

## Beyond the Basics

*High-impact school boards recognize the need to invest in ongoing development of their governing knowledge and skills*

**T**he better educated and trained your 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 also must be committed to its own continuing education.

When dealing with board professional development, you face two basic challenges:

■ First, how can you make sure that new members are well prepared to hit the ground running, rather than spending their first year learning the ropes?

■ Second, how do you keep board members' governing knowledge and skills up-to-date so that they are able to participate productively and creatively in ongoing board capacity building?

The good news is that you could not ask for a better group of students than your fellow board members. The great majority of board members 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 any surprise, when you reflect on the kind of bright, high-achieving people who tend to make it to the boardroom. Slackers they are definitely not.

The bad news is that many if not most board members, in my experi-

ence, are at least initially reluctant to make much of an investment in developing their own governing knowledge and skills once they have gone through the basic orientation.

This is ironic when you think about the critical leadership role that we expect boards to play and their tremendous impact on school district performance. The very people who would not blink an eye at investing handsomely in administrator and faculty education frequently question whether they should devote time and money to their own governing education. As far as I can tell, this is, in part, misplaced altruism—as in: “What happens in the classroom has first claim on our limited dollars.”

Whatever the cause, high-impact boards overcome their reluctance. They recognize that under-investing in developing their governing knowledge and skills is a classic penny-wise, pound-foolish course of action.

Boards that I have seen deal effectively with these challenges establish a formal board continuing education process spearheaded by the board's governance or board operations committee. The process has two elements: a thorough orientation program for incoming board members; and an ongoing education program to keep board member knowledge and skills current.

### **New member orientation**

One of the questions I always ask when interviewing board members is: “What does the board do to make sure that incoming members hit the ground running?” You might be surprised to learn that the answer is often, “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 curriculum, services, budget, administrative structure, and other facets of the organizational life of the school district, with nary a word about the board itself.

You obviously want incoming board members to understand the educational mission and key educational and operational features of the district that they will govern. However, what they need more than anything else if they are to succeed is a thorough orientation on the board itself: its role, governing processes, and structure. Many districts make sure that their orientation programs include such elements as the board's:

- Governing role
- Performance targets (what is expected of individual board members)
- Involvement points in such key processes such as student achievement, superintendent evaluation, strategic planning, and budgeting

Although some districts still have the superintendent handling the orientation of incoming board members, a growing practice is for members of the governance or board operations committee (if they use the committee struc-

ture) to actually conduct the orientation themselves. By doing so, board members can visibly demonstrate that board education is a top priority, not just another job to be passed along to the superintendent. Assigning the orientation job to board members also reinforces the board's accountability for managing its own performance as a governing body.

### **Ongoing education program**

School governance is anything but a static field with immutable principles. Instead, every day that passes in this field sees yesterday's golden rules challenged, new principles proposed, and new approaches and techniques for generating higher-impact governance 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 and burnout that can work against high-impact governing—motivating, inspiring, and energizing your board members by raising their sights above the trenches in which much of their governing work

takes place.

Second, you can arm your board members with information that they can put to practical use in their board 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 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. In this regard, your state school boards association and NSBA are sources. State association newsletters and magazines, as well as this magazine on the national level, have searchable online archives and back issues available.

- Participation in educational programs addressing governing matters. State school boards associations provide training for school board members—training that is increasingly

state-mandated. The state associations and NSBA hold annual conferences with sessions focused on governance.

- Holding a session on governance at your annual strategic planning retreat. You can use this time to discuss recent advances in the field and to identify opportunities to fine-tune and strengthen governing structure and process.

Although board members are typically avid, lifelong learners, they are also very busy people. Participation in educational programs will tend to increase, in my experience, if such participation is made a formal board member performance target. Remind your fellow board members of the data that shows that training is essential for boards to be successful in raising student achievement and running a high-achieving school district. That will go a long way toward making the case for board governance training. ■

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