

Calming the Crowd

Think you might be facing an angry public at your next board meeting? Here are strategies for handling the situation.

BY MARY ANN FRIEDMAN

The true test of a school board is how it handles a meeting when there is an angry public on the other side of the board table.

Ideally, even in this situation — especially in this situation — a board lets its community know it values public input. (In fact, it has both a moral and a legal obligation to listen to members of the public.) One of the key roles boards play is as a conduit for information between the community and the district administration. But a board also needs to keep a meeting on course and prevent it from escalating into an out-of-control shouting match that leaves both the board and the public feeling angry and frustrated. That's not productive for anyone.

Here are some ideas on how to calm a crowd.

Be ready for a difficult meeting. Sometimes a hostile audience is entirely predictable. Perhaps the board is proposing something controversial, like redistricting, eliminating personnel, or cutting sports or after-school activities. Recently, members of the public who are angry about COVID-19 issues, such as mask mandates, testing and vaccination, and remote instruction, have been making their views known — sometimes in a disruptive fashion — at board meetings.

But while boards sometimes know in advance that a meeting might be difficult, other times such a situation takes them by surprise. Members pull up to a parking lot that's full or walk into a room that is overflowing.

If you hear whispers from community members that would lead you to think that a large number of people are planning to



attend the next board meeting, make sure you tell your board president. He or she can alert the superintendent and the other board members. It's best if the board and the administration know what's coming and can prepare for it.

If you usually meet in a boardroom with limited seating because you rarely have a crowd, consider moving the site of your meeting to an auditorium or a cafeteria, and have lots of chairs set up. This will accomplish several things.

First, it will make community members more comfortable. When you try to crowd 100 people into a small area, they are more likely to become agitated. If you set up 200 chairs in a cafeteria (when you're expecting 100 people) it gives everyone a place to sit and keeps the air moving in the room. Because people are not on top of each other, or on top of the board, everyone has some personal space and is more relaxed.

There is an ancillary benefit, as well.

A meeting that attracts 100 people but is conducted in a room set up for 200 looks very different than one that attracts 100 people but is in a room set up for 50. If the meeting is being covered by the media, it's not a "standing room only," meeting if everyone is sitting!

Acknowledge the crowd and the emotion.

Often the board president can preempt an ugly situation by making some opening comments and welcoming the public to the meeting. Some boards even prepare a written statement that they will read. Basically, it's useful to say something like this: "Thank you all for coming tonight. There is a large crowd here and we certainly respect the fact that you all took time out of your schedule to come to the meeting. We value public involvement in our school district and we are anxious to hear what you have to say." Acknowledge that people are there for a reason and assure the public you're interested in what they have to say.

Be proactive and demonstrate tone and control ahead of time.

The board president should smile and try to seem relaxed and friendly when facing the public. Set the stage for public comment. The board's tone and demeanor will greatly influence that of the public.

Control expectations from the beginning on what will happen at the meeting.

"We'll probably take the information you have and your questions and then get back to you. We may get back to you in different ways depending on the questions you ask. If you ask something about a student, we

may get back to you personally. If it's an issue that many of you have come here tonight to talk about, we may hold a special meeting or continue this discussion at the next meeting."

Talk about how the public comment period works. Most boards have a policy governing public comment procedures at meetings. Typically each individual has perhaps three to five minutes to speak, and there is often an overall limit for the total amount of time that can be spent on the public comment section of the meeting — perhaps 30 minutes or an hour. The board president should explain the board's policy and procedures.

Many boards have two public comment sections — the first is near the beginning of the meeting and is for "agenda items only" while the second is near the end of the meeting and is for comment on any topic. The "agenda items only" section is to allow for the public to make comment(s) that the board may wish to take into consideration prior to their vote on that particular matter.

The president should tell those assembled that time limits will be enforced (it's important to enforce them for all speakers), and that everyone must treat their fellow citizens and the board members with courtesy and respect. Note that all comments should be addressed to the table and to the presiding officer — not to members of the audience or to a particular board member or members.

Consider extending the public comment period. If you have many people wanting to comment, chances are you'll run out of time on your allocated public comment session. It only takes a dozen people speaking five minutes each to consume an hour's worth of public comment time.

If the issue that is controversial is up for a vote that evening (or even if it's not actually on the agenda), the board can always vote to extend the meeting's public comment period.

Boards should remember they can always add comment time at the end of

their meeting, too. The board can say something like this: "We will have an hour of public comment session right now. Then we will close the public comment session because we need to get to other board business that is on the agenda tonight. But after that is finished, we will reopen the meeting for public comment. You are all welcome to stay and we are anxious to hear what you have to say." While there may be some grouching about this — after

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all, to most people the most important part of a meeting is the part they're interested in — it's a fair way to move the meeting along and complete the board business that is on the agenda.

Consider adding an additional meeting for public comment. If there are still more people who want to comment than there is time that evening, think about telling your public this: "We'd like to propose a session just for public input on the budget cuts," or another particular issue, i.e., critical race theory, educational equity, masks and/or vaccines, etc. Hold an open forum of, say, two hours, just to hear comments. With no other business to conduct, board members can really concentrate on what their community has to say.

Memo to all board members: watch your body language. Every member of the board should sit quietly and attentively while people are commenting. Make eye contact with the person speaking. Board members should not be checking their smartphone

or devices, texting, rolling eyes, sighing or drumming their fingers on the table.

Don't underestimate how bad body language can alienate the public. A board member who leans over and whispers to a fellow board member while a parent is at the microphone might be saying something like "she has a good point," but we guarantee people in the audience will think the board member is whispering something like: "there she goes again."

It's a public comment period, not a question-and-answer period. Board members should avoid getting drawn into give-and-take with members of the public. If the public puts a question to the board, the president should share all the facts and information possible. But board members need to be careful before commenting on a situation they may not be fully informed about, such as something that has happened inside one of your schools. It's fine to say something like: "Our superintendent or our business administrator will be happy to get back to you with an answer on that within 24 or 48 hours, as is our policy. Please make sure we have your name and telephone number or email address so that we can reach you." Remember, a public comment period is just that — a chance for citizens to have their say. It's not a debate period.

Have a plan. How will you handle the situation if there are negative comments made between community members? What happens if someone goes over their allotted speaking time? What if someone refuses to step away from the microphone? The board should have an idea of how to handle these situations.

If things get really testy, it may be necessary to recess the meeting — even temporarily. One NJSBA field service representative was in a meeting where a member of the public actually threw something at the board and hit a board member. "The meeting was being held at a school library and the guy wadded up a bunch of papers with masking tape to make a big ball and then threw it," she remembers. "The board handled it by announcing they were

going to adjourn for 15 minutes.” The board members left, went into another room to allow time for everyone to cool off, and came back. Meanwhile one of the board members spoke to the leader of the community group that the offender was a member of and suggested they get their supporters under control.

In extreme cases, of course, it might be necessary to call in the authorities if a meeting really gets out of control. We are happy to report that is a very rare circumstance.

End on a good note If you’re responding to an individual, reiterate what they’ve said and thank them for their input. “We understand you are very concerned about the program cuts and the impact on your daughter’s

education next year. Thank you for your comments.”

Discuss your next steps Let the public know what your next steps will be in discussing some of the issues raised, addressing the questions asked, and providing additional and ongoing information related to the topics discussed. Say something like: “We have heard a lot of questions tonight. We’re going to be gathering additional information and we will provide more details at our next meeting, which is scheduled for two weeks from now.”

Close on a confident note Reassure the public that the board and administration are up to the challenge of providing a quality edu-

cational program for their students while dealing with these difficult times. Student success will be the top priority that guides the board’s decision making.

Remember the Seven Critical “C”s The best board members convey the following image when communicating with the public: They are calm, cool, collected, concerned, credible, capable and confident.

You may also contact your NJSBA field service representative for additional assistance.

Mary Ann Friedman is an NJSBA field service representative. This article was adapted from a 2010 *School Leader* column that was co-authored by the late **Charlene Zoerb**, who was also a field service representative.