

WORKING WITH THE BOARD

• *When are issues serious enough to bring to the Board?*

It's difficult to have a rule of thumb that works in all situations. If you are hearing from a number of people in your community about concerns, you might want to check with other Board members to see if they are hearing the same concerns. An issue or activity that is counter to Board policy should be brought to the attention of the president or the superintendent. When in doubt, you should feel free to discuss concerns with the superintendent and the president at any time. They can help decide if the Board needs to be proactive about the issue.

• *Explain the committee structure, function and role.*

School Boards operate in two ways. Some Boards operate as a "committee of the whole" where all issues or activities are addressed by the entire Board together. Boards that choose this method of operation usually receive the same information at the same time, and have the ability to deliberate each issue. Other School Boards function with a well-defined committee structure where the Board members serve on several committees, and a committee first addresses issues or activities before the issue comes to the full Board. Board members are appointed to standing committees by the president and typically serve for one-year terms. Ad hoc committees can also be established to deal with a particular one-time issue, although their length of term may be less than one year. The committee structure works best when the Board fully trusts the other Board members and is willing to accept the work and recommendation of this smaller subset of the Board.

This does not mean the full Board cannot ask questions and become informed prior to voting on a motion at a Board meeting; in fact, they need to become informed in order to vote responsibly. Rehashing the entire work of the committee, though, defeats the committee's purpose. Boards that follow a committee structure feel it saves time and allows each Board member to delve more deeply into fewer areas. Some Boards find they are able to deal with more issues with this approach, and each Board meeting is more reasonable in length. Possible standing committees include: policy, finance, curriculum, public information, student and athletic, buildings and grounds, and personnel. One last point to be aware of is that committees are subject to the Open Meeting requirements even when there is not a quorum.

• *How do you survive politics?*

Politics is often considered to be a negative activity, hence the need to "survive it." Consider, however, that the powers of your School Board are established by our state legislature and your Board is based on the same principles of representation as our government. School governance is founded on the belief that a group of (potentially very different) people representing various constituents in their district can make better decisions than any one person alone could. With this in mind, one way to think about the politics is to be open-minded about the opinions of your fellow Board members. Your goal should not be to convert them to your point of view, but rather to determine the best solution on an issue by working together to try and accommodate all views. You want the students to be the "winners" - not one Board member or another.

• *How can I best assimilate into the team?*

It's always a good idea when joining a new organization to take time to listen and observe before trying to make an impression. Ask lots of questions so that you can

understand how your Board functioned before you joined it. You should certainly feel comfortable asking questions and making recommendations, particularly if you have taken the time to do some homework about your Board prior to serving on it. Remember, some of your fellow Board members have been together for many years and the Board may be very cohesive. Like any other team situation, initially it may be difficult to feel part of the team. However, with patience and an open mind and a willingness to learn, it won't be long before you will naturally assimilate into the team.

• ***How do you get more comfortable within your Board?***

It is always a good idea to try to establish good working relationships by getting to know your fellow Board members in situations other than simply Board meetings or committee meetings. If there is someone you are not comfortable with, invite them to go out for coffee or lunch so you can spend time getting to know one another. Trying to find some common ground or point of view that you both hold will increase your comfort level with that person. School events, such as sporting events or assemblies, can also offer you opportunities to visit with your fellow Board members.

• ***What should a Board do when it is not working well as a team?***

Open communication is critical to the proper functioning of your Board. If you feel your Board is not functioning well, it may be appropriate to suggest a workshop where the Board reviews Board Standards and its policies that establish how it will function. If the policies are not effective, then consider adding or clarifying the policies. In some situations you may want to ask AASB to assist your Board in improving the working climate.

• ***How do School Boards get information in order to make decisions?***

For most routine decisions, Boards rely on their superintendent and other staff members to supply them with necessary information. However, there are decisions that may require the Board to seek community input or to consult experts. Such information should always be sought in an organized fashion as the result of Board—not Board member—action. It is important to remember that the best Board decisions are made when Board members have access to the same information, share their opinions openly and honestly, and respect each other's differences.

• ***What is the most important consideration when making a decision?***

The primary consideration is the impact the decision will have on the students. If you understand the facts and relevant data and you keep the needs of **all** students in mind when making decisions, you will undoubtedly make good decisions. Remember, your first responsibility is to every student in your district. Keeping this in mind will greatly assist you in making the right decisions despite pressures you might receive from certain constituent groups.

• ***What can or can't School Board members reveal to each other?***

School Board members will learn information that is confidential and should not be discussed outside of a Board's executive sessions. This does not limit discussions between School Board members, but rather with friends and family. Board members should feel they can discuss issues that are before and within the jurisdiction of the Board.

• ***When I'm in the minority on the Board, how can I influence the other Board***

members to consider my point of view?

You can still be an effective Board member, even if you hold a minority point of view. If your Board has established a vision and mission for the school, as well as district goals based on this vision, you can stay focused on these priorities by ensuring that recommendations are consistent with your district goals before a vote is taken. If your district has not established district goals, you can try to keep people focused by asking how to address an issue in the best interests of the students.

• *Should the Board set goals for itself each year?*

Yes, it is a good idea for a Board to have goals and to evaluate them on a yearly basis. In this way you have a scheduled forum for discussing (and measuring) the effectiveness of your Board and how to improve it.

• *How does the Board assess its effectiveness?*

The Alaska School Board Self Assessment, based on Board Standards and performance indicators, is available online. The assessment should be viewed as an opportunity to improve how the Board works—not just a critique of its operations. The purpose is to identify expectations and strategies that will help the Board and superintendent enhance the performance of the district and improve student outcomes.

This is not meant to be an assessment of individual board members, but of your school board as a whole. Full board participation is important. Begin the process by talking with the other members of your board to agree to participate in the assessment. Skillful handling of the review can result in a discussion that focuses on the identification of potential solutions to a problem, rather than a rehashing of the events or issues that led to a concern.

