Successful superintendents want their boards to have deep knowledge of their school districts. The more the board sees the district through the superintendent’s eyes, the more likely the board will be to support the superintendent’s agenda.

The foundation for effective policymaking is an informed board. This is why superintendent reports are such an important part of every board meeting. This is also why superintendents should keep their board members in the loop on all important issues facing the school district and respond in good faith to responsible requests for information.

But what is a responsible request?

**Endless Demands**

Some board members have a seemingly insatiable appetite for information. Perhaps they see themselves as watchdogs for the public. Perhaps they are just curious. Sometimes the motives are honorable. Sometimes they are not.

Sadly, and not infrequently, disaffected board members make endless requests for information to tie up the central office and embarrass the superintendent, or they demand documents regarding the status of contract negotiations, personnel performance or pending management decisions. In a big school district, there is always something that is not working as well as it should, some controversial decision pending, some dirt to be found.

What is a superintendent to do with one or more board members who continuously clog up the work with difficult or even inappropriate requests for information?

Saying no creates the appearance of having something to hide. Furthermore, it is never wise to question the motives of a board member. Some requests are legitimate, even helpful. How can a superintendent say no to some board members and yes to others?

**Policy Dictates**

The answer is the superintendent can’t, but the board can. The board-savvy superintendent places the responsibility for managing board member requests for information on the full board. And as always, the instrument of choice for regulating board behavior is board policy.

After consultation between the superintendent and the board president and discussion by the board in a committee of the whole, the proposed policy should be placed on the agenda as a joint recommendation of the board president and superintendent.

The policy might read something like this:

> Board members represent the public and are entitled to information regarding district performance that will assist them in governance. All board member requests for documents or information should be made directly to the superintendent or his/her designee.

Documents subject to the state open records law will be provided, as they are provided to all citizens under board policy.

Should requests be for information that already exists or data that can be easily gathered and analyzed (provided the request is not for privileged management information, as outlined below), the superintendent will, in a timely manner, provide the information in its most accessible format, with copies to all board members.

Should the information not exist and be difficult to obtain, and should the superintendent determine that the value of the information to the district be insufficient to justify the time/cost of obtaining it, he or she shall bring the request to the board, with an estimate of the time/cost of responding to it. By board action, the board will direct the superintendent to provide, or not provide, the requested information.

By this policy, the board wishes to distinguish between district performance information and privileged management information. Performance information is normally data based on numerical measures of results, district operations or practice patterns. Documents or other management information relating to individuals, contracts, meetings, events or any ongoing management process are privileged management information and not within the purview of the board.

**Self-Enforcement**

A policy on information requests, like the one above, makes it clear that board members, subject to the policies that apply to all citizens, have access to public documents. They also are welcome to request information. But two safeguards are put into place: The board accepts responsibility for checking unreasonable requests for information, and the board goes on record respecting executive privilege.

Underlying this policy is the same principle that underlies all board regulatory policies: The board must accept responsibility for policing itself. On a whole array of issues it is difficult for a superintendent to challenge the inappropriate behavior of individual board members. And unless appropriate behavior is agreed upon in advance and defined in policy, most boards find it difficult to hold in check even outrageous behavior, let alone petty, nagging, but nevertheless obstructive behavior.

The abuse of board member requests for information may not top the list of major governance challenges, but such behavior can give a superintendent a giant headache. The remedy is simple. Ask the board, by policy, to accept responsibility for making the tough calls.

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