Administrative Support for Board Members

BY DONALD R. McADAMS

Wise superintendents know that school board service is time-consuming and stressful and that a well-supported board is a better board. School boards should request from their superintendent professional board support, and superintendents should be willing to comply.

Consider the time demands on board members. They must attend board meetings, workshops and committee sessions and read scores of pages of agenda items and supporting material to be ready for these events. In addition, their attendance is required at numerous ceremonial, social and cultural occasions. Board members need not attend every district-related event, but effective ones attend as many as they can, for this is how they gain knowledge, build networks and solicit support for the school system.

Board members also must respond to calls from constituents. Though board members should know how to channel complaints back into the system and refer serious or unresolved issues directly to the superintendent or his or her designee, constituent service work still takes time.

Finally, a board member who wants to be a board leader needs time for conversations with the superintendent, board colleagues and civic leaders to build relationships and support for ideas. Leadership is all about relationships and the power of ideas.

Time Demands
How can people with families and careers find time to serve effectively on school boards? After all, the most successful and busiest community leaders are the very individuals whom superintendents want serving on their boards of education.

What can help a lot in attracting and retaining these community leaders is an effective board services office. Board members need administrative support to help them manage events, records, communications, scheduling, correspondence and constituent service.

Every school board meeting and every board event should be planned and conducted to the highest standards of events management. Board minutes, agenda documents, committee minutes, mailing lists and all other documents should be managed professionally. All incoming correspondence to board members should be handled with the same care it receives in the superintendent’s office.

Board services should track invitations, provide RSVPs for board members, share information on appropriate dress and directions and, in every way possible, ensure board members know when and where they are supposed to be and arrive prepared for what is expected of them.

Support Needs
In small to medium-sized districts, the superintendent’s administrative support staff frequently supports the board. This is an effective model, provided the superintendent budgets for sufficient staff and makes responses to board needs a priority. Faced with tight budgets, superintendents may be tempted to skimp in this area, but my observations are that even in small districts a half-time employee is needed, and in districts between 10,000 and 25,000 students a full-time staff member is required.

Large urban boards require the support of a professional board services office. In Houston, where I served on the board for 12 years, the district provided a pool of support staff, roughly equivalent to a half-time employee per board member. These staff members weren’t assigned to specific board members—an expensive arrangement that tends to pull board members into problem solving and micromanagement. Rather, the support staff members, though assigned specific duties, were cross-trained so that any one of them could respond quickly to a board member’s needs.

The board services staff always should be district employees and report to a senior district administrator. Board staff members who are employees of the board are too easily tempted into turf battles with management. The best model is for board staff to serve board members as clients.

Board members should, of course, participate in developing job descriptions, regulating the flow of work and evaluating performance. It is the board president’s job to coordinate the work of the office to ensure equity of service for all board members.

Research Requests
One support function that should not be assigned to the board staff is research and policy analysis. Boards need support in this area, but the district’s research staff should handle this work. Asking board support staff to provide research and policy work is duplicative and wasteful.

Also, in all cases involving research for the board, the superintendent needs to be in the loop. Policy work is the work of the board/superintendent team. Board members should make requests for policy analysis or research through the board president, who in turn should pass on requests to the superintendent. Should individual requests become burdensome, the entire board can judge whether the work requested is warranted.

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