

THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

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Chances are, when you decided you wanted to join your local school board, you had a pretty good idea what that would entail: going to meetings once or twice a month, spending some time learning the jargon educators use and the laws that govern schools, and doing things to help kids. If only it were that simple.

With the intense public and media scrutiny on the school boards today, not to mention the complexity of the job they're asked to do, school board service has become time-intensive and one of the most demanding forms of community service.

Overnight, the newly initiated are expected to transform into skilled interpreters of school law, expert personnel managers and vigilant overseers of taxpayer's money. What's more, they are expected to function with the other board members as part of a united team, despite differences in backgrounds, political philosophies, interests, knowledge levels and expertise.

But even the most experienced board members never stop learning the technical details of the job, and those that are successful learn early that being effective requires more than knowing the tenure law or how to interpret state budgets. It requires certain behaviors that allow the board to function like a well-coached team.

How many of the following need to be added to your list of New Year's resolutions?



1. Focus on “we,” not “me.”

For your board to function effectively, each member must see the board as a team and respect the varying skills and perspectives his or her teammates bring to the arena. Effective board members operate from the belief that their peers have the best interests of students, parents, system and community at heart – even when they have radically differing opinions about how to address a problem. “Every board member has his or her own strengths they bring to the board, whether it’s finance or public relations or relations with teachers, whatever,” said former Vestavia Hills board member George Elliot. “You’ve got to take all that, put it in the pot, mix it and use it. Board members need to recognize the talents of other board members collectively.”

For members who come on board determined to “fix” specific problems they’ve already identified, it can be tempting to see themselves as catalysts for change and to believe that without their work to improve schools, the board would languish. However, such attitudes usually destroy whatever spirit of cooperation exists at the outset.

One former Alabama school board member, for example, frequently complained to the news media about the board’s “old guard,” portraying veteran members as only wanting to preserve the status quo. Her tactics angered colleagues, triggered hostile confrontations during board meetings and ultimately destroyed the board’s ability to work together as a cohesive group. Although she had sound ideas and strong backing from her constituents, she quit in mid-term, complaining that she couldn’t work with her fellow board members. Rather than engaging in dialogues with them about her proposals, debating the merits and seeking mutually agreeable solutions, the board member had spent her term continually on the attack and left office having accomplished little.

2. Treat staff and faculty with respect.

Like good bosses in the corporate world, effective school board members support the superintendent’s efforts to ensure staff members are accountable for doing their jobs well. That means setting high performance standards, making certain administrators are well trained in using the state’s personnel evaluation system, and giving thoughtful consideration on those occasions the superintendent recommends dismissing an employee, even if the employee is a friend.

However, effective board members understand that holding staff members accountable does not mean treating them with suspicion or as incompetents. Instead, they respect staffers’ expertise in their field and treat them accordingly. When they have complaints about an employee’s performance, they alert the superintendent, whose job it is to investigate. The board member who uses board meetings to call employees on the carpet publically for infractions destroys morale and turns meetings into battlegrounds.

3. Do your homework.

One of the most difficult concepts for the public to grasp about the board’s operation is that (work sessions notwithstanding) the regular board meeting is not a time for fact finding. Instead, it is the time designated for conducting the school board’s business in public. Effective board members ask most of their questions about proposals, budgets or plans before the meeting. They meet with the superintendent or relevant staff member to ensure they understand what is being proposed and why the administration considers it the best option. While they may still ask questions in the regular meeting, they come with a solid grasp of the issue.

Those who open their information packet for the first time when they sit down at the board table are not fully prepared to have a thoughtful discussion about the issues at hand and to listen to others’ concerns. Their lack of preparation requires colleagues to put board business on hold in order to bring them up to speed.

4. Listen.

Another challenging aspect of school board service is learning to listen with an open mind to those with differing views. Effective school board members know that by listening to different points of view, they can gain new insights into issues.

“Board members should remember they have two ears and one mouth and listen twice as much as they talk,” advises AASB Director of Leadership Development Susan Salter. “When you are talking, you are only hearing your own ideas.”

Likewise, effective board members know there is rarely only one side to a story. Ineffective board members, on the other hand, rush judgment. One such Alabama board member severely damaged his credibility with his colleagues and the public shortly after he joined the school board when it became apparent he would believe the first version he heard of almost any episode. No matter what information subsequently came to light, he would continue to be an ardent – and often immovable – supporter of the position espoused by the person who initially brought the issue to his attention. With experience, he learned to wait until he had more facts before making judgments, but the damage to his reputation took much longer to repair.

5. Be Courageous.

As parents become more sophisticated consumers of government services, their demands on school boards are mounting. Effective board members stick by their principles and make the decisions they believe best for the students and the school system – even when faced with pressure from special interest groups to do otherwise.

