

## CONSIDER A BOARD DEVELOPMENT PLAN...

Why does our school board need a board development plan?

Effective school boards understand that excellence in local school board governance requires board and individual commitment to obtaining the knowledge, skills and abilities critical to good governance.

### How can our board begin to develop our plan?

The board begins by assessing its strength, weaknesses, needs and interests. The board should ask itself:

- What are we doing well?
- What would we like to learn more about or strengthen?

Often school boards will seek the assistance of an IASB field services director to facilitate this self-evaluation.

### What else should our board consider?

The board should also consider the role of school board and the needs and challenges of the district. The board should ask itself:

- What do we need to know to provide leadership and direction for the district?
- How can we hold the superintendent accountable for pursuing the direction set by the board?
- How can we demonstrate accountability to the community for progress toward meeting current needs and challenges?

### How does my individual development plan relate to the board plan?

Individual board members also need to self-assess and commit to personal development as a board member. You should ask yourself:

- What are the particular needs of my board and district?
- How can I align my development with the board's development plan?
- What can I learn that will help me make a greater contribution?
- What can I learn that will help me be a more effective member of my board?

### What are the benefits of a board development plan?

There can be huge benefits for individual board members, the board and the district. As individual board members, you will maximize your contribution to your board and increase your personal satisfaction with board work. You will be a part of a board that models continuous improvement and life-long learning for the staff, students and community. Your board will be well-prepared to make a difference, to provide leadership for district improvement and to leave a lasting legacy for the district, the community and, most importantly, its children.

*District Name*

**Board Development Two-Year Plan**  
**20\_\_ - 20\_\_**

**Year One**

**Step 1 Begin with a board self-evaluation:**

Schedule and complete a board self-evaluation with an IASB field services director or TAG consultant.

Date of board self-evaluation: \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of IASB staff: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 2 Consider what we have learned from the following:**

- Board self-evaluation
- District Goals
- District Improvement Plans
- School Improvement Plans
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**Step 3 Identify and prioritize:**

A. One to three areas for improvement:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B. One to three areas of interest:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Step 4 Identify board development opportunities:**

Direct the board president or superintendent to contact your IASB field services director to discuss your improvement needs and interests and to learn about related services and resources available from your Association.

**Step 5 Commit to board development:**

A. Schedule and complete an IASB in-district workshop with the board-superintendent governance team and an IASB field services director or other staff member.

Targeted area for improvement or interest: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of workshop: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of workshop: \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of IASB staff: \_\_\_\_\_

B. Identify additional board development opportunities:

Activity	Purpose	Date(s) completed
<i>Example: Attend spring and fall division dinner meetings</i>	<i>Broaden the awareness of current education issues</i>	<i>Spring &amp; Fall 2011 &amp; 2012</i>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Additional activities may be listed on an attached sheet.

**Year Two**

**Step 1 Assess our progress:**

Schedule a conversation on the board agenda to evaluate our professional development progress. Revisit areas identified for improvement and areas of interest, and evaluate board progress in these areas.

Date of board self-evaluation: \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of IASB staff: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 2 Consider what you have learned from the following:**

- Progress assessment
- District Goals
- District Improvement Plans
- School Improvement Plans
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**Step 3 Seek continued board development opportunities:**

Direct the board president or superintendent to contact your IASB field services director to discuss your progress and continued improvement needs and interests and possible next board development opportunities available from your association.

**Step 4 Commit to board development:**

A. Schedule and complete an IASB in-district workshop with the board-superintendent governance team and an IASB field services director or other staff member.

Targeted area for improvement or interest: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of workshop: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of workshop: \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of IASB staff: \_\_\_\_\_

B. Our board has engaged in the following additional board development opportunities:

Activity	Purpose	Date(s) completed
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Additional activities may be listed on an attached sheet.

# 4 Questions for School Boards

*Good governance is a choice. Consider asking these questions from two governance consultants to firm up or improve your board's work*

**Linda J. Dawson and Randy Quinn**

**D**oes your board find itself so caught up with day-to-day issues that you can't see beyond the current crisis? That's precisely when you should stop the machinery and figure out just what keeps you from dealing with true board work and from providing effective leadership.

