

Communicating

How do I communicate with the superintendent? Is it OK to call?

Absolutely! You need to establish a good working relationship with your superintendent, and the best way to do that is have a conversation. If you have questions, it is better to call the superintendent and discuss them before the Board meeting, rather than give the impression you are trying to surprise the Board and the superintendent at the meeting. If these questions are concerns or relate to negative feelings from the community, the superintendent will appreciate knowing about these in advance of the Board meeting so that he or she can come prepared to address them. It is appropriate to call the superintendent, set up a meeting to discuss questions, or even email him/her for simple questions or requests.

If I disagree with Board members, or the superintendent, what is the best way to make my feelings known?

You should always treat your fellow Board members and the superintendent and administrators with respect. Disagreeing with any of them is not a problem. In fact, a discussion about an issue that reflects two or more views may result in a better decision, rather than if everyone agreed from the beginning and the simple solution was selected. Be certain you respect the individual, however, and debate the issue, not the person. Demeaning comments or loud discussions do not facilitate effective decision-making.

The Board meeting is the place for discussion and for you to make an informed decision and vote your conscious. Once the Board makes a decision, even if you were on the losing side of the vote, you need to agree not to work against the Board's position. Following that simple practice will allow your position to be considered objectively in the future. Nothing undercuts the community's perception of the Board, the district, and itself, like sniping and bickering among its Board members.

How do I approach my superintendent or Board if I have a suggestion for a change?

You can always bring an issue up in committee if the suggestion is part of the business of a committee you sit on. If your suggestion needs to be discussed by the entire Board and voted on, it should be added to an upcoming agenda. You should contact the superintendent or the Board president to discuss your idea and have it either put on the agenda or referred to committee.

It isn't fair to the community, staff or your colleagues on the Board to propose a new idea or change at a Board meeting without prior discussion. In addition to the courtesy that is extended to your fellow Board members by not catching them off-guard, the Board might well be stretching the Open Meetings law by discussing issues that are not listed on the formal agenda. No one likes surprises!

Is it OK to talk to Board members outside the Board meeting?

Yes, you are permitted to speak to your fellow Board members outside of Board meetings. As with the superintendent, you should try to establish good relations with each of the other Board members. Talking with them in social situations or at school sporting events, for example, will give you an opportunity to learn about them outside of the School Board. Be careful, however, that you do not discuss any School Board matters if you have a quorum of Board members present. Discussing Board member

business in the presence of a quorum would constitute a meeting and, if it was not advertised meeting, could violate the Open Meeting Laws. There's nothing wrong with co-existing as a group, as long as you can keep from doing the district's business outside of the public's view.

What can you say, or not say, to parents and friends about school issues?

School Board business that is discussed in executive session or relates to confidential matters (such as an employee personnel issue or student discipline issue) should never be discussed with anyone other than another Board member or the superintendent. A good rule of thumb is to discuss only items that have been made public at a School Board meeting. Adhering to this will go a long way in maintaining trust with the superintendent and the other Board members.

What information is considered confidential?

Employee personnel issues or student discipline issues are considered confidential. Also, the information discussed in an Executive Session meeting is confidential. Confidential means that you don't tell anyone, including your spouse or closest friend.

How do I address concerns for my children with a teacher once I am on the School Board?

This is a tricky area. No matter what you say about "speaking as a parent, not a Board member," it is difficult for some teachers to separate your role on the School Board from the issues you may want to address as a parent. It's not surprising that some teachers may be somewhat intimidated by your role as a Board member. You can go a long way toward disarming this intimidating feeling by making sure that you are not using your position as a School Board member to secure special treatment for your child. Your child should be treated the same as the other students in the school, and be subject to the same rules and requirements. If there are issues you wish to discuss with a teacher, you should follow the normal procedures by contacting your child's teacher to discuss them. In some cases, the teacher may be somewhat cautious, but assurance from you that you are there in your role as a parent might be helpful. If you are not satisfied with the results, be sure to follow the complaint procedures defined in your Board's policy manual and your school's student handbook. You should never relinquish your parental responsibilities simply because you've been elected to the School Board, but as a Board member, it is equally important that you model appropriate behavior by working within the Board's adopted policy.

How do I respond to questions about the School Board's decisions?

