

LEADERBOARD

MAGAZINE

WHAT WE'RE HEARING

Utilizing experience to approach different perspectives with candor and professionalism.

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DEAN

VALUE EXISTS IN MANY FORMS

Our purpose can be common even when our perspectives aren't.

By Don Wotruba, CAE

In April, a school board member told me that the value MASB provided him in a time of upheaval was greater than at any other time he had been a board member. I was truly humbled by that remark—and it is exactly what we strive for as an association—but it made me wonder: What creates value for someone in a member organization? Is it the value of the products and services an entity provides to its members? Is it the staff of the association working with the members at a workshop or a conference? Or does the value lie in the other members of the organization and the opportunity to network?

The conclusion I reached is it's different for every member, and it even changes for the member depending on their current circumstances. A member organization's value lies in being the thing your member needs at the moment they need it. That can also mean at times a member will think you have provided exceptional value—like the board member I just mentioned—and at other times a member may question whether value exists.

It also means a member may even find conflict with the value proposition. What if MASB found you the very best superintendent last year, but this year took a position on a piece of legislation you completely disagree with? Or perhaps you paid district money to attend the Annual

Leadership Conference and one of the keynote speakers offended you personally, but the three clinic sessions you attended were helpful.

I bring these scenarios up because I worry about how we, as a society, are beginning to approach decision making and I truly worry

“
*Far too often today,
something is either
right or wrong.
Either it is for you
or against you.*
”

whether that mindset will negatively impact our membership.

Far too often today, something is either right or wrong. Either it is for you or against you. We are seeing it in our elected officials, the voters and, yes, even in our school boards. The examples I give were really to point out that rarely are things cut and dry. Issues and people are complex, and we all need to take the time to think. Try to probe into an issue to see both sides. Understand that the same circumstance can be seen differently by two people sitting right next to each other.

As school board members, even if you see some things differently than the person next to you, you are better united than divided. Far too many people would like to see public education fail, and I believe the thing that unites all members of MASB is dedication to ensuring that public education provides the tools and knowledge needed for every kid in Michigan to succeed.

Keep your focus on that common goal and not on the differences of opinion that others hope will divide you.



Don Wotruba, CAE

Don is MASB's Executive Director, and can be reached at dwotruba@masb.org or 517.327.5900.

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★ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE ★

IMPROVING EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING TOGETHER

Our work as school board members extends into our communities

By Steve Hyer, MASB Board President and Clarkston Community Schools Trustee

As president of the Michigan Association of School Boards, I love interacting with and hearing from our members. I've recently heard our members talk about challenges they face meeting the needs of their students, as well as responding to parents and stakeholders. That makes our theme for this issue, "What We're Hearing," so relevant to all of us. I hope you find these articles reflective of the top-of-mind issues facing school boards and the MASB programs that can support you.

One of the most pressing issues school boards face today is how to promote civil discourse in our communities. In an era of hyper-partisanship and social media echo chambers, it can be difficult to have meaningful conversations that bridge divides and move us forward. As board members, it is our responsibility to model civil discourse and promote respectful dialogue among all members of our school community.

Another critical issue facing school boards is how to handle different perspectives. We all come to the table with our own experiences and opinions, and it can be challenging to find common ground.

However, it's important to recognize that diversity of thought and perspective is a strength, not a weakness. By embracing and valuing different perspectives, we can make better decisions that reflect the needs and values of our entire community.

MASB offers a range of programs to support the needs of school boards across the state. These programs include training and resources on community relations, codes of conduct and norms, and the role of the board president. By providing these resources and opportunities for professional development, MASB helps ensure our school boards are well-equipped to serve their communities.

As we look ahead to the coming months, I am excited to see the progress we can make together. By promoting positive civil discourse, valuing different perspectives, and taking advantage of the resources and programs offered by MASB, we can continue to improve the education and well-being of Michigan's students.

Thank you for your dedication and commitment to this important work, and I look forward to continuing to serve with you.