Here are a few questions for school boards to ponder—and some possible solutions for you to consider.

## Question 1:

### Why do boards do what they do?

Some school boards do things without considering why. We have observed boards spending time approving the payment of bills, mostly for goods or services that already have been purchased or delivered, and sometimes even after the

bills themselves have been paid. Why?

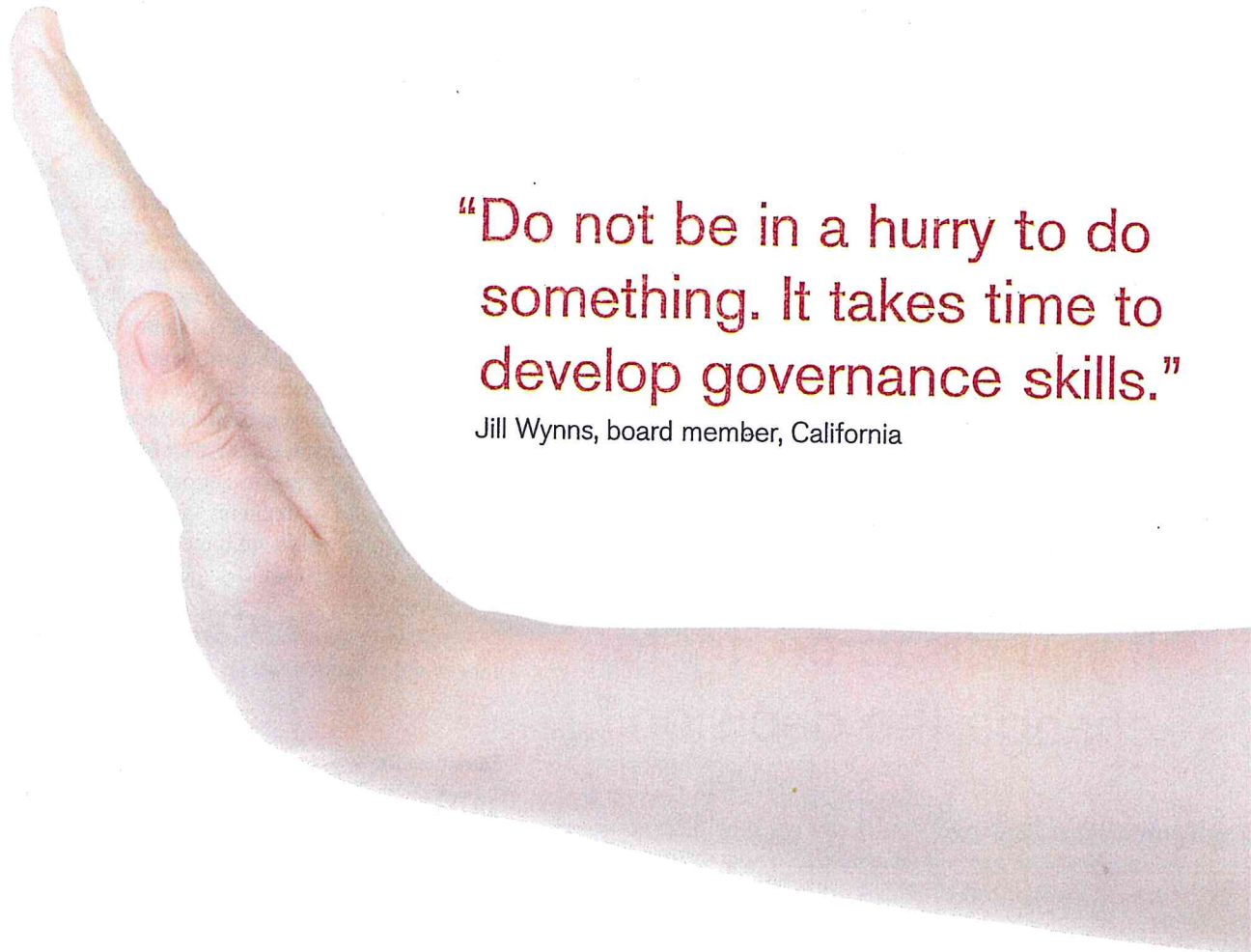
We also have seen board meetings taken over by dominant outside groups and individuals to pursue their own agendas. They prevent the board from doing its work and add hours to the crowded personal schedules of individual members. Why?

