

Welcome to the



Veteran leaders offer tips to board ‘freshmen’

OSBA welcomes and congratulates the more than 750 new school board members who recently took office. OSBA commends you for your commitment to serve on a leadership team that provides educational opportunities for your community’s children. There is no greater contribution a citizen-servant can make.

You will face many challenges. The duty you’ve stepped up to perform will demand much time, energy and patience. It also will require working well with other members of your board through teamwork, collaboration and communication.

As an elected leader, many people will be counting on you, which means you must be able to balance concerns, requests and demands from throughout the community. And, there will be much to learn about your new role and responsibilities.

But, know this: OSBA offers countless resources to help you succeed. From publications, training, legal consultation and policy services to legislative advocacy, labor relations, pooling programs and more, OSBA’s expert staff is at your service.

As part of OSBA’s welcome to the world of school board service, much of this issue of the *Journal* focuses on new board members. For this opening article, OSBA asked veteran board members and association staff to offer their insights on board governance and educational leadership.

Respondents’ answers were condensed due to space limitations. To view their full responses, visit www.ohioschoolboards.org/for-new-board-members. You’ll also find a wealth of other new board member resources and information on that page.

school board

Gary Motz,
managing editor

School board members

What is the most valuable piece of advice you would give to a new member on your school board?

Susie Lawson, OSBA president; board member, Tri-County ESC and Wayne County Schools Career Center; 26 years of board service: I strongly encourage new board members to attend OSBA workshops, network with other board members and always make educating children their No. 1 priority.

Eric Germann, board president, Lincolnview Local (Van Wert); Northwest Region immediate past president; four years of board service: Listen to your constituents; they put you there. Listen to your fellow veteran board members. They have the institutional knowledge of “how we got here.” And listen to others via professional development. Take advantage of OSBA’s invaluable resources and networking opportunities. You may not agree with some or all of the opinions you hear, but listening will broaden your horizon and base of knowledge and help you make more informed or confident decisions.

Randall E. Smith, Forest Hills Local (Hamilton); 10 years of board service: On any issue, make sure you get all the facts before making a decision. There are usually at least two sides to a story. You don’t want to find out there was additional information that would have changed your mind about a decision after you have announced your position or voted.

What is the hardest thing to learn about being on a board of education?

Sue Steele, board president, Goshen Local (Clermont), board member, Great Oaks ITCD; 16 years of board service: Do not become a board member with a personal agenda. You need to remember every decision you help make affects every student, not just the students you have personal contact with. Do not try to micromanage; hire people who are educated in their field to do what is best for your district.

Ruth M. Nau, Noble Local (Noble); 26 years of board service: It’s very difficult following the unfunded mandates that cost our schools so much each year.

Walter S. Armes, board president, Whitehall City; 21 years of board service: Some people make decisions based on emotion — not knowledge of the issues involved.

What do you wish you had known when you started on the board?

Lawson: I wish I had known how political educational issues are, and that not all politicians make decisions based on what is in the best interests of children.

Germann: That the board sets the “what” and lets the administration figure out the “how.” For those who come from a management background, it is difficult to let others do the “how.”

Smith: There is a cultural difference between the education community and the business community. In business, there is a much greater focus on measurable results, i.e., you get what you measure. But it’s much harder to measure education output than it is to measure how many cases of toothpaste you sold or how much profit you made. The culture in business is to drive a meeting to a conclusion with clear next steps that are put in writing. Education meetings don’t seem to be as rigid and frequently don’t have outcomes that can easily be summarized.

“Listen to your fellow board members and others involved in your district; you won’t always agree, but respect each other’s opinions.”

— Sue Steele

What are your top priorities as a board member?

Steele: Making sure every student succeeds because your board is giving them the courses and tools they need to become successful. I have always wanted to make sure each and every student leaves our district with high self-esteem and able to say, “I am the best I can be; I am special.”

