

## The Board Chair's Role

*The chair of the school board can make a tremendous impact on district governance, but obstacles can stand in the way*

“**T**o tell the truth, Doug, other than going over the agenda with the superintendent and chairing our monthly board meeting, I’m pretty clueless about what I’m supposed to be doing as president of our school board. I occasionally get calls from the reporter who covers the education scene, but I routinely forward these to the superintendent’s office. Not a very demanding or important role, is it?”

If you’re the chair of your school board, you can probably relate to this excerpt from a recorded interview I conducted to prepare for a board-superintendent retreat. It’s typical of what I’ve heard from dozens of board presidents during my quarter-century of work as a governance consultant.

Experience has taught me that many, if not most, school board chairs don’t come close to realizing the tremendous leadership potential of the position. I’m not 100 percent sure why, but I’ll venture an educated guess that two major factors have stood in the way of school board chairs becoming high-impact leaders in their districts.

For one thing, traditionally very little attention has been paid in the governance literature to the role of the school board chair, beyond pointing out that the chair is responsible for overseeing the board’s deliberations, while the superintendent is responsible for all internal operations of the district. Another reason for the preva-

lence of low-impact school board chairs is probably the resistance (perhaps often unconscious) of superintendents to beefing up a potentially competitive position.

Based on my work with a number of high-impact board chairs over the years, I’ve concluded that there are three keys to playing the kind of board chair role that not only makes a significant difference, leaving a distinct imprint on district affairs, but is also deeply rewarding and satisfying.

### Co-chief diplomat

It’s no exaggeration to say that public school systems are under assault around the country these days, with their goals and operations often misunderstood and their performance frequently impugned.

Never in American history has the need been greater for public school systems to play an aggressive, proactive role in shaping a positive image and building effective relationships with influential organizations in their communities.

Everyone in your district—faculty, administrators, parents, and even students—needs to be involved in the external relations arena, educating the public about both system accomplishments and needs. The board chair, by virtue of being the most senior lay leader in your district, is ideally positioned to work as co-chief diplomat with your superintendent. He or she cannot possibly muster up the time and energy to handle the chief diplomatic role alone.

The essential first step in building an effective external relations partnership is for your board chair and super-



intendent, recognizing that this is shared turf, to make a firm commitment to consciously and systematically divide the diplomatic labor on an ongoing basis.

The board chair and superintendent of a district I worked with a few years ago, with a critical property tax levy on the ballot in November, spent a couple of hours setting priorities and divvying up their diplomatic responsibilities. They would appear together on a popular early-morning TV talk show to discuss their district's vision, long-range goals, and financial condition, and make the case for the tax levy.

They also would appear separately in various forums to make the case for additional tax support. The board chair would attend the Rotary luncheon and meetings of the chamber of commerce board and the board of county commissioners. The superintendent would attend a number of neighborhood association meetings and board meetings of the regional planning commission, community college, and economic development corporation.

Meticulous planning and preparation helped make this situation work. For example, the board chair and superintendent reached an agreement on the core messages that needed to be conveyed in their presentations in the various forums. They had staff prepare PowerPoint presentations they could use in making their case. And, recognizing that practice makes it better, if not perfect, they actually held a "dress rehearsal" before taking the show on the road. The board and executive team members who sat in on the run-through contributed by asking critical questions and suggesting different ways they might make key points.

### **Co-chief board developer**

In our book, *The Board-Savvy Superintendent*, Paul Houston, the former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, and I strongly recommend that your

superintendent take the initiative in helping your board strengthen its governing capacity by fine-tuning its governing structure and processes as part of a continuous governance improvement program.

However, plenty of room exists for creative, substantive board chair involvement in this area. In fact, the highest-impact board development projects I've witnessed, in terms of elevating governing performance, have involved the board chair and CEO working in tandem as co-chief board developers.

Playing this joint leadership role effectively requires that your board chair and superintendent reach agreement first on board development needs and priorities and, second, on the vehicle to employ in getting the board development work accomplished.

For example, the board chair and superintendent of a district I worked with recently decided that an intensive daylong retreat (called the "High-Impact Governing Work Session") was necessary.

The work included refining and updating the functions of the board's three standing committees, mapping out new board member performance targets, and identifying practical ways to strengthen the board-superintendent working relationship going forward.

In preparation for this complex, high-stakes event, the board chair appointed and headed an ad hoc work session design committee consisting of three other board members and the superintendent, to work with the professional facilitator the district had retained in mapping out the blow-by-blow agenda for the day.

The board chair and superintendent also prepared opening comments and agreed on the roles they would play during the day, including in which breakout groups each would participate.

### **Strong board chief executive**

Experience has taught me that high-

impact school boards that do a stellar job of making governing judgments and decisions are inevitably strongly supported by a board-savvy superintendent who believes in strong board leadership. They also are led by a board chair who behaves like a full-fledged chief executive of the board.

The board chairs I've seen play this role to the hilt typically chair a board "governance" or "board operations" committee consisting of other standing committee chairs and the superintendent. At the helm of this committee, the board's chair—and chief executive—makes sure that:

- The regular board business meeting agenda is meticulously developed, including determining how much time should be allocated to particular informational and action items.

- The work of the other standing committees is closely monitored and coordinated.

- The board's performance as a governing body is annually evaluated and improvement targets set.

- The superintendent's annual leadership goals are negotiated and performance is evaluated.

### **More than ceremonial**

There's no question that your board chair can make a powerful contribution to your district's success and your board's effectiveness as a governing body by playing these three roles.

Playing these roles enthusiastically, and not just ceremonially, need not be at the expense of your superintendent. Indeed, playing them effectively always requires close board chair and superintendent cooperation. And playing these critical roles well provides your board chair with significant compensation in the form of deep satisfaction. ■

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