Steve Hyer

Steve is MASB's 2022-2023 President, and can be reached at sjh@igdsolutions.com.

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ASK BRAD: YOUR SCHOOL LAW QUESTIONS ANSWERED

By Brad Banasik, J.D.

EACH ISSUE OF MASB'S *LEADERBOARD* FEATURES HYPOTHETICAL SCHOOL LAW QUESTIONS THAT ARE SIMILAR TO THE QUESTIONS THAT THE MASB LEGAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT RECEIVES FROM MEMBERS. THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE LEGAL INFORMATION AND ENHANCE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS' UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL LAW ISSUES BY EXPLAINING HOW LAWS OR COURT CASES APPLY TO GIVEN SITUATIONS.

IF YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE ANSWERED IN A FUTURE ISSUE, PLEASE SUBMIT YOUR QUESTION TO COMMS@MASB.ORG.

WAS IT A VALID VOTE?

A school board was preparing to vote on appointing a new board member to fill a vacated term. The pool of candidates was narrowed down to two finalists. With the vacancy and one absent member, this meeting was attended by five board members.

A motion was made to appoint one of the two finalists to fill the vacancy. Three board members voted yes and two voted no to approve the motion and appoint the candidate. The president declared that the vacancy was filled by a three-to-two vote, because a majority of the board members present and voting at the meeting were in favor of appointing the candidate. The two dissenting board members disagreed, claiming that four votes were necessary to fill the vacancy. Who's right?

Under the Revised School Code, four votes are required to appoint the new board member. Section 1201 of the code provides the following: "An act of the board shall not be valid unless voted at a meeting by a majority vote of the members elected or appointed to and serving on the board and a proper record made of the vote." In addition to requiring the business of the board to be conducted at a public meeting in compliance with the Open Meetings Act, this statutory provision requires a majority vote of four board members of a seven- or six-member board for any action to be valid.

Thus, in this case, the school board cannot take action to fill the vacancy by a mere majority vote of the board members present and voting at the meeting. The appointment will be legally binding only with a 4-1 or 5-0 vote of the board.

It wouldn't make a difference if the school board adopted "Robert's Rules of Order" as its parliamentary authority. "Robert's Rules of Order" does define a "majority vote" as "more than half of the votes cast by persons entitled to vote, excluding blanks or abstentions, at a regular or properly called meeting." While this definition appears to support the president's conclusion that the three-to-two vote was a valid decision by the board, school board members need to remember that "Robert's Rules of Order" applies to meetings and votes only to the extent that they are not inconsistent with Michigan statutory requirements applicable to school boards and meetings of public bodies. In fact, "Robert's Rules of Order" notes that the rules of parliamentary procedure

cannot supersede the Revised School Code by providing: "[T]he actions of any deliberative body are also subject to applicable procedural rules prescribed by local, state, or national law and would be null and void if in violation of such law." Consequently, the Revised School Code's majority vote requirement supersedes the definition of a "majority vote" found in "Robert's Rules of Order."³

Therefore, to fill the vacancy, the school board must conduct another vote to appoint one of the two candidates. And, if the board is unsuccessful in making the appointment within 30 days of when the vacancy occurred, it then relinquishes its legal authority to make the appointment to the intermediate school district board of education.⁴

¹MCL 380.1201.

²RONR (12th ed.), 44:1.

³RONR (12th ed.), 1:5.

⁴MCL 168.311 ("If a vacancy in the office of school board member is not filled within 30 days after the vacancy occurs...the intermediate school board for that school district shall fill [the] vacancy by appointment.")



Brad Banasik, J.D.

Brad is MASB's Legal Counsel/Director of Labor Relations & Policy, and can be reached at bbanasik@masb.org or 517.327.5900.



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WHAT ARE YOUR DISTRICT'S MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES?

Our ability to attract, hire and retain the best staff possible given the current educator shortage. The financial status from Lansing for funding K-12 schools is currently positive but in Michigan this can change quickly depending on economic conditions. We need to realize recent COVID, ESSR and CARES act funding will not be available going forward, and we need to simultaneously meet our building and facility needs, continue to offer engaging curriculum and learning programs, and maintain a sustainable financial future for the district.

ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WOULD GIVE TO ALL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS:

Remember you are part of a governance team, your work is always done as a part of that team, with collaboration and consensus building, and always in the best interests of the kids.

YOUR BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT(S) AS A SCHOOL BOARD?

Last year was significant: MASB assisted us as we simultaneously renewed our strategic plan and conducted our superintendent search upon the retirement of our previous leader. Debbie and her team supported us in developing the new five-year strategic plan. Shawn Lewis-Lakin helped us with the superintendent search, and we were pleased to find we had the best candidate right here in our district with our high school principal, Joseph J. Hatzl. His leadership in his first year, combined with our goals identified in the new strategic plan, has continued our reputation of excellence for our district. Both processes were transparent and stakeholder driven, with comprehensive input from students, staff, community and administration.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MASB PRODUCT OR SERVICE?

Strategic plan and superintendent search, the MASB weekly communications from Lansing, and the quarterly training opportunities offered around the state enabling us to network with other board members statewide. It helps us to know MASB is available with on-site training and advice/guidance through a quick phone call with their team of experts.

If you would like to recommend your district to be featured in a future District Spotlight, please send an email to comms@masb.org.

What We're Hearing

A collection of candid feedback



Student Gender Identity

By Brad Banasik, J.D.

There are a lot of opinions around gender identity, especially when it comes to the rights of schools, students and parents. As litigation regarding sports participation, bathroom usage and more continues, it is important to separate fact from rumor. School boards can sometimes feel stuck in the middle of a tug-of-war between strongly opinionated community members and legal guidance and directives. Increasingly, board members seek guidance about navigating these waters.

In situations where community sentiment may not align with the legal imperatives of school districts, it is more important than ever for boards to clarify their role as district governance officials and stewards of district resources. This often means focusing on established guidance from our courts.

On the topic of issues related to gender identity, courts have increasingly found in favor of granting student accommodations. Districts have legal obligations to protect LGBTQ+ students and employees from discrimination and harassment, as required by the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, Title IX, Title VII and Michigan's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act. And, as recognized by the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, multiple cases have yielded a majority opinion that settled law prohibits discrimination based on transgender status (*Dodds v United States Dept. of Education*, CA 6, 2016).

Given the legal precedents and guidance issued by the Office of Civil Rights, school boards that prevent students from using bathrooms that align with their gender identities are likely to face legal challenges, particularly Title IX complaints. It is unlikely that a school district would prevail in such a case or a Title IX investigation, both of which would require considerable financial investments.

Though the legal directive for school boards may be substantially clear, this remains a difficult topic. Pressure from parents and community members to consider policy to address LGBTQ+ legal issues often creates tension at the board table. Though it may prove difficult, a board should clearly articulate to its community members how the school district's policies must comply with established law and legal precedent and are agnostic to public complaints based on personal opinion or political persuasion.

If your school board is interested in scheduling a workshop on addressing LGBTQ+ issues, please contact MASB's legal department.



Brad Banasik, J.D.

Brad is MASB's Legal Counsel/Director of Labor Relations & Policy, and can be reached at bbanasik@masb.org or 517.327.5900.

Superintendent Evaluations Help Build Better Schools

Encouraging professional growth while holding leaders accountable.

By Jay Bennett, M.Ed.

Along with April showers, spring brings us the sounds of the birds singing and the bees buzzing, long-awaited evidence of buds blooming and grass greening and, for some school boards, it also brings the highly anticipated superintendent evaluation.

The evaluation of a school's superintendent is an undertaking that lies solely with the board of education. While preparing for and conducting the evaluation, it's normal for questions to arise such as how much evidence is required, how should we ask for and receive said evidence, and where will this evidence come from.

So, what's important to remember as we navigate these evidentiary waters? I'm glad you asked! MASB offers guidance that can help.

