SCHOOL BOARD WISDOM FROM A DOZEN TRUTHS

Facilitated by:
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“No surprises.”
No Surprises – the Cardinal Rule

No one (superintendent, board member) should get surprised at any time — in the meeting or between meetings. Some people resist because they don't want the whole thing to appear scripted. Others love to play "gotcha." The truth of "no surprises" is **respect**. Going outside of respect for either people or processes, and someone will get surprised — and end up looking or feeling bad — and the work will suffer.
Best Practice Says....

• Preparation on a consistent basis - reading materials in advance; reaching out with questions in advance
• Seek clarity in advance of our meetings will make discussions more productive and our meetings more efficient.
• Respecting our Committee structure; asking questions for understanding vs. to challenge our administrators’ authority and professionalism
Trust is the foundation of good governance.
Good governance is about roles and relationships. All members need to live within their role to build trust and foster good relationships. Both require effort and trust — trust that others will perform their own role appropriately and trust that others are not out to get you or the system. Trust is earned (by a system and individually by participants) when integrity and quality outcomes are ensured.
Best Practice says…

- Follow policy and protocols - observe the chain of command
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Focus on the goals - the big picture, not the minutiae.
- Maintain confidentiality
Truth # 3

It's a meeting in public, not a meeting of the public.
School boards provide leadership for what are typically multi-million dollar businesses. The board has important work to accomplish. To do that work, the board needs to be fully engaged around the table. The Open Public Meetings Act requires that public business be done in public, and that citizens have opportunity to observe, and comment, at every meeting. Wise school boards understand the difference between public comment and the rest of the meeting. They also create appropriate venues (coffees, forums, surveys) to engage the public.
Truth # 4

The most important thing a school board does is hire a superintendent.
A school board cannot make a wise hiring decision without a shared vision on the direction, purpose and needs of their district. With clarity in these areas, the board and the person they hire as superintendent can forge a partnership that benefits all students and the district as a whole.
The board has one employee.
The board does two things: 1) clarify expectations for the system, and for all staff, and 2) hire a good superintendent that everyone else in the system works for. This keeps the lines of accountability clear. The superintendent is responsible for administering all aspects of the district, and the board empowers the superintendent so that it can be managed well.
Individual board members have no power away from board meetings.
The school board is empowered by the state to perform a number of critical functions. Individual school board members have official power *only* at the board table. Wise and effective board members make sure they, and their colleagues, only exercise legitimate power and refrain from assuming authority in areas where none has been given.
The essential board skill: being able to count to five (or whatever number is your board majority - and - optimally reaching consensus whenever possible).
Board members only have power when they act with a majority of the board. It takes a majority to accomplish anything. But the real power of the board is finding common ground on behalf of the whole community. Common ground can only emerge when all the voices are heard. A board that runs rough shod over the minority (board member or citizens) is headed for trouble.
Truth # 8

School board members run for election as individuals, but must govern as part of a group (the board).
Some board members are ill prepared to work cooperatively with their board colleagues. Teamwork is a skill that must be nurtured. Board candidates make promises in the election and then come to understand their only power is the ability of the board to act as a whole. Part of the task of each board member and superintendent is to help build a team that is equal to the work.
Truth # 9

The board speaks with one voice (or it doesn't speak at all).
Essentially, in their actions, the board speaks to the superintendent, setting direction for the district: "Here's what the community expects us to achieve." Until the board reaches an agreement, no individual board member has a right to expect a particular action from the district. Multiple voices create a “no-win” situation.
This requires board members to:

- Accept and support the decisions of the majority and move forward
- Follow board policy on who speaks for the board
- Refer questions/concerns up the chain of command
Roberts Rules guarantees you get your "say" but not necessarily your "way."
Roberts Rules is about balancing the "rights of the individual" and "will of the majority." On some boards, it's expected everyone will quickly join ranks with the majority; a dissenting voice is rarely encouraged. Other boards have a culture where dissent is so prevalent there is no effort to find common ground. Good governance is a balance that values the individual voice and the ability of the board to act (speak).
A wise superintendent knows he/she cannot get involved with board behaviors and issues.
Board members often look to the superintendent to fix a board member who is out of line. The superintendent works for the board, and the board cannot expect the superintendent to intervene in board disputes, or to take responsibility for keeping the board on the "straight and narrow." A local board of education must take responsibility for itself.
Truth # 12

