

The Importance of School Board Training

By Naomi Dillon, The American School Board Journal, July 2010

Sandra Barry was already a familiar face in Maryland's Caroline County Public Schools when she was appointed to the board. Being an active PTA volunteer and participating in district meetings was a large part of it, though in her rural area, it's simply unavoidable: Everybody knows everybody and everybody knows a school board member.

That familiarity with key community members and with key education issues lent Barry a certain amount of ease when she took office. But that feeling didn't last long.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred less than a week after Barry started serving, then the No Child Left Behind Act became law four months later. But for Barry, the rudest awakening was from friends and neighbors who came out in droves to protest two proposals before the board -- a middle school restructuring and the designation of an art class as Advanced Placement.

"People lined up at public comment, people I even knew, to tell us what morons we were and how we needed to be thrown out of office," says Barry, who now is president of her board. "I was stunned, which sounds horribly naïve, but the intensity surprised me. The fact is that you can present people with the facts, but if they have an emotional attachment, they can't see the big picture. They can't see beyond their child."

As Barry learned, being a school board member isn't easy, not then and especially not now, underscoring the importance of ongoing training and professional development. Lisa Bartusek, NSBA's associate executive director of state association services, says a big part of what board members bring to the table is common sense and an understanding of the community's values, but boardsmanship has a very technical element to it.

"People aren't born understanding the intricacies of school funding formulas, parliamentary procedure, open meetings, and public records requirements," says Bartusek. "Board training helps lay citizens get up to speed quickly with the practical knowledge to perform their role."

Guiding and leading change requires board members to be aware of educational innovations, best practices, and breakthroughs occurring in other districts and settings -- knowledge that only can be gained through a wide array of training, networking, and professional development opportunities.

"A school board is responsible for vision ... but it's hard to provide visionary leadership when you only see to the edges of your district's boundaries," Bartusek says.

Building better content

Indeed, if boards are facing more changes in their jobs as district leaders, it makes sense that the traditional modes of training must change as well. For Michigan, one of the states hit hardest by the recession, it's meant changing how board development is delivered and packaged.

"We are so sharp, we're ahead of the trend line," says Olga Holden, director of leadership services for the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB). "We are constantly on the lookout. If we're going to survive, we've got to be ahead. We can't be responders."

MASB has been adding new courses annually to its growing catalog as well as scanning pending legislation and conducting public polls to stay on top of current issues and public sentiment. In 2006, for instance, the organization surveyed 600 Michigan voters about their attitudes on school boards and school board training.

A high percentage of respondents believed board development is necessary, with 76 percent having more confidence in the decision-making ability of those who had received training. Today, MASB has no fewer than seven distinct levels of certification, with the most extensive -- the President's Award -- requiring nearly 1,400 education credits.

"People love to be certified, and we built that up," Holden says. "Think about it: We're in education, and we're advocating for learning and achievement, so for them it's pride in achievement."

To make training more accessible and enticing, MASB recently began offering evening and weekend sessions as well as more seminars in more locations. The association even runs customized workshops for individual school districts.

Regardless of the delivery system -- MASB, for example, also is building up its online offerings -- effective training still requires relevant and useful content. Phil Gore, director of leadership development services for the Washington State School Directors' Association, says that content is still painfully lacking in the area of school governance.

Gore, who is pursuing a doctorate in organizational leadership, says he's been "perplexed and frustrated" by how little there is in research and in practice specifically for school board members.

"So much of what we have has an administrative look and feel," says Gore, who uses his hobby of playing the guitar to illustrate the quandary. Though he plays bass, his longtime tutor and jam session partner is a lead guitarist.

"The last time we played, he told me I sounded great but that I sounded too much like a lead guitarist," Gore recounts. "There's lots of criticism about board micromanagement, which is code for 'Get out of my space.' I'm not bashing administrators at all. I'm just saying administrators complain about boards acting like administrators, because [the fact is that board members have] been trained like administrators."

Training advances learning

That's slowly changing in states like Washington, which is developing a curriculum around a comprehensive set of standards for board members. Drafted last year by a task force of mostly school board members, the standards emphasize strategic planning, community engagement, and data-driven decision-making. They also reflect a larger movement in education to set measurable goals, monitor progress routinely, and hold people accountable.