First and foremost, let's remember the evaluation tool MASB offers was not designed as a 360-degree evaluation of your superintendent. The sections of the instrument that talk about feedback are based on the processes and systems that the superintendent employs to garner feedback from the staff, community and students of your district, about your district. This should not be taken as an opportunity to solicit your thoughts about your superintendent's job performance but instead this feedback should be used as a component in the development of your district's strategic or school improvement plans. Please remember the evaluation of the superintendent lies exclusively with the board.

Secondly, as it relates to gathering evidence for the evaluation, I like the Goldilocks approach. That is to say, the board should ask

for and receive just the "right" amount of evidence. Boards should ask for evidence to bolster a superintendent's ratings in areas in which the board is having a difficult time evaluating the superintendent. For example, if the board is wrestling with how to account for the superintendent's visibility in the district, then it would appropriate for them to ask for access to the weekly calendar to get a better idea of what a typical day looks like for their superintendent.

Finally, it's important to remember that collecting evidence for the purposes of an evaluation is but a very small part of a superintendent's day-to-day responsibilities. As a board, you should strive to be clear, explicit and mindful of your expectations of the evidence you receive as part of the evaluation process.

Much like spring, the superintendent evaluation process provides us with an opportunity to bask in the wonderment of the professional growth of our superintendent while also making sure that you work as a board to avoid the relenting showers of unrelated or irrelevant evidence and our own unrealistic expectations.



Jay Bennett, M.Ed.

Jay is MASB's Assistant Director of Executive Search Services, and can be reached at jbennett@masb.org or 517.327.5900.

Leadership Continuity Leads to Better Student Outcomes

Learning how to keep superintendents in place starts with board training.

By Greg Sieszputowski, M.Ed.

For years now, we have been hearing about the teacher shortage in Michigan and across the country. I believe it's appropriate to correct folks who are using that language, encouraging them to instead say "educator shortage." Mass superintendent retirements and the subsequent hiring of new superintendents has dominated our work in the executive search department over the past few years.

To put this in perspective, prior to 2019 in Michigan there would be between 70-80 changes in the superintendency from folks retiring or moving on to the next opportunity. Between 2019 and 2021, we saw these numbers spike, with more than 310 changes over this three-year span. Yes, you read that right. More than 50% of the superintendents in Michigan have changed districts or retired in the past three years. My team expected this year's turnover to be no different, as MASA recognized 44 superintendent retirements at its mid-winter conference and because of the superintendent churn we have seen over the past three years. Fortunately, this is not what has occurred in 2022-2023.

Here's the good news: To date, we are tracking only 66 superintendent changes. This is a drastic shift from what was anticipated. There are certainly many reasons this shift could be happening. I would speculate that those 300-plus brand new — or newly placed — superintendents are happy to stay put, working to embed themselves into their communities and learning their role. Whatever the reason, this is incredibly positive for districts for a few reasons.

We know from the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's meta-analysis of 27 studies conducted since 1970 that there are significant impacts when there is superintendent longevity in a district. Here are just a few of their findings:

- District-level leadership has a positive impact on students' achievement.
- Effective superintendents focus on creating goal-oriented districts.
- Superintendent tenure has a positive impact on student achievement.
- The impact on student achievement starts in as little as two years.

If leadership continuity leads to better outcomes for students, what can boards do to keep their superintendent longer? Commit to consistent communication built on the strong foundation of good governance. That foundation should be built on the four dimensions of governance: unity of purpose, roles and responsibilities, supportive structures and processes, and a positive governing culture. In other words, develop clear and agreed-upon goals, operate within the scope of your role, develop procedures to clarify how the work will get done, and set norms to define how you will treat each other.

Interested in a conversation about how your board can develop this strong foundation? Reach out to the MASB leadership development team at leadershipservices@masb.org to schedule a Building an Effective Governance Team workshop for your board or to discuss other options to assist your governance team in having a long and productive partnership with your superintendent.



Greg Sieszputowski, M.Ed.

Greg is MASB's Director of Leadership Development and Executive Search Services, and can be reached at gregs@masb.org or 517.327.5900.

