Characteristics of an Effective Board Member

Individuals who seek or accept service on their state board of education generally enter this venture with good intentions. Most often they bring to the board a belief in public education, a commitment to public service, and a desire to make a positive difference in the lives of the students in their states. If most board members share these altruistic motives, how and why do some boards occasionally become unproductive and dysfunctional?

Although several processes are fundamental to effective policymaking, none is more important than the conduct of individual board members. This is true both at the board table and in the way members represent the interests of the board to interest groups and in their respective communities.

To be an effective board member one should:

- Be a Team Player
- Use Good Judgement
- Have Time for Board Service
- Be Loyal
- Be Flexible
- Use His or Her Expertise for the Good of the Board
- Show support for and belief in the Board’s Mission.

In the richest democratic tradition, board members will often disagree, promote particular viewpoints and debate the issues. This is appropriate in the development of policy. However, once the board has taken a vote, it is critical for every board member to stand behind the collective decision of the body. Effective boards share common expectations of their colleagues that they observe and respect both in the deliberation of policy and in the representation of the board’s views when policy is enacted. When it meets those expectations, the board is a better institution and the focus of policymaking is on results for students.

An effective board has members who:

- Support the Mission of the Board;
- Read Written Materials in Preparation for Board Meetings and Decision Making;
- Attend Board Meetings and Actively Participate in Decision Making;
- Advocate for the Board.

Supporting the Mission

Every member of the board must know the mission and know how it relates to the work of the board. The mission should drive the actions of the board and should be modified as the policymaking environment changes for the board. When an individual is elected or appointed to the state board of education, he or she should review the mission, goals and related policies. Although it is typical for members to have their own views of what the board should be accomplishing, it is important that new members show regard for the work of previous boards.

This is not to suggest that a member should not raise new issues and concerns that the board’s mission may not adequately address. An existing board should try to accommodate the views of new members without disrupting the progress it has already made. It would be highly unusual if an individual’s vision of public education could not some-
how be held in the mission statement of the board. If there is dissent among several members of the board about the mission and goals, then spending time rewriting the mission to achieve a vision that all board members can enthusiastically support at every opportunity is appropriate for the board.

**Reading Written Materials in Preparation for Board Meetings and Decision Making**

This may appear to state the obvious, but on occasion board members express frustration that a colleague does not do his or her homework in preparation for the meetings. This reflects poorly on the entire board and slows progress. When a board member is chronically unprepared, it is proper for the chair of the board to speak to that individual in private, letting them know the critical importance of preparing for the meeting. After all, the board is often under a microscope and must be cognizant of the way it looks to the public.

Although there are board members who are sometime negligent in their preparation, frequently it is simply a case of busy people finding the time to adequately prepare. Board members are volunteers who often find it difficult to read and evaluate the stack of paper that comes to them on a monthly, weekly and sometimes daily basis. Lack of preparation may be more of a reflection of the way in which the staff conveys the value of information to members.

If Board members are expected to read material and come to the meetings prepared to debate and develop policy, then expectations must also be set for the staff responsible for keeping the Board informed. The staff must ensure that members receive relevant material in a workable time frame. The Board should have an operating policy that guides staff on the materials that will be sent to the Board members. Boards should use executive summaries, report logs and other devices to give members a chance to read as much or little as they to prepare for a given issue.

**Attending Board Meetings and Actively Participating in Decision Making**

It is impossible to make an informed policy decision without active learning and participation in the process. Most boards set aside time for study sessions, hearings and other exercises to help inform the process. It is important that board members attend these sessions and use this time to expand their understanding of the issues and their implications for students. Members who are sincere about getting input from the public and about making informed decisions attend board and committee meetings plus hearings and study sessions. Recognizing how much time this entails, additional meeting responsibilities should be linked directly to the ongoing work and goals of the board.

Active participation in decision making also involves sharing opinions, concerns and expertise with colleagues on the board to help expand their knowledge as well. The strength of a board often rests with its diversity, and a board is better when all members are contributing.

**Advocating for the Board**

State board members often do not get to see first hand the impact of the policies they make for students. There is no doubt that state education policy has the potential power and influence to change lives. Policies can only change lives, however, if the message the board transmits to teachers, administrators, parents, students and other policymakers says that, “We, members of the state board of education, stand behind our convictions and our policies.” If the board’s decisions are to have an impact, board members must advocate the process of lay policy development. The member who casts the dissenting vote should recognize the value of the debate and the integrity of the board’s procedures and accept defeat graciously. A member can always advocate change or modification at the appropriate time. Members who deride the board and its positions because they disagree with them do more harm than good for students and for the process. They are also less likely to convince their colleagues to consider their views on other issues.

— Brenda Welburn