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Beyond Governance

School board members have an important role in representing the district to the community outside the boardroom

By Doug Eadie

The primary mission of all boards is to govern, which essentially means making decisions about the annual operating plan and budget and making judgments based on such information as a quarterly financial report and standardized test results.

By its very nature, governing is somewhat aloof work, requiring some distance from day-to-day affairs in order to attain the degree of objectivity that sound decisions and judgments require. Many members of nonprofit and public boards, including school boards, also are involved in doing hands-on non-governing work, such as representing the school district at graduation ceremonies and the annual chamber of commerce luncheon meeting.

Non-governing work should help the school district achieve an important goal. Direct board member involvement should make sense in terms of both district needs and board member qualifications. Of course, this work should not interfere with the board's preeminent responsibility: governing the district.

Community relations committee

You may want to consider forming a standing community relations committee to ensure that non-governing board member involvement is well-conceived and productive. The stakes are especially high in the external relations arena. Mistrust of public institutions is growing, along with reluctance to provide additional financial support in the form of local real estate taxes or state subsidy.

Many people believe—and I certainly concur—that school board members are uniquely suited to be representatives of their districts. Their obviously important and highly visible governing role signals that our district cares enough to send you our very best for your event. Since many, if not most, board members are elected, they represent their district as “one of us,” rather than as paid professionals who are seen the “they” side of the “we-they” division.

Many board community relations committees lay the foundation for productive board member involvement in external affairs by taking two very important steps:

1. Updating the district's formal image statement and identifying how the district wants and needs to be seen by the general public and stakeholders in order to carry out its educational mission effectively, and
2. Identifying and prioritizing key stakeholder organizations in the community.

Both of these steps often are taken in a special committee work session so that they receive the time and attention they deserve. The image statement, which consists of the key messages that the district needs and wants to send to the community, is normally decided by completing the

sentence “We need and want to be seen as” Then the vision elements are refined and finalized and, in many cases, recommended to the full board for review and approval.

Typical vision statements include such elements as: “a prudent steward of public financial resources;” “efficient;” “driven by a fervent commitment to student achievement;” “transparent in our operations;” “dedicated to active parent involvement;” and “providing a nurturing, secure learning environment for our students.”

The obvious purpose of the image statement is to provide board members with talking points when they are out in the community representing their district. The point is to shape perceptions of the district, for the very simple reasons that good—even stellar—performance very often does not speak for itself and can easily go unnoticed by the general public and district stakeholders. Of course, actual performance trumps image building over time, and no amount of image building can make up for consistently poor performance. That said, aggressive image building is a sensible strategy in these skeptical times, when public institutions are generally viewed with suspicion that is not easily overcome.

Beyond the school community

Stakeholders are organizations, institutions, and groups with which it makes sense for a school district to maintain a working relationship because important stakes are involved. Typical school district stakeholders are city and county governments; chambers of commerce; civic organizations such as Rotary and Junior League; the print and broadcast media; economic and community development corporations; higher education institutions; and the state department and legislative committees overseeing K-12 education.

A common approach that is used to prioritize stakeholders involves, first, brainstorming a comprehensive list of stakeholders, and, second, assessing the stakes involved in each stakeholder relationship. The relationships involving the highest stakes obviously call for the most district attention, including school board member representation at key stakeholder events, such as the annual meeting.

Many school board community/stakeholder relations committees oversee a robust board member “speaker’s bureau,” booking board members to speak at such functions as chamber of commerce and Rotary luncheons. One of the committee’s most important responsibilities, in addition to selecting the highest priority stakeholder forums, is to ensure that speakers do well at the podium, not only in terms of connecting with the audience and getting key points across, but also providing speakers with an ego satisfying experience (and sparing them the embarrassment that failing at the podium would cause).

The key elements of the image statement I described above certainly provide important speaking points, as do current district priorities (such as the need to build community support for a capital improvements tax levy), critical district issues (such as the need to explain why two schools must be closed over the next two years), and notable district accomplishments (such as a significant improvement in test scores).

Beyond making sure that board speakers are armed with clear speaking points, committees also provide slides when appropriate and even opportunities to rehearse presentations. On occasion, a board member might be joined at the podium by the superintendent or other senior district

executive, most often when the issues being discussed are so complex that it would be unrealistic to expect a board member to explain them and field questions alone.

External relations

Other examples of important board member hands-on involvement in district external relations include:

- Representing the district on the boards, committees, and task forces of high-priority stakeholders, such as a local development corporation's task force charged with fashioning a comprehensive business attraction strategy with a public education component or an ad hoc chamber of commerce committee responsible for improving communication between the business community and public schools. Since superintendents traditionally receive most if not all invitations to participate in stakeholder bodies, it is critical that the superintendent make a point of bringing such invitations to the board's community/stakeholder relations committee for discussion. And successful district representation requires clear committee direction and regular oversight to ensure that the best interests of the district are served by board member involvement. At the very least, board members representing the district should be provided with clear, detailed policy positions on issues under consideration in the external board, commission, or task force.
- Enlisting board members as advocates for the district, often in league with the superintendent or another district executive, for example: testifying about K-12 issues before a state legislative committee or commission; meeting with foundation staff to discuss a district funding proposal. By the way, since many foundations these days consider evidence of active board engagement in doing high-impact governing work when they make funding decisions, involving the board chair or one or more other board members in presentations to funders can help play a critical part in securing grants.

School board members can also play an important symbolic role internally in their district, for example by attending such functions as graduation ceremonies, by touring schools and visiting classrooms, and even by attending key meetings (for example, accompanying the superintendent to a meeting of a faculty task force presenting its preliminary recommendations for strengthening parental involvement in the buildings). Such symbolic internal involvement is one of many ways to create a more cohesive district culture, communicating to faculty and administrators that board members are colleagues in the educational enterprise, not just distant overseers who are watching over things to make sure that everyone is doing a good job—in other words, that the board is a vital part of the “we” making up the district, rather than outsiders foisted on the district by the electors.