We've observed board members showing up for meetings with no real understanding or knowledge of why certain items are on the agenda, or what the board is expected to do with them. Why?

And finally, we have seen board members trying valiantly to make sense of staff reports on topics that have little or no relevance to the board's main job: governing the district. Why?

Our answer: The board has not taken responsibility for its own agenda.

Boards have become accustomed to dealing with whatever their agendas ask them to consider, whether it makes sense to them or not. Typically, the responsibility for developing agendas falls on the superintendent's shoulders, along with some input from the board president. If this is



**“Do not be in a hurry to do something. It takes time to develop governance skills.”**

Jill Wynns, board member, California

your board's routine, you are not deciding what your job is and how you should do it; you are doing the job the superintendent has decided you should do.

We do not mean to criticize the superintendent, who probably is doing his or her best to design an agenda that reflects what the board wants. But the result of this method is that the board has deferred the determination and execution of its job to its chief employee, making itself captive to an administrative agenda.

Our solution: Create an annual calendar of board work. Outline in advance the issues you believe the board should spend meeting time on during the next 12 months. Expect the calendar to drive the development of monthly or semi-monthly agendas. You won't become entangled in the continuing challenge to put together monthly meeting agendas, if you have created an annual work plan.

Be diligent in deciding what other matters to place on the agenda as it is finalized. A well-defined purpose should exist for every item the board is being asked to consider. Board members should leave every meeting believing their time was well spent.

Another solution: Tie every item on the agenda to an existing governing policy. If there is no relevant policy, the issue may not be the responsibility of the board. If every item on the agenda is based on board governing policy, the conversation is framed up and placed in context for meaningful board-level discussion.

#### **Question 2:**

### **Why do boards do what they do the way they do it?**

All boards have their customs and habits, but some of them just don't make sense.

These customs include board presidents routinely recognizing each individual member for comments on every item on the agenda. If an agenda has 10 items for the board to discuss, and if every member of a seven-member board feels obliged to speak on each one of them for three minutes, the time required would be 3.5 hours. Why?

Frequently, we see boards being held captive by one of their own members who has free rein to consume unlimited time by demanding extraordinary attention for their own personal gratification. Members are at the mercy of one who marches to a very different drummer. The majority go home angry and frustrated, while the dominant member goes home satisfied and sleeps very well. Why?

Our answer: Decide what you want your governing culture to be and institute the rules necessary to achieve it.

Nothing prevents boards from imposing whatever type of discipline they choose to help get their work done effectively and efficiently. Other public bodies do this, including Congress, provincial governments, state legislatures, and city

**“Once a decision is made, you should support the decision. If you disagree, try to change the decision.”**

James R Dykeman, Jr., board member,  
Massachusetts



and county governing bodies. Yet school boards, for whatever reason, sometimes allow themselves to be dominated by behaviors that other public bodies would never tolerate.

If a board permits these customs, practices, and unhelpful behaviors to sidetrack and prohibit it from getting meaningful work done, it has only itself to blame.

Our solution: Back away from your current concept of how your board operates and ask a few questions:

- If we were meeting here as the very first board ever seated to govern this district, how would we choose to organize ourselves to get our work done?
- How would we build an agenda for our meetings?
- What rules would we impose on ourselves?
- How would we self-discipline poor practices or behaviors?

Would your answers result in a board that looks the same as your board now looks?

### Question 3:

## What is your job as a board and as a member?

Boards carefully define the superintendent's job when they negotiate a contract, and they expect the superintendent to communicate clear job expectations for every employee. But who decides what the board's job is? The superintendent?

We aren't necessarily talking here about the legal duties assigned to school boards by states. Rather, consider the real jobs school boards create for themselves that transcend their legal responsibilities.

During all of our combined 60 years of working with school boards, one constant has been our challenge to help boards define their jobs. Role definition generally has been a seat-of-the-pants decision, depending on the crisis of the moment.

Our answer: Boards must deliberately craft their own job description and performance expectations.

You and your colleagues must decide: What do you expect of your board and how will you do your job? What is the relationship and clear accountability you will establish with your superintendent?

