Surviving Board Transitions
BY DONALD R. McADAMS

We have all seen it happen. An effective superintendent and supportive board of education are working together in reasonable harmony. Most parents and voters are satisfied with school district progress. Trouble seems a thousand miles away.

Then board elections bring as few as two new members to the board of education. The new board members do not appear to be serious critics of the district and perhaps are just slipping into open seats. Few anticipate upheaval. But a year later the superintendent is gone or on the way out.

Why is this pattern so frequently repeated, and what can be done about it by the sitting superintendent?

Turnover Turmoil
In a democracy, elections happen. They are the foundation of the democratic process, putting the people in control of their public institutions. But school board elections are problematic. With low visibility and low voter turnout, single interests can easily prevail, and unsuitable candidates—that is the kind way of saying it—can slip into office.

Of course, sometimes elections are open referenda on the state of the school district. Challenging a new day sweep out the incumbents and the board majority flips. When this happens, superintendents usually start looking for another job or accelerate their retirement plans. It is often too late to change hearts and minds.

But even normal board turnover presents challenges. Most newly elected board members see themselves as change agents. They promised improvements; now they feel obliged to deliver. And because they had no part in the selection of the superintendent, they may have no personal stake in the superintendent’s success. Also, even one new board member changes the dynamics of the board. And two or more newcomers can change board direction.

Key Ingredients
Whatever the circumstances, board-savvy superintendents should provide new board members with orientation and training...”

certain that it is done, whatever the postelection feelings of board members and district administrators, and it puts new board members in the position of having to receive the orientation or violate board policy.

Policy language need not be too specific, but the essential points are orientation to the school district, training in governance and the policies and practices by which the board regulates itself, and state and national education policy, including critical issues in public education.

Conceptually, district orientation comes first. School districts are not just schools writ large. They are distinctive and complex systems. Superintendents need to plan an orientation for new board members that introduces them to major programs, central-office operations, especially audit functions, and all the district’s major business systems. The orientation should include briefings on major issues facing the district, meetings with senior staff and a tour of district facilities.

Governance and board operations come second. Here the board president should take the lead. New board members need to know what good governance is and is not, especially the difference between governance and management. They also need to understand how the board does its work, such as the monthly cycle of board meetings, agenda preparation, constituent service and the board’s role in policy development.

Thirdly, new board members need to understand the state and policy framework in which their district operates and the current issues in K-12 schools. State standards, assessments, accountability and all the intricacies of public school finance are critical, as are special education and a host of other compliance issues. And at least by overview and suggested readings, new board members need to be introduced to critical issues in public education.

A Welcome Feeling
The last step is perhaps the most important. Veteran board members need to make new board members feel welcome. A small reception for new members, perhaps after the first board meeting, and genuine attempts to establish ties of friendship are great tactics.

But just as importantly, veteran board members should seek out and welcome the opinions of new board members on district issues and, where possible, incorporate these views into board actions. New board members need to see their voices are heard and their opinions valued.

This work should begin immediately after a new board member is elected, and some orientation can even be made available to candidates before the election. None of it guarantees a smooth transition.

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