Top 10 ‘Guarantees’ for a Great Relationship

BY DONALD R. MCADEMS

Let’s have a little fun, David Letterman style, by generating a Top 10 list. Like Letterman, we will start at the bottom and work our way up to No. 1. Our objective: Identify 10 things superintendents can do to guarantee a great working relationship with their board of education.

Of course, there really are no guarantees. Sometimes voters elect school board members beyond belief, and sometimes circumstances conspire to confound the wisest among us. In any case, should not improvements in student achievement and effective district operations bring joy to the hearts of all board members and outweigh any petty complaints about how they feel their superintendent is treating them?

It should, but it doesn’t. We all have known superintendents who performed brilliantly but still had trouble with their boards, even reasonably good boards, whether because of too much ego, not enough political acumen or just over-absorption in the work. So though nothing is certain and performance should be sufficient, savvy superintendents know there are things they must do to promote a good working relationship with their board.

Here are my proposed Top 10:

▸ NO. 10: GIVE BOARD MEMBERS LOTS OF OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE FAVORABLE PRESS. Every time you address a group of any size, praise the board for its visionary leadership and introduce all board members present. As a rule, board members like recognition and favorable press. After all, they are elected officials.

▸ NO. 9: NEVER ARGUE WITH OR SHOW DISRESPECT TOWARD A BOARD MEMBER IN PUBLIC. Privately you can be as tough as you need to be. But no one likes to look bad in public, especially public officials. In fact, this rule is a good rule for everyone. Violate it at your peril.

▸ NO. 8: SHARE ALL WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS TO OR FROM INDIVIDUAL BOARD MEMBERS WITH ALL BOARD MEMBERS. This practice shows you have no favorites. Moreover, it enables board members to collectively monitor what they are asking the superintendent, thereby discouraging micromanagement. You also should note that any private conversation with a board member is likely to be repeated to another board member.

▸ NO. 7: ON IMPORTANT ISSUES, MAKE CERTAIN YOU HAVE THE VOTES BEFORE YOU MAKE A RECOMMENDATION. From time to time it is not a bad idea to lose a vote on an unimportant issue. It enables the board to show it is not a rubber stamp. But you want support for important recommendations. A compromise ahead of time to get a majority and on matters of great importance a super-majority is well worth it.

▸ NO. 6: ALWAYS INTERPRET A VOTE AGAINST ONE OF YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS AS A VOTE ON PRINCIPLE. Indeed it may not be. Sometimes board members vote no because they lack courage. Sometimes they are deal making. Sometimes they just want to demonstrate opposition. Whatever the reason, give them credit for an honest vote. Challenging their motives will make it that much harder to win their support next time, and there is always a next time.

▸ NO. 5: DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN TO AVOID THE CREATION OF STANDING COMMITTEES OF THE BOARD FOR OPERATIONAL AREAS. A standing audit committee is needed, and it’s required in some states. And standing committees whose purview is the district as a whole, through a specific lens — for example strategic planning and policy — might make sense. But standing committees for operational areas such as facilities or personnel invite micromanagement.

▸ NO. 4: MAKE CERTAIN THE BOARD RECEIVES EFFECTIVE TRAINING. Adult education works. Every profession requires it. Effective training always helps and never hurts. Individual training is good. Training for the entire governance team is best. Make certain the training is stimulating and rigorous and focuses on what the board needs.

▸ NO. 3: RESOLVE CONSTITUENT COMPLAINTS QUICKLY. Boards need to be trained how to respond to constituent complaints, and boards should regulate their own behavior by board-approved protocols. But the best way to keep board members out of problem solving is to build a customer-friendly school district that responds quickly and effectively to parents and other constituents.

▸ NO. 2: CULTIVATE BUSINESS, CIVIC AND COMMUNITY LEADERS. You need their advice. From time to time, the district needs their help. And the withering displeasure of community leaders is sometimes all it takes to shut down an out-of-line board member or nudge the board back onto the path of good governance.

▸ NO. 1: COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE. Share your thinking and ask for input on the major issues facing the district. Dream openly about your vision. Provide an immediate heads-up on anything that might make it to the news media. No surprises, ever! In my experience, this is the No. 1 complaint boards have about superintendents: We don’t know the superintendent’s thinking; we are not part of the superintendent’s planning; we are informed after the fact; we are not in the loop.

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