Collaboration and Compromise

Working together can be hard – but it doesn't have to be!

By Debbie Stair, M.N.M.L.

In a world where there are endless examples of leaders digging in their heels and being unwilling to move from their position, it's no wonder local school board members struggle with how to handle their own disagreements. Unfortunately, some board meetings are filled with conflicts that are so entrenched and arguments that are so raw that they only seem to be decided by split votes that leave clear winners and losers.

Sadly, when events play out this way, everyone loses. Sides retreat and double down, trying to figure out how to "get one over on them" the next time. Meetings become battlegrounds instead of spaces of opportunity or creativity. Equally as significant, confidence in leadership wanes.

When did compromise become something bad? According to Dictionary.com compromise is defined as a settlement of differences by mutual concessions; an agreement reached by adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims, principles, etc. Synonyms include concessions, middle ground, happy medium. These terms all should be regarded as positives.

School boards have been serving as liaisons between the district's professional educators and their communities since the mid-1600s. There have always been different perspectives and values, as well as competing interests for resources. But today, examples of compromise seem harder to come by. When boards use their

mission and vision as guideposts for their work and keep the students they serve at the forefront of their decision making, compromise is often the means to get there.

That means allowing enough time and preparation for rich discussions about any given topic. Whether your prework is completed in subcommittees or a committee of the whole, different perspectives must be sought out and considered. It is through the full exploration of any subject that we get to the best solution. New options are often found during this stage of the decision-making process, but those new options are only possible when individuals are willing to consider something other than their original position.

When compromise is in play, individuals may win some and lose some—but your students and community always win. Be the shining example we all need by finding healthy ways to work through your differences!



Debbie Stair, M.N.M.L.

Debbie is MASB's Assistant Director of Leadership Development, and can be reached at dstair@masb.org or 517.327.5900.

What is Happening to School Boards?

By Don Wotruba, CAE

Across our country in the last 16 months, we have seen significant growth in the number of school boards in the news, not because of the large citizen turnout at meetings, but because of their inability to function together as a body. This is largely a new phenomenon; school boards as a whole have functioned well for more than a century. Many would say that recently school boards have become more partisan and so we should expect discord. While there is some truth to that thought, voters have always elected school board members that have had their own political alignments. Somehow, for all that time, Republicans, Democrats and Independents have served on local school boards and have functioned well, and rarely would a citizen even be able to tell you what politics an individual board member subscribes to. Today's school boards have to take steps to figure out how they will function as a governance body. To do that, they must have some discussions on why a school board is a governing body and not a representative body, like the legislature or Congress.

Political party is irrelevant to the decisions that school board members make on a monthly basis. If you looked at a whole year of decisions, you would likely find few that were of interest to political parties. Political parties seem to have a growing interest in school board candidates and see them as a great way to build their farm


team for higher elected office. What board members need do is figure out how they will govern in a more fractioned environment, because the work still needs to get done. What every school board should be doing is deciding how they expect each individual member to conduct themselves as part of the body, and how they will act as a united body. School boards need to adopt norms and governance standards that will allow them to become highly functional governing bodies. There are many resources, including some from MASB, that can guide these discussions.

This doesn't mean they have to like each other or agree with each other, but if they can function together, the decisions that need to be made on behalf of the kids will get made. As voters you should expect to have a school board that models good adult behavior. A little bit of work and focus on how they want to function could get things back on track.



Don Wotruba, CAE

Don is MASB's Executive Director, and can be reached at dwotruba@masb.org or 517.327.5900.



WHAT HAPPENED TO BORING BOARD MEETINGS?

Civil discourse is sorely lacking from our public forums. Can we revive it?

By Greg Warsen, Ph.D.

I recently had lunch with a current superintendent colleague who had moved to a home outside of the district. The move was to an entirely different metro area, creating a one-way commute of nearly an hour. The motivation to move was both understandable and troubling. They understood that personal insults and name calling related to mask mandates or critical race theory, etc. were part of the job; however, "When my spouse was physically threatened during one verbal attack, a line was crossed that we could not ignore. We literally slept with the lights on until the day we moved."