What gets measured gets done.
Effective boards know "what the board cares about will soon be what the district cares about." There is incredible power in providing a shared vision, focus and direction for the district. One way the board exercises leadership is in deciding what to monitor (measure). As it measures, wise boards assure the data gets used to inform, improve and increase student learning.
Is This Your Role?

Read each of these scenarios and decide whether or not the actions describe appropriate behavior for the Board of Education or for individual Board members. Why or why not?

1. The Ourtown Board of Education has successfully passed its elementary school building referendum and construction on the school has begun. Dan Rollins, a Board member who runs a large construction company, has begun visiting the construction site every day to speak with the Construction Manager and check on the progress of the project.
2. In executive session, the majority of the Ourtown Board of Education decides to support the superintendent’s recommendation to fire its extremely popular football coach because of his recent unprofessional and unsportsmanlike behavior following a disappointing loss to a big rival. The next day, Ed Reed, a member of the Board who strongly disagrees with the decision, calls his best friend, John, whose son is a member of the football team, and tells him about the board’s decision. Ed encourages John to bring the team and their parents to the next Board meeting to try to get the Board to change their decision.
Is This Your Role?

3. At the beginning of the annual budgeting process, the Ourtown Board of Education meets with the superintendent and business administrator and sets parameters for the budget.

4. Claire Murray, a member of the Ourtown Board of Education, is in the produce section of the local supermarket when 2 of her neighbors come up to her and tell her that their daughters have told them that their 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Smith, spends part of every school day talking and texting on her cellphone while she is in her classroom with her students. To calm them down, Claire promises to investigate the situation and make sure that it doesn’t continue.
5. The Ourtown Board of Education holds its meetings on the first and third Tuesday of the month. Board members receive their board packets on the Friday preceding the meetings. Bob Martin, a member of the Ourtown Board, in reading his packet over the weekend, believes that he has found an error in one of the proposals that the Board will vote on Tuesday evening. To make sure that everyone on the Board is involved, he decides to wait until the meeting to point out the error and ask for clarification.

6. Lisa Watson, a Board member on the Ourtown Board of Education, has received multiple calls complaining about the behavior of a teacher at the middle school. Although she refers each of the callers up the chain of command, she also calls the superintendent to alert him to the issue.
Is This Your Role?

7. The Ourtown Elementary School needs a new Assistant Principal. Because the superintendent is new, the Ourtown Board decides to help by reading all of the applications and interviewing all of the candidates for the position.

8. Elizabeth Gonzalez, a Board member on the Ourtown Board of Education, is very concerned about the district math scores. She’s heard a lot of talk about a new “miracle” math program that is being advertised on television. She asks the superintendent to research that math program and prepare a report comparing that program with the district’s current math program and the math programs used in neighboring districts.
9. As a former teacher at Ourtown High School, Board of Education member, Kate Armstrong is often approached by teachers. Because she knows they are more comfortable with her than with the superintendent, she encourages them to come to her with their problems and concerns.

10. Jim Berenger, an Ourtown Board member, knows that NJ state law requires that all curriculum meets the standards set out in the NJ Student Learning Standards. In order to ensure that the Ourtown curriculum meets those standards, he decides to go to the elementary school and question teachers and administrators about the implementation of the curriculum and whether they believe that it meets the Student Learning Standards.
Collective Bargaining
Other Possible Conflicts

- Supervised by employees in the unit
- Not in the unit, but terms of employment linked to unit.
- Immediate family member/relative has heightened union involvement.

**NEW!**

A10-18: Endorsement of a candidate by a local or statewide union does not create a per se future conflict unless a financial contribution is given and is intended to influence the member.
Good Governance

Thank you for your interest in effective governance practices to support student achievement.

Adapted from the Illinois Association of School Boards