

Governance

If you want the community to trust your board, try these guiding principles

Mind Your P's

The district badly needed a new school. The board had a plan that was both educationally sound and fiscally conservative, but first voters had to approve a bond referendum to pay for the new building. Board members, district officials, and community volunteers mailed flyers, put up signs, and held informational meetings. Then the campaign took an ugly turn.

Everyone, of course, was in favor of the new school, but the possibility of higher taxes drew protests. Opponents were full of misinformation, and rumors ran wild. Good people accused the board of ignorance, shortsightedness, duplicity, deception, and deceit. After a particularly rancorous meeting, a board member came to me. Visibly shaken, she said, "These people are my neighbors. They know me. They voted for me. What has happened here?"

Electing a person to public office is an expression of trust by voters. Board members are trusted to make the right decisions about curriculum, discipline, teachers, and other school staff. They are trusted with the care and maintenance of the buildings to keep children safe, learning, and growing. They are trusted with making careful and prudent financial decisions.

With community trust, school boards can move forward with the business of education and establish a strategic vision for the district. They can focus on student achievement and outcomes. And they are successful at bond elections.

After 16 years as a board member and four years as a superintendent in two Colorado districts, I have found four guiding principles that boards should follow to build and maintain community trust. I call

them the four P's: prepared, positive, professional, and predictable.

Be prepared and positive

Board members should always be prepared for meetings. Anyone can look at the district's monthly expenditure report and find an entry that will stump the superintendent if sprung without warning in the middle of the meeting.

Practicing "gotcha governance" makes the superintendent look bad and reflects negatively on the board. This tactic consistently fails to elicit the information requested and diverts the attention of the board and administration from more important matters. Once ambushed, the administration will limit the type and amount of information it gives to the board or be over prepared in anticipation of the monthly trivia contest. If the goal is to get answers, board members have a responsibility to warn the administration of the questions and concerns they expect to raise.

People should have positive attitudes about things they build and run. Occasionally, a board may be forced to take a hard stand or a negative action on an issue that inflames the community. But a board that expects to be trusted must be positive about the curriculum, the staff, the administration, and the operation of the schools.

A negative board sends two messages: The school district is not running the way it should and the board is not in control. Negativity creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. A district that operates under the cloud of ill will, runs on fear, or thinks the board or administration is playing "gotcha" will begin to live down to expectations.

The staff will begin to refuse to take risks. Instead, people will look for whom



By Charles Poncelow

to blame and where to hide. The message becomes, "We're a bad district with bad students and bad teachers. Those bad administrators cannot make it work. And the school board is incompetent to govern such a bad system."

Just try to pass a mill levy increase on those terms.

This is not to say that boards should view their district through rose-colored glasses or that they should not identify weaknesses and work to correct them. On the contrary, boards must do exactly that. But they must do so in a positive way, acting honestly, directly, and with good will.

Positive boards exercise leadership rather than control. They focus on solutions rather than problems. They are more interested in delegating authority to make things right than in assigning blame for what went wrong.

Be professional

True, boards are composed of laypeople. Part of the strength of the system is that people from all professions—farmers and carpenters, housewives, and hair stylists—are qualified for board service. Nonetheless, a board that expects to be trusted by its community must behave professionally.

Board members ought to maintain professional appearances. We dress up for important events, whether we are going to church or going to court. The mechanic who comes straight to the meeting from the garage sends a message that his time on the board is not valuable to him. What constitutes proper attire will vary from community to community, but "casual" never meets the standard.

A professional demeanor is as important as a professional look. The conduct of school business ought to be businesslike. The meeting need not be solemn, but a certain soberness is expected. Board members have been known to read the newspaper, file their nails, or talk on a cell phone during the meeting. The public might assume that they are not fully engaged in the district's governance and should not be trusted with important decisions.

Meetings should start and end on

time. The community will not fully trust a board that cannot meet its own schedules, regularly starting late or, worse yet, having members who arrive after the meeting has started. A system that punishes 6-year-olds for tardiness should not have lower expectations of its governors. Board members who do not possess the discipline to stick to an agenda, who feel compelled to make speeches on every topic that arises, or who endlessly belabor every point impede the district's operation. I have not seen any research on this, but I am confident that the worst decisions are those that are made after 10:30 p.m. Only on the rarest occasions, in times of crisis, should a board meeting run past that time.

The primary responsibility for the conduct of the meeting lies with the board president, but all members share in the duty of behaving in a serious and businesslike manner. Creating a reliable record of the meeting also is important. It requires that motions be carefully and accurately stated. The board that discusses a topic for 20 minutes and then votes because one member finally says "So moved" will undoubtedly return to the issue in confusion and disagreement at a later date. Be clear and concise when taking action.

A key aspect of professional behavior is the pursuit of professional development. Education is immensely complicated in today's world. Competent board members must have adequate knowledge of educational research and practice, of human relations law and procedure, and of school finance. They need some understanding of special education, the operation of a school transportation department, building design, construction, and maintenance, and the legislative process at the state and federal level. They should be able to intelligently read a financial audit, a federal grant proposal, a curriculum guide, a staff evaluation matrix, and a school improvement plan.

Additionally, board members must know how to engage the public, how to exercise leadership, how to work as a team, and how to conduct efficient and effective meetings. Board members

should not believe they can do an adequate job just because they attended school or have children in school or because they run a successful law office or car dealership. They must make a serious and sustained commitment to their own education by seeking opportunities for personal growth and professional development.

Be predictable

A board that expects the confidence of its public must operate from a cogent and cohesive vision, developed and shared with the administration and staff. It must move in a deliberate way toward articulated goals. It must have and follow policies and procedures that allow it to act thoughtfully.

Unpredictable boards create anxiety in the district staff, hesitancy in the administration, and mistrust in the community. Boards that panic or get angry should not expect the community to rely on their judgment. A board that changes direction or alters policy whenever a strident voice rises out of the crowd will not have followers because it cannot be perceived as leading.

The public wants change for the better in our schools, but it also values consistency. A board must develop a strong sense of character. Questions will arise about the specific outcome of a specific issue, but there should be a sense that the board views staff, students, and parents in a particular way and acts accordingly.

I once had a member of my board who could always be counted on, regardless of the discussion, to ask, "How will this help our kids?" His vision helped the board maintain an important focus and act with consistency. On more than one occasion, my director of human resources has reshaped and refocused a board discussion with the simple statement, "That's not consistent with how we want to treat our people." Because the board has a strong sense of its own character and the district's character, its behavior, policies, and goals are consistent, predictable, and worthy of the public trust.

Public trust is fragile. School boards can easily drift from being a group of dedicated volunteers to a bunch of op-

portunistic politicians. They can get painted with the same broad brush and stained by scandals and misfeasance from across the state or the nation. The most local and accessible arm of government, they are easy targets. Boards must make it a priority to maintain the community's trust. Without it, we cannot accomplish our mission of high-quality education for our children.

Charles Poncelow (poncelowc@wsd3.k12.co.us) has served for 16 years on the Widefield (Colo.) School District 3 Board of Education. From 1998 to 2002, he was superintendent of Colorado's Hanover School District.