It's normal to hear questions about the Board's decisions. You can respond by explaining the thought process that went into the decision and why the Board arrived at the conclusion they did. Be sure to answer honestly and without emotion. One of your roles as a School Board member is to be an advocate for the district. Being asked about Board decisions provides an opportunity to promote the positive activities that are occurring in your schools, while at the same time responding to community questions. If you find yourself in the minority on a Board vote, you still need to communicate the rationale for the decision and the will of the majority. If you voted in the minority on an issue it is better to say, "I didn't agree with the majority, but I can see what they were thinking. We will be monitoring that situation over the next year to see how it actually turns out. If it needs fixing, we can revisit the issue."

How do I respond to questions from the media?

First, look to your policies about who speaks for the Board. Make sure you don't try to take on more than you have the expertise to address. Board members are most effective when they are able to discuss the policy decisions and overall goals of the district. One Board member should be designated to present the Board's point of view. This is usually the president. If the media is waiting to do an interview following a Board meeting, then it is appropriate to refer the question to the president or the superintendent.

If you are contacted by a reporter, and you are unprepared for an interview, it is best to avoid saying: "No comment." Rather, you can say you don't know the answer, but you'll be happy to find an answer and get back to them. Then be certain you follow through and provide them with the information they are requesting. It's always good to ask what their deadline is, and then respond within that time frame. In all situations try to be honest, speak in plain English and in short, quotable sentences. Be friendly and warm. It is important to identify whether you are speaking as a representative for the district, or as an individual. Clarify that point for yourself, and for the reporter.

How should I handle negative or untruthful comments from the community?

If you are aware of untruthful comments from the community, and you are comfortable speaking to the people passing on these untruths, then you might consider visiting with them and providing the correct information. If you are not comfortable speaking with the people who are advancing the incorrect information, maybe there is another Board member who would be willing to meet with them. You should also notify the superintendent and Board president if the negative or untruthful comments become pervasive.

How should I respond to parental complaints?

If contacted individually, you should refer the person to the appropriate channel of authority, except in unusual situations. Board members should not take private action that might compromise the Board or administration.

The best way to respond to parental complaints is to be a good listener. In the process of listening, you can ask questions to understand the situation better, but be careful the parent does not interpret your questions or comments as an indication of future Board action. Once parents have shared their complaints with you, try to give them guidance on how to get their concerns addressed through the proper channels.

It is critical that you know, and are able to explain, the district's complaint procedures. Encourage them to follow the prescribed steps. Remember, it is not your responsibility to take on the concerns of each community member who calls you. You are not the source for their solution (as a single Board member, you don't have that kind of authority), you are a resource that will help them solve their own issues. You should listen to them, but then make sure they know to contact the school staff to have their concerns addressed in the appropriate manner. It's important they understand that, in your role as a School Board member, you do not get involved in the management of the school; your role is to set goals and oversee the school district's operations.

Ultimately, you may be called on to sit in judgment of a staff member or a student. If you have been convinced of the person's guilt prior to the hearing, you cannot be a legitimate juror during the objective presentation of the evidence. Don't give up your right

as a Board member to serve in this role!

How should the Board communicate with the community?

You should review your School Board policy on community relations. This area is quite involved, but at a minimum, you should strive for two-way communication with local opinion leaders and engage them in a regular, ongoing dialogue about your district. The more your community is involved in the schools, the easier it will be to gain their help when you need it — whether it is to pass a bond issue for much needed improvements, or to explain a controversial decision that the School Board makes. And be sure to celebrate the successes of each school with the community as well!

Can Board members communicate with each other via email?

School Board members may use email to communicate with each other only if they are not using it to conduct Board business, decide issues in advance of a meeting or as a means of avoiding open meeting requirements. You should be particularly careful to avoid sequential email communications. While a Board member may send an email to ask a question of another Board member, it is not appropriate to forward the question and answers on to other Board members as this might appear to be a decision making process. Remember, if you are using a school email address, the public or media under the Freedom of Information Act can request copies of all emails. Board members, in their capacity as Board members, cannot use email to conduct Board business. It is appropriate to use email to disseminate information and in messages not involving deliberation, debate, or decision-making. It is OK to use email to suggest an agenda item, as a reminder, or in response to questions posed by the community, administrators, or school staff.

There is no expectation of privacy for any messages sent or received by email. Board members should keep public and personal communication totally separate.