The Short, Productive Board Meeting

BY DONALD R. McADAMS

Board meetings are the time and place where school boards act. In fact, only when coming together as a body in a legal meeting do school board members become a board. Effective board meetings are the first prerequisite for an effective board.

Furthermore, what parents and voters see at board meetings determines largely what they think about their board, even their school district. Frequent, long, unfocused or contentious meetings are sure signs of an ineffective, perhaps even dysfunctional, board. Everything matters: length, time of day, agenda, protocol, configuration of the room, dress, decorum, etc.

Board meetings are the board's meeting, not the superintendent's meeting. But because the primary reason boards meet is to consider the superintendent's agenda, board meetings are a joint responsibility. Most boards are happy to defer agenda preparation to the superintendent and welcome suggestions regarding agenda review and meeting management.

Working through the board president, superintendents can and should make effective, professionally run board meetings a high priority. Superintendents have a compelling case to make: Effective board meetings contribute to effective district management, and they make board members look good.

Practice Patterns

There is no one pattern for effective board meetings. Cities, like people, have personalities. Boards have traditions. What works for one school board may not work for another. Nevertheless, the following principles and practice patterns contribute to effective meetings. Superintendents should promote these to their boards unless there are good reasons not to.

Boards should hold fewer rather than more regular business meetings. Under most circumstances, one meeting a month is sufficient. Boards should want their superintendent and senior staff working to improve student achievement and district operations, not constantly getting ready for and following up on board meetings.

Meetings should seldom run more than three hours in length and never go late into the night. Long meetings encourage boards to micromanage and are often a sign of bad planning.

Even in short meetings, there should be time for recognizing and honoring achievement. Shining the spotlight on excellence builds school district morale and public support.

Regular business meetings also should include reports from the superintendent. These reports educate the board, the workforce and the community about important achievements, programs, issues or plans. And reports give board members an opportunity to comment, helping to set the tone for the district and the community. Superintendents should make certain that at least one report deals with student achievement.

Boards should consider no more than four priority items for discussion and approval at a board meeting. Again, at least one item should deal with student achievement. What better way to keep the board's and the public's focus where it belongs, on the district's core business?

The rest of the items should be grouped together for approval with one vote. This division of the agenda into a priority agenda and a consent agenda enables the board to quickly approve numerous routine items with one vote and then probe deeply into a few major issues. Of course, individual board members may pull one or more items out of the consent agenda for separate approval.

Infrequent, short board meetings, with most routine items grouped into a consent agenda, require an agenda review, either in board committees or a committee of the whole. An agenda review enables the superintendent to discern problems board members have with agenda items and board members to come to meetings prepared to thoughtfully discuss priority items and quickly approve most items on a consent agenda. Neither superintendents nor board members like surprises at the board table.

Tempo and Decorum

Tempo and tone are important. Boards should neither appear rushed nor stray from the agenda. All board members should be allowed adequate and equal opportunity to speak, and no board member should be allowed to dominate debate. In addition, all interactions among board members should be respectful. Where boards have the misfortune to have a disruptive member, strong leadership from the board president and the support of other board members are required.

One final point: A board meeting is a meeting of the board in public, not a public meeting. Public comment on agenda items during the business meet-

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