

Community Connections

School board members are well-suited to build and maintain relationships between your district and your community, as this Wyoming system demonstrates

I was fortunate recently to sit in on a daylong retreat involving the Teton County School District 1 “strategic governing team”—the board, superintendent, and senior administrators—in Jackson, Wyo. Over the course of the day together, board and administrator participants explored a number of practical ways to fine-tune and strengthen the board’s governing role and work, using several breakout groups that employed a free-flowing, brainstorming methodology.

One of the groups worked on board involvement in external relations. They first mapped out a preliminary “image statement” describing how the district wants and needs to be viewed by the community in order to fully accomplish its mission (for example, as “improving student success in all areas,” “safe and caring,” “fiscally responsible,” “open,

honest, and transparent”).

Then the group worked up a long list of stakeholders and analyzed the relationships with what appeared to be the five highest priority groups. A “stakeholder” was defined as any formal organization or group outside of the district family with which it makes sense to build and maintain a working relationship because something is at stake. They are groups that the district needed for financial and political support, collaboration on projects, and technical advice and assistance.

The breakout group’s list was long and included state legislators, the town of Jackson, the Rotary Club, Teton County, and the Chamber of Commerce. Two things really impressed the Teton County board and executive team members in the room that day as they listened to the breakout group’s report.

First, the sheer number of stakeholders on the list—29 after only a few minutes of brainstorming—was awesome. Too many groups for the superintendent and her top lieutenants even to stay in touch with, much less to systematically manage working relationships with.

Second, the stakes involved in managing relationships with stakeholders were in many cases quite high, and failing to build and maintain close and productive working relationships would very likely exact a high price for the district.

A case for board involvement

In light of the tremendous importance of community and stakeholder understanding of—and support for—your school district’s educational mission and operations, there’s no question that you will want your school board involved in this area. The question is: How?

The great majority of you will almost certainly agree that, normally, you want your board to focus on governing—making strategic and policy-level judgments and decisions—rather than on doing. After all, we pay a superintendent, administrators, faculty, and staff to operate our educational enterprise, and a micro-managing board is definitely not efficient.

However, I recommend that you make an exception in the stakeholder relations arena and engage your board as doers. A growing number of school districts around the country are, like Teton County School District, involving their boards in a hands-on fashion in building and maintaining effective relationships with key stakeholders for two very sound reasons:

1. Many, if not most, school board members are qualified to play a hands-on role in stakeholder relationship man-



agement, because of both their stature in the community and their ties to many of the most important stakeholder organizations.

2. Your superintendent and senior administrators can't begin to meet all of the demands of an effective stakeholder management program while also carrying out their day-to-day administrative responsibilities. There are so many stakeholders and only so many staff hours available.

Keys to effective board involvement

Experience has taught me that there are three keys to productive, hands-on school board involvement in the stakeholder relations arena:

1. Formally assign the function to a board standing committee.
2. Fashion a comprehensive stakeholder relations strategy.
3. Monitor implementation of the strategy, updating it as appropriate.

Unless a particular board committee is formally assigned the stakeholder relations function, it will tend to ooze away like a crustacean without a shell. Since the great majority of school boards aren't large enough to support a dedicated external/stakeholder relations committee in addition to the bread-and-butter standing committees—planning and performance monitoring—it makes sense to add the stakeholder relations function to either planning or performance monitoring, or perhaps to the board's governance or board operations committee.

The objective is to make sure that a very important function has an organizational home on the board so that it doesn't get lost in the myriad activities of governing a modern school district.

The board committee that assumes this function should work closely with the superintendent and appropriate senior administrators in fashioning a comprehensive stakeholder relations strategy that:

- Clearly identifies the top priority stakeholders with which formal working relationships should be managed.

- Maps out steps for building and managing particular relationships.

- Assigns explicit accountability—both board and administrative—for carrying out the steps.

Many districts have begun to involve board members in a hands-on fashion in representing the district in important public forums; for example, booking board members to speak at chamber and rotary luncheons. Although the “board speakers bureau” is unlikely to convert stakeholders into strongly committed “owners” of your district's mission, it will promote wider and deeper understanding of your district's educational enterprise.

For this approach to work, the board's committee must work closely with the superintendent to make sure that board speakers are armed with specific talking points, visual aids such as PowerPoint presentations, and pertinent handouts. It's also very useful to provide your board speakers with opportunities to rehearse their presentations.

Another tack that I've seen bear fruit is to engineer the appointment of school board members to the boards of high-priority district stakeholder organizations. Of course, this approach must be carefully managed so that your board members are not overextended, to the detriment of district governance.

A relatively modest and low-impact strategy would be to have particular board members observe meetings of specific stakeholder governing bodies and report back to your board committee responsible for external relations.

From stakeholders to owners

An objective of your district's stakeholder relations strategy should be to turn the highest-priority stakeholders into committed owners of your district's mission and operations, through meaningful involvement in district affairs.

In this regard, districts I'm familiar with have successfully involved representatives of high-priority stakeholder organizations in high-level district advisory groups. For example, you might

invite the CEOs of five major financial services firms in your district to serve on a business advisory group to devise ways to strengthen district financial planning and management.

You might invite the CEOs of the chamber of commerce and the regional economic development corporation, along with the deans of the business schools of two local colleges, to assist in coming up with ideas to strengthen your district's business and vocational education programs.

And another approach I've seen work is to invite key community representatives to participate in your board's annual strategic planning retreat, involving them in brainstorming your district's values and vision, assessing environmental conditions and trends, and identifying issues facing your district.

If you do choose to invite community representatives into district affairs, you must make sure that their involvement is meaningful and meticulously managed. Otherwise, instead of widening stakeholder ownership of your district, you risk creating a cadre of disappointed and disgruntled community members who feel that their time has been wasted.

Finally, the board committee responsible for stakeholder relationship management should closely monitor the board's involvement in stakeholder relations, regularly fine-tuning and augmenting that involvement as appropriate. For example, based on experience, the committee might decide that presentations to certain stakeholder forums are likely to be more effective if a knowledgeable district executive is teamed up with the board presenter.

School board members are perfectly positioned to reach out to key community members and draw them in to the school district family, turning stakeholders into allies. ■

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