

# Five rules to follow for great school board meetings



*Steve Horton, school board services consultant*

**M**eetings! Go ahead — insert your sigh here. One could ask the question, is there such a thing as a great meeting? The answer depends on your personal perspective.

However, there is one constant truth about school board meetings all board members must take seriously: They are where a large portion of the public's opinion of the district is formed and, therefore, deserve our attention.

While parliamentary procedure is crucial to efficiently and professionally conducting meetings and is something all board members should be familiar with, that is not the focus of this article. Instead, we will explore five rules for creating great meetings that have purpose and provide the opportunity

for connecting the governance of your district with its community.

## **Be a great board member**

The basic rules of boardmanship must apply to all members of the board; this should not be an optional requirement. The general issue with boardmanship is that it gets in the way of personal agendas and, for too many board members, that simply will not do.

OK, what are the rules? Well, given that there are entire books written on the subject, I will stick to a high-level view.

First and foremost is the realization that you are a single member of a governing body. As such, you have no official

authority outside of board sessions. So does that mean you can never talk about school business outside of board meetings? No. Conversations with other board members, administrators, teachers, parents and others from around the district can and do happen frequently, but remember, they are just conversations. No debate, decision making or votes happen during those conversations. They are where you learn and gather information to help you prepare to make an informed vote when the real business of the meeting is conducted.

Second, as an individual member of a governing board, it is never appropriate to act or speak on behalf of the board without the board's permission. The proverbial "limb" is a tough place to be, so don't purposefully put yourself out there. Also, ethics and trust are invaluable assets. Nothing can damage those more completely than divulging information shared in confidence. If it is shared behind closed doors, keep it behind closed doors.

### **Not too short, not too long**

One of the stigmas about meetings is they often are perceived as being unnecessarily long. While it is a good idea to get in, handle the necessary business efficiently and get out, don't forget that people's time is valuable. This applies not just to long meetings, but also to very short meetings. For many sessions it is easy to introduce the agenda items, call the vote and be done in 15 to 20 minutes. The meetings are held in public for a reason — to allow people in the district to be informed about the board's decisions.

When I was a school board member, a community member once cornered me and said she watched one of our meetings on TV. I thought that was great. To my surprise, she did not agree with me. She told me she "learned that we all knew our names and how to say yes." Remember, the agenda items that are just normal business to you are not common knowledge to people outside of the schools. Take time to educate community members and let them hear your questions and answers. Even if it is not what they want to hear, it will help bring them closer to the board's work.

There is not much to say about unusually long meetings. They happen, but they should be the exception. I once heard a board member say that his board could not accomplish anything in under two hours. At the time I thought, if that is the case, you need to fix it. Figure out how to conduct your business more efficiently. Rein in those who like to talk a bit too much. In the end, everyone's time is valuable.

### **Love your fellow board members**

Are you kidding me? Well, no, not really. I am not suggesting you all gather around the campfire and sing "Kumbaya," but I am talking about mutual respect. There are plenty of boards with members who will not communicate with each other during a meeting, let alone outside of the meeting. If you

think the district employees and community members are not acutely aware of relationship issues, guess again.

Be aware of the fine line between debate and arguing or fighting, especially during a meeting. This is a tough one, but be willing to listen and seek middle ground. Politically, we don't want to hear it, but there is always truth in an opposing position.

Little things also count during a meeting. Interruptions, eye rolling, negative body language, side conversations, passing notes and texting are all forms of disrespect. And those behaviors are noticed as if they have a spotlight on them.

I know what you are thinking. How can I control what others do? In reality, you can't, but you should feel the responsibility to set an example and be willing to constructively communicate your expectations to your fellow board members. I realize this is a tough pill, but also be willing to receive that in return. It won't solve every issue, but it is an important step in the right direction.



*Board meetings provide an opportunity to educate community members on education issues and the needs of the district.*

### **Respect the community**

Inviting the public to appear and address the board can be intimidating, but remember — these people elected you to represent them. It is incumbent on board members to hear and consider public input. Nothing separates a community from its schools like shutting it out of meetings.

If you consider that adults' No. 1 fear is public speaking (death is seventh on that list), then a citizen who has summoned the courage to address the board certainly deserves the board's full attention and respect. This is especially important when you do not agree with that person's perspective. As difficult as it may be, do not allow that time to degenerate into a debate, or worse yet, an argument. The rules of respect that apply to engaging with other board members apply double for community members.

### 'No man (or woman) is an island'

I love the **John Donne** verse, "no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent." So it goes for school board members. That's right ... I am talking about the dreaded "C" word. Consensus is the board's job. Give thought to this quote from **O. Garfield Jones**' book *Parliamentary Procedure at a Glance*: "For a group to be of maximum effectiveness, it must have complete leadership and also a high degree of competence among its members. Among other things, this implies that the members know how to deliberate and to crystallize these deliberations into group action."

If the board is going to be truly effective in its work, it has to reach a consensus. This does not mean you must be a "rubber stamp" for the superintendent, nor does it mean you cannot express yourself when your opinion is different from the rest of the group. No, far from it. But if the board cannot come together and accept and support a final decision, then the result is always dysfunctional and very damaging for the district.

This also relates to the overall conduct of each of the board's members, individually and collectively. I saw a YouTube video of Boston Red Sox player **David Ortiz** obliterating a dugout telephone with his bat after being ejected from a game.

On my first viewing, I got a chuckle out of the extremely overt temper tantrum. Then I thought about the impression that would leave on anyone who did not know Ortiz. I thought about him being the face of the Boston Red Sox and the team leader. If that tantrum is your only knowledge of him, or the Red Sox, then you will certainly never appreciate the longstanding legacy of the organization. That is a shame, but this is unfortunately what individual board members regularly do to their districts.

I will leave you to ponder two strong success stories. In the December 2013 issue of the *American School Board Journal*, **Del Stover** wrote a story about the recent success of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, N.C. Like so many other districts, increasing poverty and dwindling operating funds were fraying its fabric.

At the heart of the story were the considerable efforts of the board and newly hired Superintendent **Heath Morrison** to restore community trust in the schools. Morrison had this to say about the role of board governance: "In this challenging environment to improve public education, at a time when resources are going the wrong way and expectations are getting higher, the ability of the governance team to work together is critical."

Board Vice Chair **Timothy Morgan** added, "A lot of trust had been lost, but we've worked really hard in our interactions at the dais and how we behave in public ... we've worked hard to build community trust in this board."

NPR aired a story on Aug. 20, 2013, "What's Behind the Turnaround at Miami Public Schools?" The Miami-Dade County Public School system was an absolute zoo. Local residents actually treated the videotaped board meetings like they were reality TV entertainment. The new superintendent, **Alberto Carvalho**, who has been referred to as a miracle worker for turning the situation around, realized that a major point of emphasis had to be the dysfunctional board.

Board member **Raquel Regalado** had this to say about Carvalho's work: "He quickly made peace with the school board, which was seen as inept, disreputable and hopelessly divided. Carvalho has helped change that image." n

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