As school boards recognize the wisdom of adopting more formal governance operating systems, they also adopt the understanding that their own job is not merely an extension of the superintendent's job. Their job is entirely different. The superintendent's job is to lead, manage, and execute, while the board's job is to lead, direct, and govern. They are fundamentally different, but complementary, roles.

Our solution: Sit down as a board, perhaps with professional coaching, and thoughtfully and clearly define your job.

Some job-related questions include:

- Is it the board's job to determine the vision and expected student outcomes for the district? Or does the board hire a superintendent to develop a vision?
- Should the board deliberate and approve the superintendent's "how to" strategies? Or should the board decide "what" the district is expected to achieve, and then hold the professionals accountable for making it happen?
- Who decides the non-negotiable standards for all district operations and determines successful performance?

**Question 4:**

## How do you evaluate your superintendent?

Many boards struggle with superintendent evaluation. Some years ago, we wrote an article on superintendent evaluation. It was based on our experiences with boards dealing with this issue.

We have worked with boards that rated their superintendents on superficial elements such as their choice of automobile or where they lived. Others dinged their superintendents for out-of-district professional travel. One superintendent, incredibly, was faulted for spending too much time dealing with underperforming students.

Our answer: Superintendents need to know and understand their boards' expectations. They are entitled to clear information on what they are accountable for before any evaluation is made. Otherwise, there are no standards against which the evaluation will be relevant.

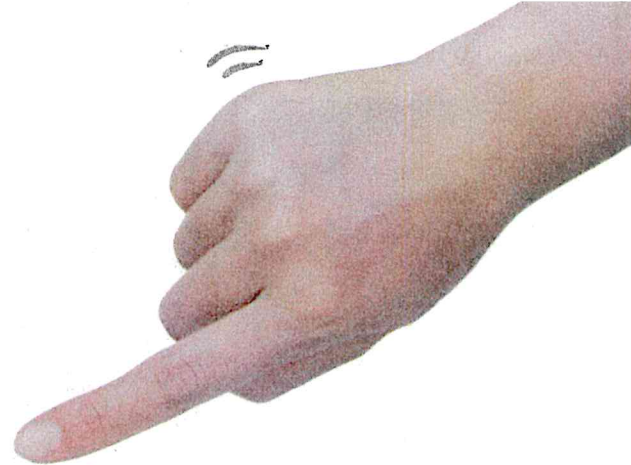
Make the district's performance and the superintendent's performance the same. That's a different concept from the norm, we understand, but let's step back and think this one through.

We believe the superintendent is hired to do two things: to ensure that students learn to the standard the board defines; and to make sure that the district meets the board's standards of operation in all functional areas. If that is a comfortable concept, then two crucial steps must be taken to make it work:

1. The board must deliberately define its expected student achievement outcomes and agree on the metrics that are acceptable for monitoring reasonable performance progress; and

2. The board must define the standards for all operational areas of the district and agree on the monitoring measures and resulting data that prove whether the district is meeting those standards.

If these two steps are taken in advance—with the participation and support of the superintendent—both student perfor-



**"Don't take things personally."**

Vanessa Hatcher, board member, Illinois

mance and the district's operational performance are formatively monitored throughout the year.

At the end of the annual monitoring cycle, the superintendent is credited with the summative judgments of the board, based on agreed upon data points. In this way, the district's performance becomes the superintendent's performance, and the latter now becomes meaningful.

## Make a choice

We believe that, if boards have the vision and the will, they can elevate their governance performance to levels they rarely even dream of. They merely need to exercise the choice that is theirs to govern better, more effectively, and more powerfully.

We consider the linkage between the boardroom and the classroom to be critical to the overall success of the districts for which boards are responsible.

All of us have seen the results of boards that are truly outstanding, that have led the charge for improvement, and that are setting the standard of governance excellence and district performance for others to follow.

We also have observed the consequences when boards have set a different kind of example. Those boards have allowed a lack of role clarity, focus, self-discipline, or preoccupation with management to break down morale, trust, and progress.

