

Developing Your Board

Education is just as critical to good governing as it is to our students, but how can we ensure that our members hit the ground running and get the ongoing training they need?

The better educated and trained school board members are in the work of governing, the more likely they are to perform at a high level. So every board that is committed to high-impact governing must also be committed to its own continuing education.

There are two basic challenges in making sure this occurs. First, how can we help new board members be prepared to hit the ground running, not spend their first year on the job learning the ropes? Second, how do we keep members' governing knowledge and skills up-to-date so they can participate productively and creatively in ongoing capacity building?

The good news is that you could not ask for a better group of students than your average school board members. The great majority I have observed over the years have been avid lifelong learners who are sincerely committed to doing a top-notch job of governing. This shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider the bright, high-achieving people who tend to make it to the boardroom. They set high standards, ask a lot of themselves, and dedicate significant time and energy to acquiring the knowledge and skills they need for professional or business success. Slackers? Definitely not.

The bad news is that many, if not most, initially are reluctant to invest in

developing their governing knowledge and skills beyond the basic new board member orientation. This is really ironic given the critical leadership role we expect boards to play and their tremendous impact on district performance. These people would not blink an eye at investing handsomely in administrator and faculty staff development, but they question whether they should devote time and money to their own governing education.

It's amazing, but all too often true. As far as I can tell, this is part misplaced altruism ("What happens in the classroom has first claim on our limited dollars.") and part ego ("At this point, having climbed so far up the professional ladder, I really can't see myself going back to school."). Whatever the cause, truly high-impact boards overcome this reluctance. They recognize that not investing in developing governing knowledge and skills is a classic penny-wise, pound-foolish course.

In my experience, school boards that deal effectively with this twin educational challenge have established a formal education program that consists of two elements: thorough orientation for incoming board members and continuing education aimed at keeping members knowledge and skills current.

If you want board members to pay close attention to a leadership function and really take it seriously, assign it to a board standing committee. Otherwise, it's unlikely you will generate enough ownership and commitment to make it fly. Many have taken this step by giving the task to the board's governance committee, which helps oversee board operations.

Orientation and mentoring

When preparing for retreats, I always ask board members one question: What does the board do to make sure that incoming members hit the ground running? You might be surprised to learn that the answer often is, "Nothing in particular."

But even when the answer is, "We provide new board members with an orientation," a little digging often reveals that the orientation has little to do with the work of governing. Instead, new board members are often briefed in detail on the programs, services, budget, administrative structure, and other facets of the district's organizational life, with nary a word about the board itself.

Obviously, you want incoming board members to understand the district's mission and key educational, financial, and operational features that they are being asked to govern. What they need, more than anything else, to be successful at the governing business is a thorough orientation on the board itself: its role, detailed governing processes, and structure.

This is now being widely recognized, and many school districts these days make sure their orientation programs include such elements as the board's:

- Governing role
- Performance targets (what is expected of individual board members)
- Committee structure (the roles and detailed responsibilities of the standing committees)
- Involvement points in such key processes as CEO evaluation, strategic planning, and budgeting.

Some superintendents still handle the orientation of incoming board members, but a growing practice is for governance committee members to actually conduct the orientation themselves. This gives them a means of visibly demonstrating that board education is a top priority, not just another job to be passed along to the superintendent. Assigning the orientation job to committee members also reinforces the board's accountability for managing its own performance as a governing body.

Another growing practice is formal mentoring, in which you pair each incoming board member with a seasoned veteran who plays a mentoring role for, say, the first six months of the new member's tenure. The mentor's major job is to make time available to discuss any questions the new member has about the board and to provide coaching, as appropriate.

Continuing education

School governance is anything but a static field with hard-and-fast principles that are cast in bronze and immutable. Instead, every day that passes in this wild and wonderful—and relatively new—field sees yesterday's golden rules challenged, new principles proposed, and new approaches and techniques for generating higher-impact governing reported.

Taking the time and effort to keep board members abreast of developments in this exciting field can serve two important purposes. First, you can combat the fatigue, boredom, and even burnout that can work against high-impact governing—motivating, inspir-

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ing, and energizing the board by raising their sights above the trenches to where much of their governing work takes place.

Second, you can arm board members with information that they can put to practical use in their organizational development efforts. For example, dramatic developments in the field of strategic planning provide board members with opportunities to play a proactive, creative role in leading strategic change, rather than merely thumbing through a finished tome on its way to the proverbial dusty shelf.

Highly effective board continuing education programs that I have observed over the years have included such elements as:

- A lending library of books and articles on governance that are regularly circulated among board members.

- Participation in educational programs addressing governing matters. Both the National School Boards Association and the American Association of School Administrators offer educational sessions on governance at their annual meetings, and many state school boards associations provide board member training that increasingly is state-mandated. Some districts retain consultants to present on-site educational programs for their board members exclusively, an approach that provides both stronger quality control and greater opportunity for in-depth participation—but at a price, of course.

- Building a half-day session on governance into the annual strategic plan-

ning retreat, using this time to discuss recent advances in the field and to identify opportunities to fine-tune and strengthen the governing structure and process.

As you can see, the need for education is ongoing, no matter if you are a new board member or a savvy veteran. Take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to you, and you can continue to be a high-impact governing body that works for all of the students in your district. ■

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