A welcome by-product of focusing boards on the big picture is that they have less time and inclination to focus on personal agendas and issues, the source of most board dysfunction and -- as a result -- the focus of most board training.

"We've shifted the past couple of years away from getting boards to play nice and get along, to having a higher goal, a higher level of student achievement," says Gore, who as a pastor for more than 20 years has had lots of practice bringing people together.

"I've done the marriage counseling stuff and seen the 'he said she said' [accusations], and it is this endless black hole for people," Gore says. "The same can be true of boards, but if we let student learning be the primary driver in our relationships, in our decisions, in our goals, then student learning can be improved regardless of our little tiffs with each other."

Fortunately, more people are beginning to realize that school boards can play an active and integral role in advancing student learning.

"There's a technical knowledge you need as a board member, but from NSBA's perspective -- and many boards agree -- student achievement is the key work," Bartusek says. "It's the most important thing to learn about."

Yet it's the area of boardmanship that is least understood and explored.

"Most of the research we've found on what it takes to significantly improve learning has not included the board, because it was just assumed they were too far removed from the classroom to have an impact," says Mary Delagardelle, executive director of the Iowa School Boards Foundation, the research arm of the state association.

For more than a decade, the foundation has studied the boards of low- and high-achieving districts, comparing and contrasting how they work and how they think in order to identify a defined set of success factors. But the key finding of the Lighthouse Study has been to identify how the board can connect with district staff to make those factors work for student achievement.

"Boards matter, and they matter most when the change you want to see is systemwide," Delagardelle says. "There are many conditions of practice that can't be implemented effectively at the classroom or building level."

In high-achieving districts, the study has found, boards are successful at setting goals, providing support through professional development, and holding the system

accountable. If a board fails to carry out those responsibilities, it can lead to uneven results, disjointed operations, and a disillusioned staff.

Closing gaps in board learning

Closing the achievement gap has been a top goal ever since test scores and achievement data revealed the disparity between white and minority students. Yet movement on this front has been slow, despite the infusion of funds and initiatives -- most of which ignored the board's role in this endeavor.

"The only way to ensure student learning isn't determined by street address, race, or ethnicity is to decrease the variability of instructional quality in every class in every district," says Delagardelle. "The key to that is the board because they are the leadership group that affects the entire system."

Getting boards to understand their unique power is one thing. Getting them to adopt the behaviors to fully manifest these powers is another.

Part of this inertia is self-sabotage -- board members feel inadequate and uncomfortable setting expectations about academics. Part of it is fear among superintendents and administrators that boards will micromanage curriculum and assessment.

But boards are obliged to take a leadership role in setting the mission, goals, and expectations of the system and staff. Sharing and communicating a common vision is the first step in lasting change, but to be more than just words, it must be married with proper support and regular monitoring.

"Boards have a unique role in pushing the system to do more and holding them accountable ... but not in a negative or confrontational way," Delagardelle says. "Because if you can't support your staff, you need to adjust your goals."

Setting expectations, overseeing progress, and leading districts into the future is a tall order, especially for a volunteer position. But, Delagardelle says, Lighthouse Study research has identified two more essential roles to be effective board members: building public will and committing to learning as a board team.

"If we're going to reach those children that we've not reached so far, it will take a different kind of effort, a different kind of support from the community," Delagardelle says.

One of the great leadership challenges boards and districts face is getting the public to believe that all children can learn as long as schools have partners willing to help them move forward. Some districts are more aggressive in their approach to engage the public, but Delagardelle says no single way seems to be better at rallying communities around schools.

"It isn't just communication," she says, "but getting people to feel responsible for public education."

To mandate or not?

With so much to learn and so much at stake, some states have pushed the importance of board training into law. According to a 2009 NSBA survey, 20 states now mandate training for school board members, nearly double the number from a little more than a decade ago. Among those states, nearly all stipulate the number of training hours and/or topics that must be included.

Missouri, for instance, requires training only for newly elected board members on school law, governance roles, and education finance and policy. Texas and 13 other states require ongoing training for all board members.

Kentucky requires board members to earn annual training credits based on their number of years of service. Those with fewer than three years must have least 12 hours of training each year, while those approaching double-digit tenure need only four hours annually to comply with the state law, which was enacted in the 1980s.