Both kinds of boards made conscious choices. In fact, not making a choice in itself is a choice. ■

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# 7 Practices of Highly Effective Board Members

*Sage advice for new school board members—and veteran board members may want to take a look, too*

**Kathryn Blumsack and Terry McCabe**

**C**ongratulations! You're now a member of the Board of Education. If you're like most new board members, you've worked hard to reach this point. You've listened to your community, and come to understand its values and concerns. Above all, you've embraced the transformative power of a great board to improve public education. Local control of education through elected school boards is a deeply held American political tradition. School boards may be small and local, but they represent perhaps the most important daily civic commitment we as citizens make to our communities, our children, and our future.

As a new board member, you bring sharp questions, innovative ideas, and fresh energy. You'll look at established routines and policies with new eyes, you'll challenge old assumptions, and you'll have the opportunity to share your perspective with your fellow board members. At the same time, you'll learn how to make a positive difference in the work of the board, and how to contribute most effectively to lasting change. We want you to be the most effective possible advocate for your community's educational vision and values. To help you succeed, we're going to share with you the seven practices of highly effective boards.

“Remember, you were elected by citizens. Try to carry their voices and needs.”

Cynthia Shabb, board member, North Dakota



## 1. Going solo's a no-no



You were elected to your board as an individual. You've got issues that are priorities for you. And you'll get a lot of individual attention early on from friends, school employees, and community members who want you to tackle particular problems. The early tempta-

tion will be to say “yes” and use your power to fix things.

Except you won't have any power to use—not as an individual, at least. As a school board member, you have no individual legal authority to fix problems or decide issues. One of the wisest things you can do is to help others understand that you can only get your work done as part of a team. We're not saying you can't try to take the lead on a particular issue, or that you have to stay silent—not at all. In fact, the more you communicate and share with your fellow board members, the more likely you'll be able to gain support for your priorities and ideas.

Look at the long term: Your success as a board member is inextricably tied to the success of your board. You will be judged by what it accomplishes, not by what you as an individual tried to accomplish. In all the years (decades!) we've worked with school boards, we've never heard anyone say something like, “That's a bad board—except for Mary Smith.”

What do boards work on together? Everything. Consider

the three main areas of board responsibility: legislative, administrative, and judicial. The first area of responsibility, legislative, refers to policy making. Effective boards adopt policies that give direction to the superintendent and staff, enabling them to manage the district. The board should seek appropriate input in the development of policy, and after adoption should hold the superintendent and staff accountable for its implementation.

Administration is the second area of responsibility. It includes approving and monitoring the budget, approving and monitoring district contracts, and hiring and evaluating the superintendent and appropriate staff. The administration should present the draft budget based on the goals and objectives outlined by the school board. It is up to the board to ensure that goals and objectives are truly aligned with the spending outlined in the budget. As for contracts, many states give final approval and responsibility for major contracts to the local board. It is important that you understand the bidding process and follow ethical guidelines in approving all contracts.

Finally, the board's judicial responsibility refers to hearing formal appeals sessions brought forward by staff, students, or parents. Naturally, these appeals require confidentiality, impartiality, and a full understanding of school law and regulations. The judicial function is sporadic, but handling appeals properly is critical to the effectiveness and fairness of a school board.

## 2. Respect the team



You were elected as an individual, but you'll work as part of a team. The best way to succeed as a board is to practice collaboration and respect. Because boards deal with extremely difficult and vexing issues—from budgets to grievances and everything in

between—it's common for emotions to sometimes run high. Keep in mind that you're in this for the long haul, and the best way to succeed is to be part of a strong team. Boards whose members treat one another with respect tend to be the most effective. Those whose members give in to acrimony tend to get less done.

Collaboration and respect don't mean consensus. Boards vote, and majorities rule. (But remember: This year's majority could be next year's minority.) There is honor in casting a sincere vote, win or lose. But, after the vote, effective boards move forward together. When you're new, every challenge will be a first-time challenge. But you'll come to realize that boards confront major issues all the time, and that a long-term commitment to collegiality and respect is critical to effective board governance.

The impact of respect goes beyond the board. The board sets the tone for the entire school system. Staff, students, parents, and the community are watching carefully to see how the board functions. Effective boards don't only handle their own work well—they establish a model of collegiality and collaboration that builds confidence across the community that everyone is working to do what's best for students.

