

Dealing with 'rogue' board members

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Is a member of your board attempting to direct district staff? Are they grandstanding at public board meetings and nitpicking every administrative decision? Have your meetings become full of surprises? Are members of your board feeling bullied or intimidated? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, it is likely your board has a "rogue" board member.

Rogue board members almost invariably perceive themselves as crusaders for justice. They believe the board or the administration is engaged in inappropriate, clandestine or illegal behavior. They see themselves as acting on behalf of the best interests of their constituents or the public at large. Right or wrong, a lone wolf board member is a disruptive force. Their behaviors often lead to a tense relationship between the board and the superintendent and reduced credibility with the public. In their attempts to unilaterally demand change, rogue board members may have high ideals, but they tend to create chaos and dysfunction.

Ignoring the behavior and waiting out the problem seldom works. At the other extreme, seeking to remove a board

member typically is not an option unless the individual has violated their oath of office or otherwise disqualified themselves from serving. Attempts to remove a board member tend to be protracted legal battles that damage the district's reputation no matter what the outcome.

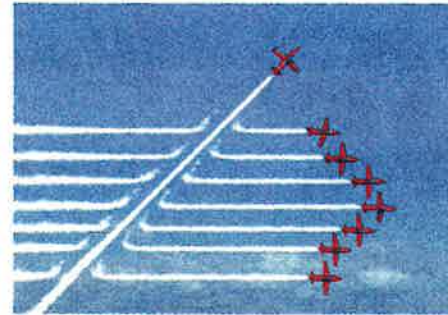
So, what are boards to do to maintain their governance role and ensure that meetings are cordial and efficient?

The typical answers include:

- Speaking with the offending member (one-on-one or as a board).
- Having a retreat to reinforce proper board decorum and roles and responsibilities.
- Reviewing/revising the district's vision/mission/goals/strategic plan.

These strategies have proven effective for addressing concerns and getting everyone on the same page, but they only work when there is buy-in from all board members (including the rogue member). For instance, a retreat would be ineffective if the rogue member chose not to participate. However, if there is genuine dialogue, a retreat is likely to help.

Whatever your strategy, care must be taken to ensure that the offending member does not feel attacked or singled out. The board must work to address the problem, not



the person, taking every precaution to ensure that these efforts do not make matters worse.

An indirect way to discourage rogue behavior is to collaboratively develop a profile of desirable board member attributes – teamwork, open-mindedness, dedication to the district and students, following protocols, etc. This profile could be shared with the public before school board elections to help people decide whether to run for school board. By engaging in the development of this list, any board members with rogue tendencies would have the opportunity to compare themselves to the board's ideal.

A more direct option is to conduct an annual school board performance evaluation. This self-evaluation should include specific performance standards and professional practices that highlight the responsibilities of the board and provide an opportunity for rating and reflection. The evaluation instrument should also provide

an opportunity to reflect on the board's goals and objectives. After each individual board member has evaluated the board's performance, the results are compiled and shared with the board.

This provides an opportunity to identify and reaffirm processes for meaningful board member engagement in functions such as strategic planning, educational performance monitoring and budgeting. It also can identify specific areas that need improvement. The discussion will provide guidance on board processes and protocols and can serve as a check for those behaviors that are operating outside of these expectations. This self-evaluation provides every board member the opportunity to share their concerns in a productive activity that is designed to help them improve their individual and collective effectiveness.

Issues with individualistic board members are all too common. When board members are able to model and communicate best practices, demonstrate a unity of purpose and highlight the personal attributes that are most desirable for board service, they are better positioned to communicate about behavior that deviates from the ideal. If your board needs assistance achieving unity, or if you believe you are perceived as a rogue board member, please call NYSSBA's Leadership Development team.