"There's no egregious act that springs to mind," says Kerri Schelling, director of board team development at the Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA). "It was just part of an effort to help the school board carry out their functions. There's no job in the world that people are as ill-equipped to do because there's nothing that prepares you for it."

KSBA is required to train new board members, providing them with the essentials on school law, education finance, and their roles and responsibilities. Beyond that, individual board members are left to their own discretion in finding additional training, but they must submit the information to KSBA, which compiles and presents the data to the state board of education.

Kentucky is one of 11 states with an enforcement provision built into the law. However, no board member has ever been removed from office for noncompliance.

"I'd say the vast majority don't even blink [about the mandate]," Schelling says. "They appreciate they will get some training, get some help on how to do these things. They want to be good at this. We have about 1 percent who don't comply or fuss a lot, and my sense is it's symptomatic of a larger problem. They probably aren't on the board for the right reasons."

Putting standards in place

Encouraging the right behaviors was one reason Barry -- who also has served as the state association's board president and now works for the Maryland Association of Boards of Education -- pushed to have the Caroline County board develop a mission statement and handbook.

For years, Maryland has debated whether school board members should be elected instead of appointed to office. Currently, the state has a mix of appointed and elected school boards. Caroline County's school board will become a hybrid in 2012, with three members elected and two appointed.

"We've always had boards that have gotten along really, really well and had personalities that are respectful -- maybe not agreeing, but respectful of one another," Barry says. "I worried that, because of this new makeup and each having different misconceptions about the other, that it would change. So I thought we should put something in place, on record, for this new board to see what we'd like them to aspire to."

The end product is nothing fancy, Barry says. "If you read it, you'll think nothing is going on here because there is nothing super-specific, nothing like 'You won't answer cell phones during a meeting,'" she jokes.

Barry says serving on her board has never been dull. With her tenure scheduled to end in 2012 when the hybrid board takes over, she says boardsmanship must continue to evolve.

"I've been on the board a long time and I've seen a lot of things, but I'm still going to workshops and attending training," she says. "Things move fast and boards change all the time. You've got to keep up with it and how you're working together as a team."

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In tough times, new CPE program shows value of strong data analysis

Are your third-graders reading on grade level? How about your high school seniors?

Have you identified your best teachers? If so, how are they distributed throughout your schools?

Do you have a well-run transportation department? Just how efficient is it?

These are just a few of the thousands of questions board members might face during their tenure on a school board. To answer them successfully, they'll need common sense, good judgment, and the kind of personal skills that allow them to get along with each other and work as a team.

But they'll need something else as well. To answer questions like these and address the issues that underlie them, they'll need data -- good data -- and they'll need to know how to use it.

For more than a year, NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) and state school boards associations in California, Illinois, and Michigan have been working on a pilot project to train school board members in the effective use of data. Supported by a grant of more than \$750,000 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the program builds on the center's "Good Measures for Good Schools," a web-based framework for measuring school quality from prekindergarten through postsecondary school.

One of the program's fundamental goals is to help board members learn how to analyze student assessment data. But in field testing in three school districts, facilitators from

NSBA and the state associations also found that board members wanted to back up tough budget decisions with data -- and be able to explain their rationale to the public.

Because of the recession, "boards all across the country are facing agonizing decisions," says Patte Barth, CPE's director. "It's not just cutting out the fluff. We've done that."

Having good data analysis skills will not necessarily make those decisions any easier or mollify stakeholders when districts have to make painful cuts, Barth says, but it will give board members the confidence to know that they are making informed decisions.

"I think they really appreciated understanding how to use data as a method of decision making and continuous improvement -- not just for assessment," said Angela Peifer, associate executive director for board development of the Illinois Association of School Boards. "That was an 'aha' moment."

Some board members might be reluctant to wade deeply into district data for fear of appearing to micromanage, says Kathy Gemberling, the project's principal consultant. This is understandable, she says. But boards need to strike a balance between being totally "hands off" and overly meddling.

"We try not to be 'down in the weeds,' but we don't want to be 'above the clouds,'" Gemberling says.

For example, it's not the board's job to delve into the intricacies of collecting student achievement data, but it is the board's job to make sure that a strong data system is being used, and used wisely, Gemberling says. She advises board members not to simply ask "yes or no" questions, such as "Does our district collect its own assessment data?" Rather, board members should know things like how often their students are tested, the subjects they are tested in, the testing methods, etc.