## 3. Understand the difference between board and staff



Effective board members refrain from trying to perform management functions that are the responsibility of the superintendent and staff. As a board member, it is your responsibility (along with your fellow board members) to ensure that the schools operate well.

But it is not your responsibility to run them. That's what the superintendent is for.

Boards do have great power, but it can seem a strange kind of power to new members because it's not the power to order individuals to "do this" or "stop doing that." It's the power to establish goals and policies, and then the power to

demand accountability for reaching those goals and executing those policies.

The fundamental reason to refrain from trying to perform management functions is so you can hold the system—and above all, its leader, the superintendent—accountable for results. Accountability is the key, and many recent educational reforms aim to clarify and strengthen accountability.

If the superintendent understands that he or she will be held accountable by the board to reach goals and execute policies, then the board has achieved a key part of its work. If board members muddy accountability by trying to involve themselves in management functions, then any individual "win" in a particular case has the larger effect of undermining overall system effectiveness.

Here's a common situation for a new board member: You've been approached by concerned parents or community members about fixing an issue. If this happened during an election, you may have assured the concerned individuals you'd tackle this issue right away. You should listen to such concerns and questions, but rarely if ever will it be appropriate for you to directly contact a principal, a teacher, or a coach to try to solve the problem. That's one of the main ways board members unintentionally diminish their effectiveness.

Part of your job is to help educate the school community about your responsibilities, explain the chain of command (or "chain of accountability," as some board members call it), and direct concerned individuals to the appropriate staff person.

A useful guide for new board members is your school system's policy on how to handle concerns from members of the public, to ensure that every concern gets a fair hearing and

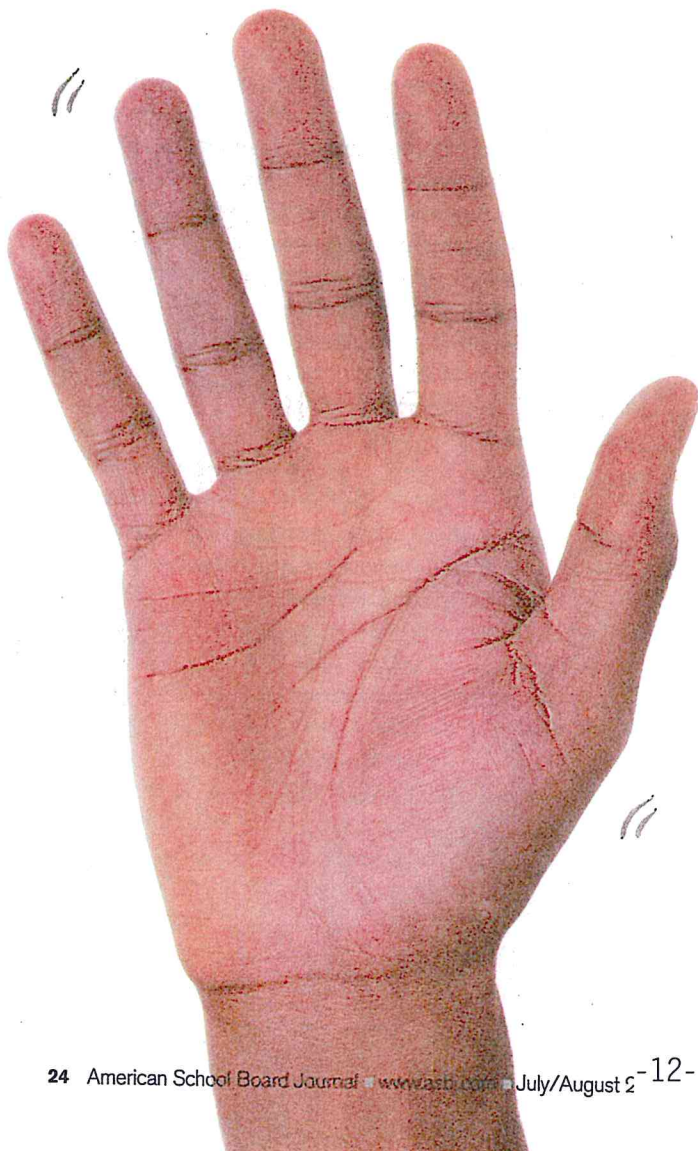
**"Read everything  
and be prepared."**

Iris Lane, board member, Virginia



**“As long as you are working in the best interest of the students, vote your conscience.”**

Mary Mathes, board member, Indiana



timely resolution. And if a concern merits board consideration, you should bring it up with your fellow board members.

