

"Junket" vs. Necessary: Reconciling Expenses for Board Training

Board members often face raised eyebrows as well as raised voices from the public when it comes to spending money for workshop and conference attendance. When your board is questioned about spending precious tax dollars on conference expenses or even to attend a regional workshop or district meeting, you need to know why participation in these events is important—not just to you personally, but to your community.

No one is born knowing how to be a good school board member. Your superintendent went to school for many years as a student, as a teacher and then again as a student, to learn to be an effective administrator. But board members need information on local issues, policies and procedures as well as knowledge of how the educational system functions beyond the community in which they serve.

Annual convention, as well as district meetings, conferences and workshops, offer another bonus: the priceless opportunity to network with your peers from all parts of the state.

Many of the decisions board members need to make involve complex information: tax caps; funding; curriculum; legal issues; personnel issues. And each election/appointment cycle brings new members onto boards—members who need to learn what their role is as board members and get up to speed on the issues. For those reasons alone, continuing education is as important as continuing education for teachers and other professionals entrusted with the education and supervision of schoolchildren.

Currently, Nevada does not require training for school board members, although some states do. Continued participation in the Nevada Association of School Board's New School Board Member Orientations and other professional development opportunities may serve to show that Nevada school board members are taking responsibility for their own continued learning without such state mandates.

A board that cuts training expenses and cites finances is like a business that cuts advertising when it is losing customers. Just as a business needs advertising the most when customers are scarce, school boards need professional development so they can stay abreast of the best thinking on problem solving. Not to do so would be "pennywise and pound foolish."

Make school board training part of your school system policy and include a line item in your budget for these expenses. By including expectations for your own learning both in policy and the budget, you let your community know up-front that it is important.

And as taxpayers become familiar with the subjects covered at NASB's training sessions, they tend to be more supportive of board members and superintendent attendance. Share the program in advance with your local media. Let them know the topics that will be covered and why specific topics are important to your board. Then

make sure to report back to them when you return, especially to share new ideas and strategies that you have learned.

In addition to offering numerous training opportunities all at once, the annual convention also is a time for significant decisions that affect board members throughout the year. Just as board members want to represent the voices in their communities, convention participation by as many member school boards as possible is essential to making sure all voices are heard.

While this information may help you explain your conference expenses, board members also need to be careful about using school system funds to pay only for official, board-approved expenses while at a conference. Personal funds should pay for personal or family incidentals.

By letting your community know the importance of conferences, keeping an eye on your expenses and paying for personal incidentals, board members will be well informed as well as fiscally responsible

This article is adapted from an article by Linda Dawson, director of editorial services for the Illinois Association of School Boards and editor of IASB's School Board Journal.