Montgomery County school board members learned that firsthand years ago when a small but vocal group of parents opposed to the federal Goals 2000 program waged a bitter battle to stop the board from pursuing a federal magnet

school grant. The parent group made outrageous allegations about the board's plans, even charging the grant would result in teaching kindergartners about homosexuality. The majority of the board, once satisfied the allegations were untrue, backed the grant proposal, however, and won a multi-million dollar grant to create the new programs and give students more educational options.

Effective board members also have the courage to follow existing board policies and apply the rules equally despite strong political or parental pressure. Whether disciplining the straight-A student who claims the rifle in his car was left there accidentally after a hunting trip or the honor students caught drinking on an out-of-town field trip, effective school board members understand that bowing to pressure from influential parents puts the board on shaky legal ground when similar legal cases arise in the future. Worse, it's unfair to students without such effective advocates.

6. Support the school system and board decisions.

No board member should blindly believe his or her school system can do no wrong or that the board always makes the right decision. Humans aren't infallible. However, effective school board members are optimistic about the system's future and are committed to resolving problems without losing sight of the successes.

Ineffective board members, on the other hand, focus almost exclusively on the shortcomings. Weak administrators. Inept teachers. Ill-equipped classrooms. Deteriorating buildings. Whatever the proposal, the ineffective board member will argue it isn't the right solution or doesn't do far enough. A few such board members have even gone so far as to oppose efforts to pass tax referenda for their system. Referenda rarely pass when that happens.

While individual independence and freedom to dissent are important, effective board members are committed to the concept of majority rule. They argue their positions without attacking those with opposing views, and they support board decisions even when they are on the losing side.

But, the board member who continues to argue his point of view – whether its opposition to buying out the superintendent's contract or support for dismissing a losing coach – long after the issue has been settled by majority vote, undermines the entire board in the community. Continuing to fan the flames of unrest in the news media and among parents rarely leads to decisions being overturned but often creates doubts about the school board's effectiveness that linger long after the immediate issue has been resolved.

7. Know your role.

Accepting the difference between the roles of the board and the superintendent can be tough. Admittedly, the public expects the school board members to be able to solve their problems. But board members intent on micromanaging can be highly disruptive to a school system. When school board members make surprise visits to schools to evaluate teachers themselves, breeze past secretaries to barge into administrators' offices unannounced or sit in on job applicants' interviews, they throw the system into chaos.

Instead of trying to run the day-to-day operation of the schools, the effective board member knows the board's role is to make policy and the administration's is to enforce it. As one board member put it, the board's job is to decide *what* should be done, while the superintendent is responsible for determining *how* it gets done.

Helpful Hints To Remember:

Though they didn't make the list of the top seven habits, school board members also can improve their effectiveness by remembering the following:

- **Keep your eyes on the big picture.**

When school board members are elected or appointed to represent a specific portion of the community, they can be tempted to focus on the needs of their own constituents, rather than the system as a whole. But effective board members balance their districts' needs with those of their systems to ensure that the board's broader goals are met.

- **Be honest.**

Effective board members are honest with others and themselves. They base decisions on principles and are straightforward about their beliefs. Likewise, they don't mislead colleagues or the public by omitting pertinent details about the impact of a plan or their support for it. Those that do tank the community's faith in them as individuals and the board as a whole, said the Rev. Clifford Jones, a former member of the Auburn school board. "If they know you're not going to vacillate on your principles, they'll accept what you say," he said.

- **Keep children first in your thoughts.**

Often boards become so involved in hiring personnel, approving bus routes and cafeteria service, monitoring finances, handling community and staff complaints, and coping with personality conflicts that they forget the real reason they were elected or appointed: to serve schoolchildren. The basis of every board decision should be whether or not your position is in students' best interest.

Helpful Hints To Remember Continued:

- **Remember you have no authority individually.**

This can be difficult for board members and the community. Board members often promise to fire an incompetent teacher or vow that the board won't take an unpopular action. However, individually, you have no authority to make such promises into realities. Only when the board makes decisions as a body can actions be taken. Individually, you cannot act alone unless the board as a whole specifically delegates a task to you.

- **Stay out of personnel problems.**

Effective board members remember the superintendent and staff are responsible for resolving personnel issues. The board only should become involved when the superintendent recommends action. This is particularly important in cases that could lead to the dismissal of an employee. One Alabama board learned the hard way when a board member's public criticism of an employee and vows to see her dismissed torpedoed efforts by the superintendent to fire the woman. Because the board sits in a quasi-judicial capacity on dismissals, the member's comments were viewed by the board's own attorney as prejudicial, and the board was warned the board could lose if the woman challenged her dismissal in a lawsuit.

- **Quickly learn how to disagree agreeably.**

Effective board members share their ideas and opinions and listen to the opinions of others. Just because someone else's opinion is different than yours doesn't make it wrong.

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