Influencing the Board Presidency, Behind the Scenes

BY DON McADAMS

Most school boards elect officers annually. And for most superintendents, few elections are more important. It usually does not matter who serves as vice president or secretary, but the board president matters a lot.

What every school district needs is a fair-minded board president with the respect of his or her colleagues, deep knowledge of the district, a sharp focus on district goals, a clear understanding of board and superintendent roles, the ability to speak for the board and run a business-like board meeting, and, not unimportantly, a small ego. Such a board president is a tower of strength to the district and a great partner for the superintendent. The opposite drags down both.

Given the stakes, what can a superintendent do to increase the likelihood that the board will elect an effective board president? Not much. Boards rightfully claim the prerogative of electing their own officers. And few things divide boards more than battles for the board presidency. Sometimes odd political alliances are formed; sometimes longtime friendships are sacrificed; sometimes scars last for years. Even if a superintendent could guarantee his or her tilt would tip the balance, the downside of meddling in board politics might well outweigh the upside of victory.

Rotating Stints

What then can a superintendent do? Encourage the board to adopt policies that bring forward the best candidates for board president. What are the issues and how is this done?

One issue is length of term. Many boards by custom or policy rotate the board presidency annually. Term limits give more board members an opportunity to serve as president and make it impossible for a powerful board member to entrench him or herself in a long-term, overbearing presidency. On the other hand, rotation risks the annual replacement of experience with inexperience.

Another issue is succession by seniority. Some boards, to avoid conflicts and to acknowledge that every board member wants to be board president, select board officers based on seniority. New board members take their turn starting with the lowest office and annually work their way up to the presidency. This works well enough until suddenly, and as luck would have it in a critical year, the least suitable board member winds up in the board chair seat.

These issues, and others, make board officer elections problematic, but then democracy is always problematic and we celebrate it anyway because we would have it no other way. This does not mean we cannot regulate democracy. This is exactly what statutes do.

Board policies are no different. Boards can and should adopt policies to regulate their work, including practices that encourage the election of experienced, effective leaders as board officers. And superintendents, who provide policy leadership for district operations and reform, are certainly allowed to suggest such policies and encourage their adoption.

Superintendents should, of course, do this with great care. Unlike operations and reform policies that superintendents often draft and bring directly to the board as recommendations, board regulatory policies should originate with the board so the superintendent should only encourage with a light hand. Anything more might be resented. Most board members, however, will acknowledge their limited knowledge of school board work and welcome the sage advice of an experienced superintendent.

Traditions Rule

What policy ideas might a superintendent suggest? A lot depends on time and place. Board traditions matter. Still, boards should be willing to consider restricting service as board president — but not in other officer positions — to board members with at least one or two years of service.

Some might argue this policy would limit democracy, for when new majorities sweep into office with a change agenda, the first thing they want to do is elect one of their own as board president. Not to worry, democracy is not limited, for a board can waive or rescind any self-appointed regulatory policy with a simple majority. Policy guarantees nothing, but it supports stability. Lack of policy encourages instability.

Another policy boards should consider is allowing board presidents to serve two terms. A third year might — or might not — be desirable, and other board members might not be willing to wait in line, but an effective board president should at least be eligible to put his or her experience to work for the district for a second year.

Finally, boards should be encouraged to forget about seniority or automatic succession through the officer ranks. Not every board member is suited for the board presidency. The best interests of the district and the board — which should be the same thing — trump the desire of every board member to be board president and the board desire to avoid potentially contentious elections.

So let the elections be held; let the most qualified person be elected; and work to conduct elections without rancor or bitterness. But do give the school board the opportunity every year to elect one of its best as board president. This is the message superintendents should give to their school boards and then get out of the way.

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