Lawson: Providing a high-quality education and preparing our students for the jobs of the future. To be vigilant in opposing increasing efforts to privatize public education and stand firm against attempts to diminish local control and



accountability. Advocating for the state to provide its fair share of school funding and stop shifting more and more of the funding burden to local taxpayers.

Nau: Providing our students 21st century technology and learning tools to enable them to succeed in the future.

Armes: I want to work cooperatively with the other board members, administration and staff. I also want to support our staff and help them meet the district's objectives by providing the resources for a high-quality education.

What was the best advice you received?

Germann: When a situation is done, it's done. Whether it's student discipline, controversial changes to policy or process, or employee discipline, once it's decided, it's done. You can't rehash it at every meeting and you can't hold it against anyone over the long haul.

Smith: Remember that as a board member, you cannot speak for the board or the district unless the board has specifically authorized a position or a specific statement.

Steele: You need to put students' education above everything else by making sure you have the correct curriculum and students are learning about life and how to succeed in the world today. You will find out that the time some students spend at school provides them with the most security and attention they get in their lives.

Armes: Listen and respond to your constituency no matter what their social or economic status. Each person is important. You may not agree with them, but disagree in an agreeable manner. Be careful what you say and to whom; it is easy to be misinterpreted. Also be careful when talking to reporters. Do not be afraid to refer constituents to the superintendent or other school official for the best answer.

How can board members increase student achievement?

Nau: School board members need to be up-to-date on the latest technology and work hard to ensure their staff is educated, qualified and able to provide the best for all students.

Lawson: Focus on professional development. Investing in learning and leadership pays big dividends in student achievement.

Germann: Encourage people to step outside their comfort zone and take risks. Many are afraid to do that because of the current culture created by OTES/OPES (Ohio teacher and principal evaluation systems). Encourage risk-taking to enable people to "break the mold" without fear of retribution for good-faith efforts. Encourage staff to take those risks and meet students where they are or implement student ideas that may have merit. If a new idea fails, regroup or drop it.

Smith: Support programs that provide high-quality curriculum for your students. Support new programs that provide education in emerging areas. The world is changing more rapidly than ever. We need to keep up with new programs to prepare our students for college and/or careers now.

What part of being a board member is the most personally rewarding to you?

Armes: Seeing that you have a strong staff to work with your students and help them succeed. Graduation and awards ceremonies are strong indicators of success and are very rewarding, as is helping build new facilities for students and the community.

Nau: There are so many things. The kindergartner smiling with a new book bag and excited to ride the bus; giving seniors their diplomas along with a handshake and a hug; awards banquets; seeing students' successful class projects; watching our community support their schools and students. I love my work and have *never* regretted getting involved.

Steele: One that stands out for me is that at every board meeting we have students in to explain what they are doing in class and what it means to them. The pride you feel about being able to help students succeed is like no other pride you will feel. We are a small community, so people know just about everything that is going on in our district. To walk into the grocery store and have someone without children in school tell you they read about the great job the district is doing makes you stand up a little taller, like a proud parent.

Germann: Watching the child I know had a hard life and struggled their entire academic career walk across the stage and receive a diploma, in spite of the odds.

Lawson: Visiting students in the classroom is always a rewarding experience for me.

Smith: Seeing individual students succeed because of the programs that we offer, and seeing our district ranked as a top district in the state in various measures.

Is there any other advice you would offer?

Armes: Remember you only have power to take action when you are in a regular meeting. As a single board member, you do not have the authority to give staff orders. If there are conflicts among board members, do your very best to not air them at a

board meeting. Remember, you are a very important part of a team; don't embarrass yourself, the board or the community.

Steele: Stay involved in what is going on in your district and community and keep the doors of communication wide open. Being trusted and respected by your staff, community, students and parents is crucial to your district's success. Listen to your fellow board members and others involved in your district; you won't always agree, but respect each other's opinions.

Lawson: Again, professional development. A commitment to leadership training shows you are accountable to your schools and communities. In these tough economic times, it is more important than ever for board members to learn the best ways to provide a high-quality education.

