

## MYTHS ABOUT BECOMING A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Each election year, citizens decide to run for their local school board and some approach the job with preconceived ideas of what the job will be and what they want to accomplish on the board. Among those ideas are some persistent myths that veteran board members have learned are just not true.

### **Myth 1: I can speak and write as a private citizen about school issues.**

Be very careful if you think you can continue to speak or write as a private citizen on school issues once you are a board member. Even if you just sign a letter to the editor or an opinion piece with your name and town address (usually required for publication) the news media will pick up on who you are. Your district may have a policy that outlines who may speak for the board. Usually that is the board chairman, but it can be a board member who has been designated because of expertise in a certain area. If you are saying anything that borders on slander of a staff member, you may be liable.

### **Myth 2: I can stay involved with school related groups.**

You may think you'll be a great reference for them, but it may inhibit interaction in the group. You're not just one of them anymore: you're a board member. This also can become an issue of intimidation. Check with your board chairman regarding any potential issues of conflict. When you're a board member and a parent, however, your parent hat always should come first. There's no reason you can't volunteer in your third-grade student's classroom if you've always been the one to help with cutouts and copying for the teacher. Just be sensitive to larger issues and let someone else "carry the water."

### **Myth 3: No more 7-0 votes! I am here to "rock the boat!"**

As long as they are reached independently, is there really anything wrong with a 7-0 vote? Of course not. Look at the process by which you reach a unanimous vote. Many boards have two or three readings on policies before adoption, which is plenty of time to make suggestions and changes. Many board meetings include presentations about data and progress on district goals. Board meeting packets contain a plethora of information. So how do you convey your reasoning behind 7-0 votes? You can recap the process by which you reached your decision: "This item was vetted in committee and this was the recommendation." Try to engage the vocal minority voices in your community to diffuse the possibility of an issue "going viral" with misinformation. Also remember, even if the vote is split, the board should stand together on the decisions that are made for the district.

### **Myth 4: I have a mandate from the voters!**

We hear this often. A board member had support from a group to gain election and then six months down the road a call comes from the leader of that group asking why the board member "hasn't done anything" regarding a specific issue. It's easy to be vocal during a contested campaign. Learn how to count. One member on a seven-person board is not a majority. Always do the math regarding the number of calls received versus the number of students affected by the issue. Your real mandate is to do what is best for all the children in the district.

### **Myth 5: As a former teacher (or other district employee) I know exactly how the school system operates.**

The learning curve for being a school board member is more like a steep grade, especially when it comes to understanding laws and finance. Yes, you do bring an expertise to the board that has value, but you need to understand what your new role is. We knew a teacher/union president who ran for the board in order to get the superintendent fired. That person finally let go of the issues that came with being a union representative when she realized what the board was doing for children. If you have difficulty understanding your new role as a board member, talk with your board chairman, superintendent or someone from your state school board association to gain clarity.

**Myth 6: I don't need to read or attend training to understand the issues.**

Continuous learning is important. At one of our trainings, we met a woman who had been on a school board for eight to ten years —she was the epitome of experience. She relinquished her seat on the board for a few years but missed it, so she got re-elected. We saw her at a new board member training session, and she said she knew she had more to learn and that things can change quickly, especially with laws and finance. Find out what your association has to offer in terms of professional development. If others on your board are the ones resistant to training, report out what you have learned and lead by example. Ask someone to go with you the next time and tell them: We need to model continuous improvement for our teachers and staff. Your board meeting packets are another area that needs to be read and understood. If you're not doing your homework, it slows things down at the meeting.

**Myth 7: I have tons of new ideas!**

New board members do provide fresh ideas and a new sense of purpose for district work. But, please, be respectful of experience that your veteran board members provide. School districts have a collective history just as do communities. An orientation program that includes a component of district history (facilities, redistricting, busing, etc.) can help inform new board members so they can get up to speed.

**Myth 8: School staff can say "Yes or No" to my requests.**

The real issue is should you be making any requests of school staff? Be sure to use your district the chain of command or communication for any requests, or you risk putting staff in an awkward position. They may think they could lose their job if they don't comply with your request. Remember, it's not your job to direct day-to-day operations. The authority conferred on you by being a board member rests with the board as five, seven, or nine members sit to deliberate and vote. As an individual, outside of the meeting room, a board member does not have authority except as an individual citizen.

**Myth 9: School board service is my full-time job.**

It may seem like that sometimes — especially at budget time. But you need to find that often delicate balance between your board/district life and your personal/family/professional life. If you find yourself operating at helicopter level with policies that direct administration, you need to step back and start working at the board level – which is as a member of the District Leadership Team.

**Myth 10: I'm the only one "in it" for the kids.**

Give your fellow board members the benefit of the doubt. You may not understand at first, but you are all "in it" for the kids. Each of you may express that in a different way. Making decisions that support "Students First" is often a challenging balancing act.

When we ask board members, they have plenty of additional "myths" including:

- We can do whatever we want regardless of the law.
- Being on the board will give me the power to change \_\_\_\_\_.
- It's going to be easy. We only meet once a month!
- I can advocate for my child at the board level.
- The community is generally going to support the board.
- Coming to a training conference is like a vacation, a reward for our hard work!