



January 2019

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**Upcoming Free Webinars**

February 4, 11:30 a.m. –  
Topic: The Legislative  
Session/ Lobbying  
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## **Introducing A Newsletter for New Board Members!**

Happy New Year board members! You have likely been sworn in and have assumed your official duties for the next four years. We hope your first board meeting was a positive experience. Your willingness to serve in this important role demonstrates a personal commitment beyond what you may have imagined. The rewards far outweigh any long meetings, difficult decisions or disappointed constituents. You, through your vote, have the opportunity to shape the future for the students in your district. That is an awesome responsibility!

At our new board member training session in November, we briefly reviewed the characteristics of excellent school board members. In this first of our monthly communications we will address more critically a few of these characteristics.

### **Chain of Command**

Research shows that high-flying, effective boards are dependent upon both the superintendent and the board members understanding, respecting and adhering to the chain of command. The superintendent is charged with running the school district following the policies and direction set by the board. He/she is the only employee who answers to the board. The remainder of the staff is hired upon the recommendation of the superintendent and is responsible to the superintendent or his/her designee. Problems arise when board members move beyond the superintendent in giving direction, critiquing or inspecting staff, either administrative or instructional. All day-to-day issues should be addressed through the superintendent.

### **Feeling Comfortable**

You don't have to have an answer "right now". As a new board member, you need to feel comfortable in answering questions that may be posed to you by constituents with, "I don't know." Quite frankly, you probably don't know. It is also reasonable that you wouldn't know as a new board member. Don't let yourself become trapped into giving a response or taking a position that may have unintended consequences. Refer them to the person who can truly answer the question, the superintendent. By referring them to the superintendent you are reinforcing the concept of chain of command and demonstrating confidence in the leadership team.

### **Be Patient**

It is going to take you some time to process all the information that's given to you in your

first year. Nothing is going to change overnight. **Listen, Learn and Love** this commitment you have made. In the next few months you will be tasked with evaluating your superintendent, reviewing progress toward district goals, communicating with legislators regarding the impact of their actions on your district, setting and approving priorities for a new budget, approving new staff and a myriad of other responsibilities. Be patient!

Look for a message from us each month. We will take the opportunity to share current articles (this month's article is below) and events you may find interesting and helpful. We will also host free monthly webinars for you on relevant topics to help prepare you for what's to come. They will be interactive so we encourage you to submit questions during the session. We respect your valuable time, so they will not exceed 30 minutes. The following webinars have been scheduled, so please mark your calendars:

**February 4**, 11:30 a.m. – Topic: The Legislative Session/Lobbying

**March 7**, 11:30 a.m. – Topic: Budget Development

**April 25**, 11:30 a.m. – Topic: Superintendent Evaluation

**May 9**, 11:30 a.m. – Topic: Professional Development

**June**, date TBD - Topic: Strategic Planning

**July**, date TBD – Topic: Advance Ed/Accreditation

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We are available if you need/want to talk, **so please don't hesitate to reach out.**

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**Attachment:**

**[Communications 101: Advice for New School Board Members](#)**

*Source: American School Board Journal, February 2019*



“Our message to new board members is this: You are not the person to solve everyone’s problems,” says Greg Abbott, director of communications for the Minnesota School Boards Association. “You are the person who needs to direct people to the district person who can solve their problem.”

## LISTEN AND LEARN

For Barbara Bradley, who has worked in a variety of roles for the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), new board members can’t underestimate the value of listening. Doing so with an open mind, she says, provides you with an opportunity to “learn what goes on in your schools and how others perceive your schools.”

“That’s where the communications really begins,” says Bradley, NYSSBA’s deputy director of online communications and project planning.

John Tramontana knows firsthand that this is true. In addition to his role as director of communications, public relations, and marketing for the Michigan Association of School Boards, Tramontana has been on his local school board for four years.

“When you first start, it’s like drinking from a firehose. There is so much information coming at you at once and you’re just trying to figure it all out,” he says. “Communication is a two-way process, so you really need to listen as much, if not more, as you speak.”

When confronted with a negative incident in the district, board members should determine whether the issue is related to governance (a board task) or operations (an administrative task) and respond appropriately, says Debbie Elmore of the South Carolina School Boards Association (SCSBA).

“You do not want to leave the impression that you can ‘fix’ every problem that everyone may have,” says Elmore, SCSBA’s director of governmental relations and communications. “Individual board members speak for themselves. You are one person, one vote. Consider the impact your comments will have on the district and know who speaks for the board.”

As new board members learn their roles, they should follow the chain of command when it comes to questions about policy and operations, Tramontana says. Talk to the board president or superintendent first.

“New board members will soon learn more about roles and responsibilities so they know what’s appropriate and what’s not,” he says. “Until you have those figured out, talking to the board president and/or superintendent is the best approach.”

Tramontana also suggests that you should not be afraid to ask questions, especially at the board table.

## PART OF THE SYSTEM

Last year, I wrote a column about dealing with rogue board members — those with an agenda that leads to distrust and dysfunction. While you may have been elected on a platform of not fitting in, taking the time to understand the issues and build trust with your fellow board members may alter your view and help you to avoid that toxic brew.

Here are some other tips: Take the time you need to understand and be well-informed on the issues you face. Respect the confidentiality of privileged information. Finally, look for ways to create and develop what Heidi Vega calls “authentic relationships” with your school community.

“When people communicate about a school, what do they say? Most likely they are going to share their personal experience or an experience of someone else they know,” says Vega, communications director for the Arizona School Boards Association. “Think about the types of experiences and relationships your local school has with your community [and] ensure the experiences in your public schools are the best ones for students, families, and community members.”

Miller agrees, noting the entire board should discuss “how to interact with staff and connect with the community” so “well-meaning new members can avoid precarious situations.”

“I know of school boards where its members are expected to be in the schools helping in the carpool line or doing whatever is needed in the district,” Miller says. “There’s an understanding about expectations that allows all of the staff and parents to be comfortable with casual conversations with those board members. Abbott suggests asking the superintendent for a monthly report on what he calls “the positives.” Having that information in hand will help you when community members or staff ask questions about the schools.

“Become part of the system,” Abbott says. “Use three items as your elevator speech when you’re approached by a member of the public about how the schools are doing. Knowing three positives in your district and being able to concisely talk about them builds trust in your district — especially in the age of social media.”

Finally, Tramontana notes, new board members should become involved with their state association as soon as possible.

“They have resources, from learning opportunities and conferences to publications to networking, that can really help new board members become effective at the board table,” he says.

Sound advice, indeed.

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