I asked how the board responded to this relocation, as most school boards would want their superintendent to live within district boundaries. Not only did the board of education understand and support the move, but they also renegotiated the superintendent's contract to include a nearly 20% raise to retain the highly effective leader.

Another colleague recently shared that two newly elected board members told him shortly after the election that they were put in office to fire him. Things have gotten way out of hand in some districts, to say the least.

BOARD MEETINGS: TOO EXCITING

Having spent 25 years working and leading in the public school system, I have attended and presented at more board of education meetings than I can count. I recall now with almost romantic gratitude how uneventful — even pleasantly boring — most of these meetings were. Board members would stroll in 10 to 15 minutes prior to the pledge and exchange cordial pleasantries. We would assemble into our seats, and then rise to recite the Pledge of Alle-

giance. The board president would open the meeting, ask for public comment (these were rare), and then ask me for the superintendent's report. These reports would include chilling, edge-of-your-seat revelations such as the accounts payable for the past month, perhaps a few new hires or transfers on the personnel report, or a presentation from my team on how a new curricular initiative was progressing. The meeting would close with the president asking trustees if they had any comments or questions. Some would comment on an event they had attended (the school play was particularly good that year) or thank staff for accomplishments on behalf of students (the coach who helped an athlete with a scholarship application). That was pretty much it. Visitors outside of board members and administrators were rare, and we interpreted this as implied trust among the community, the board and district administration. If this still describes your setting, consider you and your district fortunate.

Contrast that almost idyllic setting to what we see in too many board of education meetings now. Public comments devolving into lengthy rants (that need to be gavel managed) about COVID responses, critical race theory, LGBTQ issues, library resources and education's perceived left-wing agenda. These issues and others like them create canyons of perceived conflict, with zealots on both sides competing for attention and power. Volunteer board members, formerly cordial colleagues, have evolved into bitter rivals on either side of a given issue. Trustees are — at best — wondering if all this is worth donating one or two Mondays per month and — at worst — resigning from service, either in disgust over what the community has become, out of fear for personal and family safety amid threats, or in profound lament and distress for what these examples are teaching today's children.

CAUSES OF POLARIZATION

What happened? We can blame the pandemic for some of this, but broader societal divisions are at play and finding their way to the schoolhouse door. According to recent polls from the Listen First Project:

- **87%** say political polarization is a threat to America.
- **71%** believe American democracy is now threatened.
- **66%** of partisans see the opposing party as “a serious threat to the United States and its people.”
- **51%** expect political violence to increase.

Technology also plays a role. Gone are the days when many people got their news reports from the same—or similar—trusted sources. While the growth in number and diversity of media outlets may have benefits, it also means we can silo ourselves into our own echo chambers, essentially cutting ourselves off from opposing or uncomfortable views. Do this for a couple of decades and we are all living with the results.

It is not difficult to see how and why these divisive dynamics would play out in public schools across the state and nation. In these settings, thousands of parents and guardians within a given district need to come together and educate their children. Conflict has always been a part of this equation, but now it intensifies as polar opposites clash on a variety of issues in classrooms, playgrounds, sporting events and board meetings. The consequences of this polarization are anything but small.

IMPACTS FILTER THROUGHOUT THE SYSTEM

As someone who prepares aspiring school and district leaders, I am very concerned about the leadership crisis in this state, and the examples above only make matters worse. MASB has shared that the turnover rate for superintendents is at an all-time high. I wish it were difficult to understand why, but examples of those in the top leadership role under attack receive broad media coverage. To say



that is a poor optic for developing the field is an understatement.

Classroom teachers are also in incredibly challenging situations right now. In multiple polls, online videos, etc., teacher morale is at an all-time low. The Rand Corporation released a report that found that teacher (and principal) “well-being” was lower than other adults in the workforce. The challenge historically has been that society did not value education as an industry per se but did appreciate their local school district. However, when a social studies teacher in Iowa is afraid to take a stance against slavery because the district is telling him not to take a stance on anything, we have really lost the common-sense narrative.