Germann: My overall goal is to create an environment where people (administration, staff and students) succeed or fail on their own merits and streamline the process to get them the resources they need in a challenging statutory and fiscal environment.

Smith: If your district is going to succeed long term, your

decisions need to not only be in the best interest of students, but also fair to district employees and your property taxpayers. It would be easy to make decisions that are in the best interest of students, but you cannot forget about the impact on others. It has to be a partnership and a fair financial balance.

OSBA staff

What is some basic advice that you would give to new school board members?

Rob Delane, deputy executive director and former superintendent at Lucas Local (Richland): Moving from private citizen to public school official, and from being an individual to a member of a team can be difficult. Old knowledge must be weighed against new knowledge and tempered in light of a new role.

Be informed. Learning what it takes to be a board member is like trying to drink out of a fire hose. There is so much information — and it's coming at you so rapidly — that it's hard to take in only what is important. Unfortunately, there is no single body of knowledge that will make you an effective board member. Take the time to become knowledgeable about your district's policies, procedures, financial picture,

Vets offer rookies guidance in OSBA 'mini-poll'

Amanda Finney, senior marketing coordinator

In January, OSBA conducted a "mini-poll" of veteran school board members statewide, asking them to provide tips, insights and advice for newly elected board members. Following are the responses from these seasoned board members.

The association hopes new board members find this information helpful as they embark on their board service journey. And remember, OSBA is always here to help, and is just a phone call or email away.

Top five most common responses

- | Listen and be open-minded with fellow board members, district staff, parents, students and the community.
- | Don't come with your own agenda.
- | Teamwork is imperative.
- | Do not micromanage the district staff. Allow administrators to do their jobs; as a board member your role is to handle the "big picture" items and set policy.
- | Be an educated board member by attending OSBA events and using the association as your resource for all things related to boards of education.

Additional responses

- | Learn and understand your district's mission statement.
- | Take time to learn all of your duties and go slow. Not everything has to be done overnight.

- | Learn from veteran board members as much as you can.
- | Do a lot of listening and learning before committing to major decisions.
- | Being on the school board is not an easy job. Give yourself plenty of time to digest your role and all that is done by the board.
- | Be honest.
- | Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- | Never lose sight of why you ran for office — the students.
- | Do not make issues personal; consider the district as a whole when making decisions and policies.
- | Get involved legislatively and understand what is going on at the local, state and federal levels.
- | Make professional development a priority by attending OSBA workshops and seminars.
- | Do your "homework" on your district and know what is going on at all times.
- | Always be respectful.
- | Attend the OSBA Board Leadership Institute.
- | Have patience.
- | Understand the legal rules of board meetings, such as the Sunshine Law.
- | Review minutes from the previous year, especially the January minutes.
- | Sit down with your district's treasurer and review the five-year forecast and monthly financial statements to make sure you understand what is going on.
- | Above all, students are the No. 1 priority.

strategic goals, state report card and other significant topics. Then commit yourself to ongoing training to help you be more effective. Board members expect staff members to pursue meaningful professional development. Board members send a strong message when they model that behavior.

Damon Asbury, director of legislative services, whose extensive career in public education administration includes serving as Columbus City superintendent, associate superintendent of management services and assistant superintendent; and as Worthington City superintendent: Remember that you are elected to serve the educational needs of the children in your community. Your neighbors are counting on you to keep that mission firmly in mind. If you can honestly say that your actions are in the best interests of the children, you will be doing a great job.

Steve Horton, school board services consultant and former Mount Healthy City Board of Education member: First and foremost, don't be afraid to ask questions, no matter how elementary or insignificant you think they might be. It really is baptism by fire for new members. There is no way to be fully "trained" and comfortable when you first sit at the table and look out at those in the room. My caution is to be aware of a desire to be the expert and take control from the start. Pay attention to all that goes on around you and open dialogues with all the board members and administration.



What can a new board member do to improve his or her boardmanship skills?

Cheryl W. Ryan, deputy director of school board services and former Hilliard City Board of Education member: Attend OSBA and other legitimate training events. Network with regional and statewide board members. Read research and articles on education. Commit to partnering with your board colleagues.

