal rehearsal sessions.

You might not be fond of public speaking; many very capable and experienced leaders are not, in my experience. However, you do not have to have a charismatic personality or be the world’s most polished platform speaker to succeed on the podium. Going out there with a clear message and strong supporting materials is perhaps the single most powerful, cost-effective tool you and your board members can wield in fostering positive community relations.

My only caveat is that you must thoroughly rehearse, and then rehearse some more, preferably in a group setting (perhaps board colleagues and administrators). Go through the slide presentation until you feel entirely comfortable with it. Until you stand up and run through it in front of your colleagues, you cannot possibly know how it will sound and feel. Is it well paced, or is it dragging? Is it natural or stilted? Is there enough elaboration on particular points?

Without adequate rehearsal, you risk sounding awkward and uncomfortable in public, which will reduce your effectiveness as your district’s ambassador. Once you and your colleagues have made the presentation to three or four groups, you will feel like a real pro at the lectern.

## Community forums

Chairing or facilitating a community forum on your district's behalf can be a powerful image builder and communication tool. It gives you an opportunity to demonstrate publicly that you and your board colleagues really care about community relations. You can communicate your district's openness and responsiveness by inviting the community to participate in important school business..

**You do not have to have a charismatic personality or be the world's most polished platform speaker to succeed on the podium.**

To take a real-life example, a district successfully involved community members in fleshing out two critical planning products: its values and vision statements. The first-cut statements were generated in a two-day board retreat and touched up a bit by the superintendent and his senior administrators.

At this point, the board's planning committee and superintendent scheduled three community forums for residents to comment on the draft statements. Planning committee members led the feedback sessions, which proved highly effective at raising questions and concerns and generating active discussion.

## High-priority relationships

Building and maintaining relationships with key community leaders is an immense challenge that your superintendent and senior administrators could not possibly handle without the board's active, hands-on involvement, wearing your nongoverning, "doing" hat.

Here are real-life examples of creative, meaningful school board member involvement in this arena:

■ A board member agrees to serve as the formal liaison with a particular organization, such as the chamber of commerce. The board member participates actively, either on the organization's board or on one of its committees, representing the district. This gives you an opportunity to make sure that district activities and positions on particular issues are well understood, identify and alert your school board colleagues and superintendent to relationship problems that need to be addressed, and play an active role in working through these problems.

■ The community college president is assembling a task force to look at developing customized education and training programs that might be packaged and provided to expanding and relocating businesses, taking advantage of available federal and state vocational/technical education funding.

Your school district has been invited to participate, and your school board and superintendent agree that the district should be represented by a two-member team: the district's director of curriculum development and a board member who has been long interested in your district's involvement in economic development. Your board's planning and resource development committee provides the team with guidelines for district involvement and requests that the committee be briefed monthly on task force activities.

These are just a few examples, and I'm sure you have others. As you can see, however, this is critical work that goes outside the box—and outside the boardroom. ■

---

Doug Eadie (doug@dougheadie.com), an *ASBJ* contributing editor, is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. He is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership.