

Joining a school board: Expectations vs. reality

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This issue of *On Board* includes a list of all the newly elected school board members for 2022. Congratulations!

I fondly recall my time serving on a school board. But, looking back, I now recognize how little I knew about my position when I was first elected. I had lofty goals and expectations, and I made some promises that I later learned I could not keep. In hopes that the people listed on pages 8 and 9 have a smoother transition than I did, here are seven important lessons I learned during my first few months on the school board.

- 1. Board members represent all students.** When I was first elected, I had two children who attended school in the district, and I made their interests and concerns a priority as a board member. This was a mistake. School board members must represent the interests of all students, families and community members in an unbiased manner.
- 2. Individual board members have no authority in the school district.** While running for a seat on the school

board, I was under the impression that board members were granted special privileges and had a high level of authority in the district. Boy, was I wrong! Not only are school board members entitled to no extra privilege or access in the school district, but they also have no more authority than

any other community member. It didn't take long for me to learn that the board governs through collective authority. Board

members only have authority at a properly convened board meeting, and decisions are made based on a majority vote of the board.

- 3. You don't know what you don't know.** After you complete your mandatory training, keep going. The internet is not the most reliable source of facts and data! NYSSBA, law firms and local school boards associations all offer professional development for school board members. My school district benefited when I attended NYSSBA's Annual Convention, and so will yours if you attend such events.
- 4. After the election, there is no "quid-pro-quo."** If you get elected to a school board in New York State, there is a good chance you were endorsed by the local teachers union or received

support from a parent or group with a special interest. Remember, no one owns you or your vote. You are not a representative of those who voted for you. You are a representative of everyone who lives and works in the school community, and "stakeholders" include all who are affected by school board decisions.

5. The superintendent is a vital member of the governance team.

The superintendent is hired by the board; therefore, the board can tell them what to do, right? Not quite. Through the vision, mission and goal-setting process, the board can determine the direction of the district. It is the superintendent's responsibility to create the plans to achieve those goals. Afterward, the board evaluates the success of those plans. When the board directs the superintendent in the development of the plans, it is micro-managing, which is one of the leading causes of superintendent turnover.

Pro tip: Think team. While it is important for the board to question the decisions being made are the best for the school community, the superintendent and board of education should be united in their purpose, as defined in the vision, mission and goals of the district.

6. Stay focused on the vision and mission of the school district. I encountered many people who had concerns and complaints about the district. It was very easy for these concerns to distract me from my purpose as a board member, which was to provide every opportunity possible for student success. While you should never dismiss or ignore the concerns of your stakeholders, do not allow them to distract you from the mission. Which brings us to my final point:

7. Board members are not classroom problem-solvers. When concerns are brought to the attention of board members, especially new board members, it is natural to want to "fix" the problem. But it is not the role of a board member to make inquiries at the classroom or school level. Always encourage people to talk with the staff closest to the issue (e.g., the teacher or principal). Courteously forwarding a concern to the superintendent is indeed "doing something" and sufficient in almost all cases.

It may sound inconsistent after all that to say, "Have fun!" but that is my hope for you. It's fun to be good at something that isn't easy, and it's fun to make a difference. Whenever issues arise, know that NYSSBA is here to support you.