Kathy LaSota, director of school board services and former communications director at Delaware City and Hilliard City schools: Participate as much as possible in professional

development as a team. Take individual responsibility to seek full understanding of issues before the board.

Hollie F. Reedy, chief legal counsel: Ask a variety of people, including your superintendent, treasurer and people in the community, what they think the challenges are. Then listen carefully to their answers. The most important issues for the district may not be as important as their perception of what the issues are. You have joined an ongoing effort — start by understanding what your role is and what's already in progress. OSBA has many training opportunities, including custom learning, that can help you.

What are the biggest challenges facing Ohio public education today?

Van D. Keating, director of management services: Fiscal challenges have always been at the forefront, but in many ways, student achievement will eclipse that issue in the eyes of board members. As more and more performance data become available, the public will easily be able to compare how districts are performing on multiple levels. The phrase "bang for the buck" will come into play as a result of these comparisons and boards will have to critically evaluate the overall efficacy of their operations in a whole new light.

Delane: Board members have high expectations for positively shaping education. However, those goals often flounder on a complex mix of obstacles, scarce resources, special interest groups, hidden agendas, legislative mandates, vague initiatives and spotty information. Closing the achievement gap, improving learning opportunities for all students and preparing them for college or career readiness in the 21st century are some of the greatest challenges facing school boards.

Asbury: It is hard to narrow this down to a few items, but I believe the achievement gap among students poses the greatest challenge, not only to school performance, but also to the future well-being of our nation. We cannot let continuing generations of students leave school unprepared for their future.

How can board members best address these challenges?

LaSota: Communicate, listen, learn the facts, be patient.

Keating: Board members have to view these challenges with an eye toward the "big picture." All the little components that feed into student performance and district ratings are important. Boards need to understand the "hows" and "whys" to a much greater extent than ever before.

Horton: Be willing to listen to other board members, employees and community members and look for the nuggets of truth in what they say. This requires a civil, adult dialogue devoid of personal pride, one that engages in a give and take that can lead to the best we have to offer.

How can board members help students perform better?

Horton: Set a positive example, along with attainable goals and strategies for the administration to work toward. Then get out of the way! Good teachers want to teach — the vast majority of them love children and want to make a difference in their students' lives. Boards must enable teachers to be their best. They also play a crucial role in creating classroom environments in which students can thrive, regardless of socioeconomic and demographic realities.

Ryan: Work closely with the superintendent, who is presumably in partnership with school staff. Learn how other districts are succeeding and consider whether any of their methods might work in your district. Focus on student achievement when considering any other issue to keep it a priority in thought and behavior.

LaSota: Become knowledgeable about all things educational. In work sessions, talk with administrators about trends, challenges and opportunities surrounding teaching and learning. Ask questions focused on how the board can support teaching and learning through policy and resource allocation.

What do new board members need to know about OSBA?

Reedy: I say it all the time: OSBA is *your* member resource. Use that resource by calling us, attending training and reading

publications. OSBA works hard to constantly offer relevant information to help board members and district staff. Create a connection and use it. OSBA's website, publications and experienced staff are here for you — incorporate using your association into achieving your goals as a board member.

Keating: I have found that new board members do not seem to realize the breadth of our expertise and services. They seem very surprised to find out there is someone here that can help them individually or as a board with their questions or issues. OSBA has been serving school boards since 1955, and while the staff has changed over time, much knowledge and experience has been handed down. OSBA prides itself on member service, and its large and diverse membership requires it to have an equally large and diverse base of knowledge.

Delane: The Ohio School Boards Association is a member-driven organization whose only reason for existence is to provide programs, services and guidance to help board members and other members of the leadership team carry out their duties and responsibilities effectively in the diverse districts they represent. OSBA advocates for Ohio's public schools each and every day, and is actively engaged with myriad stakeholder groups in working toward the common purpose of promoting high-quality public education at the local, state and national levels. ⁿ

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