

What Board Members Want to Know

NJSBA's Field Service Representatives have answers to frequently asked questions

By the NJSBA Field Service Staff

NJSBA's Field Service Representatives (FSRs) function as every board's own consultant on matters ranging from board governance to student achievement. They are a little like the old-fashioned family doctors that made house calls, bringing with them a wealth of resources, recommendations and wisdom.

Every day the FSRs speak with board members – by telephone, via email, at board meetings and retreats and at training programs. Below are some of the questions they've heard in recent weeks, and their advice.

How do I get my board to focus on improving student achievement rather than focusing on more operational types of issues?

There are a few easy steps you can take to put student achievement front and center in everyone's mind: ask the board president or the entire board to put a teaching or learning topic on each agenda. This encourages the administration and the board members to concentrate on one or more academic-focused topics each month. Ask for quarterly updates on the district goals that involve improving student achievement. Always tie decision-making to the district goals and the goal of improving student achievement, whether decisions involve facilities or finance. Always ask: How does this impact student learning? These six words are a powerful tool to make sure your district maintains the proper focus.

How can we get parents more involved in their children's education?

Parent involvement has become a frequent topic in schools and at the board table. Families seem busier than ever juggling work, family life, and their children's activities. School officials often find it difficult to successfully involve a large number of families in the school community. It seems everyone is asking, "what can we do differently that will encourage parents and guardians to get involved in their child's education?" District officials first need to define what "parent involvement" means to them and the outcome they envision for their school community. With the changes in family structure and demands, schools need to look for non-traditional ways of gaining parent support.

Understanding the families of

the children we serve can go a long way to breaking down the barriers that lie between school and parents.

The primary focus a district can take is to get to know its parents and provide opportunities for parents to know them. Establishing a strong connection from the first day of school can lay the foundation for building a lasting relationship with parents. Teachers are a district's first line for public relations and the first step can be a personal phone call to a parent in the beginning of the year to say "hello, I'd like to get to know you...we are going to be partners this year helping your child." It is important to understand that parents come with differing perceptions of education. Some families pose particular challenges, and positive outreach from the school is crucial. When a systematic mission of the district is creating opportunities to help parents understand the connection between their involvement and their student's success, sustained relationships will develop between home and school.

Building family support is a detailed process unique to every district and the students they serve. NJSBA's FSRs can assist a board of education in creating a framework that encourages positive parent involvement.

If a board does a strategic plan, how can it hold the superintendent accountable for achieving the goals of that plan?

The goals of the strategic plan



must become part of the accountability system for the board. The board uses the strategic plan goals in their annual goal setting. The superintendent uses the action plan developed in the planning process and reports to the board (we suggest on a monthly basis) what progress is being made towards those goals. The board should revisit those goals annually to update them and to make any course corrections. The goals are also used in the annual evaluation that the board does of its superintendent.

Our board uses committees to examine issues and make recommendations but lately we've felt that everyone else on the board isn't getting all the information they need from committees to make decisions. What can we do?

The idea of having board committees is that they can share the work of the board, so that the board can come together in a full board meeting (typically the first meeting of the month) to share what they've learned, and with recommendations for any action that needs to be taken. When this system works, everyone should feel comfortable taking action at the "regular" meeting of the board, so that this meeting is relatively brief. Unfortunately, sometimes committees tend to stray into actual decision-making for the district. They come to expect that "decisions" – rather than recommendations – that come from their meetings should be adopted outright. Then other board members feel left out of making important decisions.

It seems that this is happening with greater frequency – board members want to fully vet all the issues at full meetings of the board. And when this happens, what is the point of members attending both committee meetings, then a redundant board meeting?

In these cases, we have recommended boards adopt a "committee of the whole" approach, which is, in effect, what they are already doing. At this meeting, all the pending issues and decisions are discussed such that all the members get the same information- and the same time—and can

ask questions.

Both approaches require discipline – committees require that board members trust each other, and committee meetings of the whole require that issues aren't overly debated so that the meetings run to the early hours of the morning. Some boards are hesitant to try the board of the whole approach – probably 90 percent of boards operate through committees. But many high-functioning boards operate as a committee of the whole because they feel it is more efficient, and tends to discourage micro-management. The recent increase in interest in this may be due to higher turnover on boards, and turnover in administrators.

Our board meetings go on far too long. How can we make them shorter?

There is no concrete answer on how long a board meeting should last. But if your meetings often extend into the wee hours of the morning, it's time to review what is taking so much time. Are you meeting frequently enough? Many districts operate with two meetings per month, a work session to review information followed by a regular business meeting a week or two later. Are board members knowledgeable about their roles and responsibilities, or are they spending time discussing items that fall under district operations and are the responsibility of the administration? If the answer is the latter, the board needs to make sure their discussion on agenda items is limited the scope of their responsibility. This may take a bit of time to work through. Your Field Service Representative can assist you with a meeting audit to determine challenge areas and assist with

getting your meetings back on track.

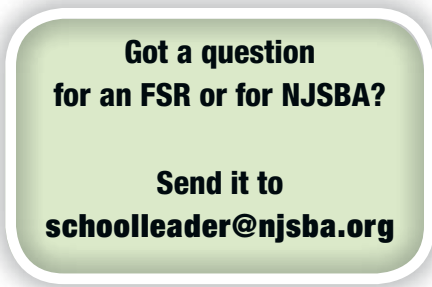
What questions should I ask of applicants for the superintendent's job?

There are two good places to look when formulating questions to ask an applicant for your superintendent's position. First, familiarize yourself with the job description for the position – what does it say are the duties expected of the superintendent? Next, determine what issues are either ongoing or will be coming up that the new superintendent will have to handle. Using this information, you can formulate questions relevant to your district and determine if the applicant has the experience or knowledge to deal with those issues. For example, you know that demographics are changing in your district and your enrollment has been declining. This will be something the new superintendent will need to address and you can formulate questions around this issue – Do you have experience working in a district with declining enrollment? Were you responsible for the plan to close schools in the district? How did you construct those plans? Were they successful? What, if anything, did you learn and would you change anything about the plan?

When should our board go into executive session?

The Open Public Meetings Law (or "Sunshine Law") requires boards of education (and other public bodies) to allow members of the public to attend their meetings and also requires them to discuss most of their business in front of the public.

In a very limited number of specific situations, the board may exclude the public from portions of a meeting known as the "executive" or "closed session." Before adjourning to closed session, the board is required to adopt a resolution indicating generally what matters they will be discussing during closed session and when these discussions will be disclosed



to the public.

Items that may be legally discussed in closed session include:

- matters considered confidential by federal law, state statute, or court rule;
- matters in which the release of information would impair the receipt of federal funds;
- material which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of individual privacy if disclosed;
- collective bargaining agreements or other discussion of the terms and conditions of a collective bargaining agreement, including negotiations leading up to such an agreement;
- matters involving the purchase, lease or acquisition of real property with public funds, the setting of banking rates or investment of public funds where disclosure of such matter could adversely affect the public interest;
- tactics and techniques used in protecting the safety and property of the public and investigations of violations or possible violations of the law;
- pending or anticipated litigation or contract negotiations in which the public body is or may become a party,
- matters falling within the attorney-client privilege;
- personnel matters related to the employment, appointment or termination of current or prospective employees, unless all individuals who could be adversely affected request, in writing, that the matter be discussed at a public meeting;
- deliberations of a public body occurring after a public hearing that may result in the imposition of a fine upon an individual or the suspension or the loss of license or permit belonging to an individual. **SI**