Dare You Ask Your Board for Management Advice?

BY DON McADAMS

Superintendents and most board members know that school boards are supposed to govern by goal setting and policymaking and not cross the line into management. Effective superintendents work hard to keep board members on the governance side of the line and as far away as possible from management decisions.

The last thing superintendents want is board members recommending management decisions, or even second-guessing decisions already made. To allow board members into the superintendent’s management space is a recipe for dysfunctional management and the reach of politics into the lowest levels of the school district.

And yet there are times when superintendents face management decisions that, because of their significant stakes for the district, attract much public interest. Prime examples include the appointment of senior district administrators or highly visible school principals, the recommendation of professional services contracts and major reorganizations of the central office. Other issues that spark intense board interest include the district’s response to breaking scandals regarding student safety, cheating, moral turpitude of staff, or perhaps just a group of popular students who have been involved in something bad but not awful.

**Legitimate Stake**

Board members have a legitimate interest in issues such as these. Though they primarily are management issues, they sometimes have governance implications. For example, in many states school boards must approve all employee hires, transfers, terminations and contracts above a certain amount.

A new organizational chart may require the opening or closing of staff positions, another board prerogative. And because public interest may be intense and the credibility of the school district at stake, boards always are interested in the district’s response to scandal. After all, public schools belong to the public.

If the public is focused on an issue, so will be its elected representatives. It is unrealistic to expect otherwise.

Faced with issues such as these, to what extent should a superintendent engage his or her board? I have seen both extremes and almost everything in between. I have seen superintendents place routine management decisions before their boards and in effect ask their boards to make these decisions. And I have seen superintendents publicly announce major highly controversial management decisions without board members even knowing the decision was pending.

Clearly, the context matters. But there are principles to guide superintendents regarding board member involvement in major management decisions. All assume the board understands the difference between governance and management, has made a firm commitment to stay on the governance side of the line and has built with the superintendent a solid foundation of trust. Without these, even simple issues are problematic.

On this foundation, dare superintendents ask board members or boards for advice on management decisions? Yes, though with great care and following these principles:

- **In advance**, as part of defining the board/superintendent relationship, superintendents should discuss with their board why unsolicited management advice is not welcome, but from time to time input from individual board members or the entire board might be solicited.
- **Requests** for advice should be infrequent and limited to major issues.
- **When asking** for input, superintendents should emphasize the final decision is theirs and theirs alone.
- **As a rule**, requests should be one-on-one with individual board members. Involving the full board is risky, but sometimes useful, especially when responding to a major district scandal.
- **Avoid surprises**. When a major management decision is made, board members should be the first to know.

**Risky But Wise**

Some superintendents may be surprised that I support limited and carefully managed requests for advice from board members on management decisions. Is this not inviting board members below the governance/management line? Not necessarily.

Consider the reality of managing and governing on center stage in the political arena. Superintendents routinely seek confidential counsel from senior administrators, business and civic leaders, and others on tough management decisions. Why should they not solicit input from their own board members? If it is a business or legal issue, and a board member is an experienced business executive or attorney, why not ask? If it is an issue that will have a deep impact on a community, why not ask the board member who knows that community best? Board members are sometimes wise community leaders before they were elected and do not suddenly lose their wisdom when they take their positions at the board of education table.

Board-savvy superintendents know when they need good advice and which board members give wise counsel. They also know that just as they have to manage in the political arena, so their board members must govern in the political arena. For these reasons management advice is sometimes welcome.

Don McAdams is president of the Center for Reform of School Systems in Houston, Texas. E-mail: mcadams@crss.org