

## Into the Fold

How to introduce your new board members to your district

By JANET BAMFORD

Brand new board members may know a lot about their communities, but they probably don't know as much as they think they do about their school board. Even the most conscientious community member, who has been faithfully attending board meetings hasn't been privy to ongoing executive session discussions, negotiations that are in process, and a host of other issues. "When you first run for a school board, you have no idea how the board truly functions," says Jane Kershner, director of field services for New Jersey School Boards Association, and herself a former board member. "It is critical that a new board member understand the workings of a board." That's why it is important for a local board to conduct some sort of orientation to acquaint the new board members with the workings of a district.

This orientation is different and distinct from the new board member training that is conducted by the New Jersey School Boards Association that new board members are required to complete. That program covers topics such as the roles and responsibilities of board members, the Sunshine Law, the School Ethics Act, policymaking, school finance, labor relations, and evaluating the chief school administrator.

But local board members need some sort of initiation and orientation into their own district's board. That could be as informal as the current board president and the superintendent sitting down for coffee with the new board member. "When I was a board president, I would call new board members with the agenda for the reorganization meeting and go over it with them item by item," says Kershner. "The reorganization meeting is a big one with several items that have to be voted



on. They could decide to abstain if they felt they couldn't vote on an issue, or they could ask questions prior to the board meeting."

Other boards have a more structured program, with new board members coming to the board office to meet administrators, and perhaps tour school buildings.

Several weeks ago *School Board Notes* online ran a 30-Second Survey querying readers about their local board initiation. One respondent described the process his district goes through. "The new board member or members meets with the superintendent and the board president to go over current issues and basic boardsmanship," he said. "We have a specially prepared briefing book for new members with copies of all the labor agreements, the Board Member Code of Ethics and other important documents. Our briefing lasts about an hour and is done within the first few weeks after reorganization."

Another tactic is to provide the new member with an unofficial adviser.

"Some boards find it useful to assign a seasoned board member to be a mentor to a new board member," says Terri Lewis, NJSBA field service representative and former board member. "At first new board members don't mind asking questions at a meeting or even beforehand, but after awhile new board members just don't want to keep asking 'what does this mean, or why do we have to do this, or why can't we do this?' The new members feel more comfortable going to an assigned mentor with those questions."

Whatever the form, boards of education should have some process for welcoming new board members. Here is information that new board members need to become acquainted with soon after taking office:

**The current issues** What topics is your board currently grappling with? Is the district in the middle of negotiations with the teachers? Is it negotiating to buy a piece of land for a new school or reviewing the language arts curriculum in the elementary schools? What is the status of any litigation the district is currently involved in?

**The district administrators** It sounds elementary, but board members should meet the superintendent, the business administrator, the assistant superintendents and other supervisors or top administrators in the district.

**The district's policy manual** New board members should be acquainted with how to use the manual and how to find information they may be looking for.

**The contracts** A new member should know something about the existing labor contracts such as the superintendent's contract, the teachers' association contract.

**Visit the district's schools** In districts with several schools, it is likely that a new board member has never even been inside some of the schools. It is easier for members to make informed decisions on district facilities if they have seen them.

**Ethics materials** The Board Member's Code of Ethics and the ethics and financial disclosure forms board members are required to fill out should be provided.

**District documents** A new board member may find it helpful to see the district's budget and its strategic plan

**The rules** As soon as possible after taking office, a new board member should be briefed on what they can and can't do and can and can't say, and on how the chain of command works in their district. New members should know they can't call a school principal and suggest they fire a teacher or talk with friends at the supermarket about the *real* reason a popular teacher wasn't given tenure. These are the types of things that are violations of the school ethics act and can get a board member – and an entire board – in hot water. "You need to help prevent the new member from making an irretrievable mistake," says NJSBA's Kershner.

**Standard board procedures** New members should understand board procedures, how the board's agenda is drawn up, and some basic parliamentary procedures. Does your board work as a committee of the whole or via a committee system? A new member should also understand a board's unwritten rules: many operate under an unofficial "no surprises" policy while at a public meeting. That means not playing "gotcha" at board meetings. If a new board member needs clarification on something in the board packet, he or she should understand that they can ask for more information before a meeting.

**The boardmanship basics** Then there are the lessons that new board members need to learn that can't easily be summarized on a list of policies and procedures. These

are the ones that may ultimately determine how successful they are as board members. This would include understanding that there is a steep learning curve for board members and that new additions to the board probably need to spend the first several months listening carefully, and building their relationships before trying to change things. Brand new school board members also need to fully appreciate the fact that they are one vote on a board and that a majority of the board is needed to approve any new measure.

"We always advise new members to remember they're part of a new team," says Mary Ann Friedman, NJSBA field service representative and former board member. "Board members want to come in and hit the ground running, but we tell new members to take time to cultivate those relationships. That includes building a good relationship with the superintendent and the business administrator."

The other bit of boardmanship that new school trustees should absorb as soon as possible is that they're representing all the children in the district, not just their own children, or a special interest group. "A defining moment for any board member is when he or she bumps up against a vote that may alienate their constituency but is in the interest of all the children in the district," says Jane Kershner.

One final recommendation for a local board orientation: urge the new member to complete the mandatory NJSBA New Board Member Orientation program as soon as possible. Although the law allows members to take the training anytime during the first full year in office, the sooner a member attends, the easier and more productive his or her first months in office will be. **sl**

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