

Public Advocacy



“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

Communications 101

Advice for new school board members

BEING ABLE TO MAKE A

difference and feeling like you can solve problems are two of the most common reasons someone seeks a position on the school board. But it’s not something you can do alone.

Understanding that point is easy from a practical standpoint. Majority rules, after all. But for some, accepting that your power is nil without that majority can be difficult to accept, especially if you feel like you’ve been elected with a “mandate” to make changes in how schools operate.

“At all costs, avoid saying, ‘I’ll take care of it!’” says Ramona Miller, director of board development and technology for the North Carolina School Boards Association. “It’s important to become

educated on the culture of your board and understand the norms and protocols of your governance team.”

Consider this a Communications 101 lesson for new board members. It’s one that can’t be stated too often, given the turnover boards see each winter following an election cycle. For this month’s column, I solicited comments from several trusted state association trainers and communicators who answered a simple question: “What is advice you would give to a new board member?”

“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.

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—Greg Abbott, director of communications for the Minnesota School Boards Association.

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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