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Reining in the Rogues

“WHAT CAN WE DO about rogue board members?”

I’ve heard this question countless times over the years in governance workshops I’ve presented at AASA and National School Boards Association annual conferences. Rogues are troublemakers whose behavior can erode your board’s governing performance and poison your board’s culture. In the process, they can tarnish your district’s standing in the community.

I always preface my response by pointing out we’re talking about one of those bad news-good news scenarios. On the downside, there’s little other board members and the superintendent can do directly, in the short run, to counter roguish behavior.

The vast majority of board members are elected, and the rogues I’ve observed over the years tend to feel more accountable to the constituents who voted for them than to the district they’re responsible for governing, much less to their board colleagues. Short of serious ethical violations, elections can’t be overturned, and rogue board members, in my experience, tend to be impervious to public shaming.

On the positive side of the ledger, while it’s always going to be difficult to rein in rogue board members once they’ve reared their ugly heads, prevention and containment measures have proved to be quite effective. I can think of two cases in point in recent years that I’ve been intimately involved in.

Bedeviling Colleagues

In a medium-sized district in the Midwest, two of seven board members had been bedeviling their colleagues by actively campaigning to get the superintendent fired. Their disruptive strategy included peppering the superintendent with hostile questions in board business meetings and special work sessions and leveling accusations of incompetence in the local news media.

The other case involved three newly elected members of a nine-person board in a large Southeastern school district who’d campaigned on a platform of “watching the critics so they don’t steal the store.” Little interested in such lofty governing goals as updating the district’s vision or launching innovative initiatives to strengthen teaching and student

achievement, these rogues excelled at nit-picking. Over the course of three work sessions aimed at reviewing the annual operating budget, these self-proclaimed overseers wasted their colleagues’ precious time questioning minor expenditure items.

As it turned out, the majority on both boards realized they could only stick together and weather the ruckus caused by their roguish colleagues in the short run. The board majorities recognized over the longer run that developing their boards as governing organizations would limit the deleterious impact of rogues while preventing potentially disruptive board members from morphing into full-blown rogues.

Progressive Steps

This is, indeed, what has happened in both districts. In the years since, these two boards launched several board development initiatives that included:

- ▶ Adoption by board resolution of a detailed governing mission, laying out the major governing functions for which board members are accountable (such as “annually updating clear strategic targets for our district”). These orient newly elected board members in the onboarding process.
- ▶ Establishment of a standing committee — governance in one case, board operations in the other — explicitly accountable for management and coordination of the board as the district’s corporate governing body.
- ▶ Annual adoption of updated board member performance targets and standards for communication and interaction among board members and board members with the superintendent and senior district administrators. One example: Board members can request information from administrators reporting to the superintendent but only if the information is readily available and does not require significant time to generate.

Have these steps completely eliminated the occasional rogue board member? Of course not, but they have definitely reduced the number and limited the impact of those who still now and then appear on the scene.