Parliamentary procedures are the rules and precedents that regulate how a governing body conducts its business. In recent years, as state boards have grown more diverse in their views and compositions, the significance of parliamentary procedures and Robert’s Rules of Order has taken on new meaning. While some chairs and board members use the procedures to ensure order and stability in policy deliberations, others employ the canons of Robert to manipulate discussions and direct board actions.

When members use Robert’s rules to frustrate or impede progress, then the work of the board and the improvement of education can suffer. Yet in spite of the lure to undermine the constructive value of Robert’s Rules to personal ends, there is no better system to manage debate in a democratic body. Effective boards and their members use parliamentary procedures with beneficial results. They use them to ensure that the rights of all participants are protected, that debate is balanced, and that the business of the board is conducted in a fair and orderly manner.

To ensure appropriate use of parliamentary procedures, it is important that all board members have a basic understanding of Robert’s Rules of Order. The rules are based on a regard for the rights and responsibilities of all members of the governing body. Put simply, Robert’s Rules of Order assure that the minority has the right to be heard, and the majority has the right to decide. A member who is familiar with Robert’s Rules of Order knows how to:

- Phrase and Offer a Motion;
- Protect His or Her Right to Be Heard on an Issue;
- Rise to a Point of Order;
- Evaluate the Relevance of Amendments;
- Conduct an Effective Meeting;
- Differentiate the Nature and Use of Committees.

Robert’s Rules of Order cover a wide range of parliamentary issues, and there are several publications that can be used for guidance. A new board member’s orientation materials should include a guideline to parliamentary procedures. Those topics of Robert’s rules that are most common and useful to state boards include: 1) the Role of the Chair; 2) the Importance of a Quorum; 3) the Use of Motions in Board Deliberations; and 4) the Use of the Committee Structure.

The Role of the Chair

Under Robert’s Rules of Order, the chair is the presiding officer of the board. He or she must facilitate the work of the board and build consensus among the membership to achieve common goals. The chair maintains oversight over the meeting agenda; ensures that meetings start and end on time; and keeps the board moving toward its established goals. The chair’s authority to vote is dictated by the status of his or her membership on the board and Robert’s Rules delineates the appropriate role of the chair as facilitator of the body. They also provide guidance to the chair and the membership when the chair exceeds his or her role. Any ruling of the chair can be challenged, but appeals must be made immediately after the chair’s ruling.

The Importance of a Quorum

A board cannot conduct its business unless there is a minimum number of voting members present. The Board’s bylaws often define a quorum. If they do not, there is guidance in Robert’s Rules. The only official business a board can conduct without a quorum is to set the time to adjourn, recess, or take measures to obtain a quorum. If a meeting has a quorum at the beginning, but members leave the meeting, the continued presence of a quorum is presumed unless the chair or a member notices that a quorum is no longer present. If the chair notices the absence of a quorum, it is his/her duty to declare the fact at least before taking any vote or stating the question on any new motion. Any member noticing the apparent absence of a quorum can raise a point of order to that effect at any time as long as he or she does not interrupt a person who is speaking. A member must question the presence of a quorum at the time a
vote on a motion is to be taken. A member may not at some later time question the validity of an action on the grounds that a quorum was not present when the vote was taken.

Hearings, programs and presentations can proceed without the presence of a quorum. However the absence of a sufficient number of members to constitute a quorum may be interpreted by the watching public as a lack of board interest and support for the specific program or presentation being made.

The Use of Motions in Board Deliberations

Robert’s Rules of Order lists more than eighty-seven different kinds of motions. In order to promote democratic and effective meetings, members should familiarize themselves with the rules of the most common motions used, including:

- Making a Motion
- Amending a Motion
- Referring to Committee
- Limiting or Closing Debate
- Rising to a point of Order
- Appealing the Ruling of the Chair
- Questions of Privilege
- Motion to Reconsider
- Point of Inquiry
- Recess and Adjournment

In addition, members should know if a motion is amendable, debatable or when a vote is required to pass the motion. A point of order, a point of information and a point of personal privilege are always in order. (See Table 1 at right.)

The Use of the Committee Structure

When a Board does not have sufficient information to make a judicious decision, when greater detail is necessary, or when it appears that the Board could accomplish more through the work of a committee, a motion can be made to refer the issue to committee. The rules for committees are different from the rules that apply to the entire board. For example, in committee:

- Members are not required to obtain the floor before making motions or speaking;
- Motions need not be seconded;
- There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a question, and motions to close or limit debate generally are not allowed;
- Informal discussion of a subject is permitted while no motion is pending;
- The chair can speak in discussion, make motions, and usually votes on all questions.

A motion to refer should not be a tool to avoid or bury an issue, but rather a mechanism to support the work of the Board. Committees work best when the policy questions are identified early in the committee’s study and deliberations, and they can be effectively used to inform the full Board of the committee’s work.

Table 1. Rules Used with Various Motions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motion</th>
<th>May Interrupt Speaker</th>
<th>Second Required</th>
<th>Debatable</th>
<th>Privil Mot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fix time to adjourn</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjoin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recess</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question of Privilege</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orders of the day</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous question</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit/extend limits of debate</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postpone to a certain time</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amend</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postpone indefinitely</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main motion</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>