To cite another example, it once was enough for board members to know the district's graduation rate. Now, with schools trying to prepare students for 21st century careers and the Obama administration placing tremendous emphasis on post-secondary education, they need to know much more.

"We ask them to look at what happens to students after they graduate, not just whether they graduate," Gemberling says.

Participating in the program field testing were California's San Juan Unified and Twin Rivers Unified school districts; Illinois' Lindop School District 92 and School District U-46; and Michigan's Pontiac School District and Mount Clemens Community School District. CPE plans to make the completed training program available to all state associations during the 2010-11 school year. Information will also be available on the Good Measures for Good Schools website, by visiting www.centerforpubliceducation.org.

Lawrence Hardy, Senior Editor

State associations are best places for ongoing training: Reader Panel

Fast-moving developments in public education means ongoing training is important for all school board members -- regardless of experience.

This is especially true, however, for those new to the board. And the best place to get that training, members of the ASBJ Reader Panel say, is from your state school boards association.

"I have been an active member of our state association, where I have received excellent training in many areas of school board work," says Greg Wolfe, a board member in Illinois. "The most valuable training I have received was the superintendent evaluation training, as this prepared me to better evaluate our superintendent, which is a very important role for school board members."

Anna Bucy, an Ohio board member, said the training she received from the state association helped her "head off difficult on-the-job training."

"Associating with other board members, sharing stories, networking, and finding kinship in similarly minded civil servants was the best training," she says. "Nothing can fully prepare a person for serving a community -- indeed, you will often feel like an island -- but having resources on which to draw for skilled guidance is invaluable."

For Fred Deutsch of South Dakota, becoming a better board member started at home. "Introductory meetings with the superintendent and business manager about the role and function of the school board member in our district was most valuable, followed by state and national training," he says.

While the training at the state and national levels is important, Oregon school board member Beth Gerot says she was presented with an extraordinary opportunity when her district partnered with the Wallace Foundation and Harvard University for a three-year program known as Executive Leadership for Educators.

"I have had the opportunity to be the board member on the team with our superintendent and staff," Gerot says. "The two one-week institutes at Harvard and the collaborative work we have done have been incredible learning opportunities for me. That work has also translated into board goals that are much more sharply focused on student achievement."

On the administrator side, Jay C. St. John has been both a business manager and a superintendent in Arizona. When he decided to move up the ranks in administration, he says one role definitely informed the other.

"Get experience in how the money works in a school district," St. John says. "For two years, I was the business manager of a school district."

"You can mess up a kid's education on a regular basis, but you cannot mess up the money or the community will have you fired."

Reader Panel members growing their own

In some ways, recruiting future board members is like fishing. You have to get them hooked on the work of helping kids, then you reel them in to run for office.

That's what members of the ASBJ Reader Panel said when they were asked what they are doing to get people interested in board service.

For Robert Lawrence of Michigan, grooming future successors on the school board starts with looking around pre-established groups that support his district.

"It's community outreach," he says, listing off various groups through which potential board members are found: "Involvement in our nonprofit foundation, coordination with our PTAs, and other community groups in our district."

Scott Staska, a superintendent in Minnesota, agrees.

"For board members, we have several community committees that spark interest in serving. A number of school board members have come out of financial, academic, election, or other districtwide committees," Staska says. "For administrators, our principals are active in encouraging teachers with strong administrative qualities to pursue the appropriate degrees and licensure to become administrators. We also try to assist in the process by providing opportunities to participate in administrative meetings, provide learning experiences, and allow shadowing of administrators.

Jim Clark of Missouri says the coaching that takes place in Staska's district applies to new and potential board members as well.

"I do a lot of coaching of new board members," he says. "We have had good citizens become board members for the right reason. We try to recruit responsible people to be on our board."

But the lack of a formal process, as Senior Editor Del Stover notes in his story on Page 20, remains prevalent in many districts, according to Reader Panel members.

"Unfortunately," says Sarah Winkler of Texas, "we don't have an organized program."

Stan Pruss, an Illinois school board member, says anyone should feel free to seek office if they're interested. "Whenever any community voter complains about anything," he says, "I suggest they run for the board."