## 4. Share and defend your views, but listen to the views of others



Your board sets the standard for communication within the district. Do you want your district to be open to a thorough discussion, or are you more interested in your own point of view? School board members must have the ability to compromise. You won't "win" on every issue you care about. More importantly, sometimes you'll find that the information, perspectives, and ideas others have may change your mind, or lead to a new and even better collaborative idea.

In the charged and urgent arena of public education, expect to be flexible, even as you seek to honor your deepest values and commitments. There will be times when changes must be made, when tradition cannot be honored, or when pressure must be resisted. Sometimes, you'll measure the true success of a board not by agreement, but by respectful disagreement and spirited discussion followed by a difficult vote. And after a difficult vote, effective boards embrace the decision and move forward together.

## 5. Do your homework and ask tough questions



Members of effective boards come to meetings prepared to engage in discussions, ask questions, and seek clarification. A lot of background information is required to make policy and assess accountability. In meetings, asking sharp questions can help clarify issues not just for yourself, but for students, families, the community, and even school system employees. Here are some good questions to keep in mind:

- What is the goal of this initiative?
- How does it align with our vision, mission, and system goals?
- How much will it cost? What data tells us it's

important enough to merit the cost?

- What data supports the notion that it will achieve the desired results?
- Are staff ready to implement it? If not, what's our plan?
- How does it fit with our existing activities? Does it conflict with anything we're already doing?
- How will we evaluate the results?

Board members are not career education professionals. Sometimes this feels like a handicap because of all the jargon, technical language, and policy details that board members, especially new board members, may not know. But keep in mind that, in American public education, local board members are not expected to be experts. They are responsible for serving as a bridge between lifelong education professionals and local communities.

To build the bridge, some board members like to ask plain questions. Michael Harvey, a board member in Maryland's Kent County, likes to encourage clarity and simplicity by asking, "How would you explain this policy to a parent?"

## 6. Respect your oath



Local school board membership is a public office and a public trust. New members swear an oath to uphold laws pertaining to public education. An important aspect of the public trust is to maintain confidentiality when appropriate. Many issues considered by school

boards must be handled in confidence, in executive or closed sessions. These commonly include personnel issues, legal matters, negotiations, land acquisition, and grievances.

Your state education laws determine which items must be considered in executive session or in appeals hearings, and specify the process for entering and exiting such a session. Everything discussed is confidential, with the exception of the summary public report the board president makes after the executive or closed session. If an individual board member divulges information from a closed or executive session, he or she may be held legally responsible. Significant costs and legal challenges may arise for the individual member, the board, and the entire school district.

Note that, while executive or closed sessions are permitted, most states require any action as a result of that executive session to be conducted in a public forum. Just as it is important to adhere to confidentiality for matters that should be confidential, it is important to ensure that no open-session topics are discussed, or actions taken, in executive or closed sessions. When in doubt, consult your board lawyer.

**"Change takes time. Start slow and build to fundamental change."**



Sheldon Wigdor, retired school board member, California

## 7. Keep learning



Effective board members participate in professional development and commit the time and energy necessary to be informed and effective leaders. You should understand your school system's vision, goals, and policies; its current successes, challenges, and opportunities; and the educational environment in your community.

Most importantly, you should know the aspirations and expectations of the students and parents. At the national level, American public education is undergoing major and rapid changes. Understanding and translating them for your community's schools will require steady, ongoing work.

Many resources are available to you in this new position. You need to know about your state statutes and the organizing documents for your district. Work closely with your board chair and your superintendent to better understand district and board responsibilities. Your state school board association is a great resource for information and professional development. There are additional resources available through NSBA ([www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)) and this magazine ([www.asbj.com](http://www.asbj.com)).

OK, new board members. That's our advice. Congratulations again on your new job and new responsibilities. It'll be exhausting, challenging, and sometimes painful. But, with luck, you'll share the experience of many other school board members in the great American tradition: the most rewarding job you will ever have. ■

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