Similarly, a student in one of my educational leadership courses complained that 60% of the books in the school’s media center had been pulled from the shelves out of fear that a small yet vocal and influential group of parents might be offended. Rather than ensure students have access to a diverse and broad set of ideas, the path of least political resistance was chosen instead.

What do these situations tell current college freshman and sophomores about what their life as a teacher might look like?

The impact is hitting students as well, and it is happening on both sides of the political spectrum. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development published an article titled “Teaching Students to Talk Across Political Difference”

in April illustrating how students on the right can be and are marginalized. In their introduction, they describe a student who came to school wearing an article of clothing that supported the Republican side of the aisle but angered those on the left. Name calling and insults ensued both in

person and online. Perhaps most troubling was the student’s online post after the incidents, saying, “The adults and students at Marshall are ‘total hypocrites.’ They claim to believe in free speech and to respect diverse opinions, but not a single adult, even when they were within earshot, had tried to stop the insults.”

A BETTER OPTION: CIVIL DISCOURSE

There is, however, a better way to navigate all this incivility: civil discourse. In her 2009 book “Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future,” Margaret Wheatley summarizes civil discourse well: “We don’t have to let go of what we believe, but we do need to be curious about what someone else believes.”

Civil discourse is a set of protocols and practices that can be taught and learned, and that many have experienced in action. For example, in her 2021 book “I Never Thought of it That Way,” Monica Guzmán describes two politically polarized groups meeting for fruitful conversations with one key ingredient held in common: curiosity. While they did not necessarily change each other’s minds, and that was not the point, they did come away with a better understanding of how each arrived at their opposite positions. And many maintained relationships long after the structured meetings.

Imagine a well-facilitated community forum in which you bring together neighbors on all sides of the political spectrum to talk about the hard issues: what is critical race theory and is it present in our schools? How do we feel about how to approach students who identify as LGBTQ? What concerns are there about the curriculum we use and how would we describe the underlying motivations of those concerns? What are the stories and the values that lead to these?

To be clear, civil discourse is not a silver bullet that brings consensus. In fact, it does not attempt to change minds, but it does attempt to grow curiosity and understanding.

This, in turn, can lead to greater levels of respect among all parties. And a community with higher levels of respect will be better positioned to make the tough decisions around how we educate our children. Quite simply, we must find a safer space to make these decisions if we want to see our democracy continue.

Additional resources can be accessed through the Padnos Sarosik Civil Discourse Center at Grand Valley State University. The center will host a symposium focused specifically on public education on Nov. 16 at the Grand Rapids campus of GVSU, entitled Calming the Chaos: Honoring All Voices in Public Education.

At last year’s symposium, keynote speaker John Noltner described his experience moving into a new community. While still unpacking, one of his new neighbors came over to invite him to an upcoming potluck for residents in the immediate neighborhood. Wisely, John did not want to commit to attending without checking with his wife, but the neighbor was insistent that he be there. When asked why this was so important, the neighbor explained that at some point, one of their kids would do something stupid that would result in property damage for the other: an overthrown baseball or errant golf ball through a window, for example. He said he did not want their first significant interaction to take place in response to a conflict. Instead, he wanted the opportunity to get to know John and his wife over lasagna and dessert.

This fall, we want to do the same. We want to get to know you over good food and dessert, to begin some tough conversations on the potentially divisive issues in public education. We hope you can join us, from wherever you find yourself on the political spectrum.

Civil discourse may not build instant consensus, but it can be a key piece to the puzzle that brings communities together in forums such as athletic events, drama productions and the frozen food section. It is worth a look.



Greg Warsen, Ph.D.

Greg is the Graduate Program Director for the Ed.S. in Educational Leadership and Endowed Professor for Civil Discourse at Grand Valley State University, and can be reached at warseng@gvsu.edu.

Norms Ensure Everyone Knows the Rules

Structure and guideposts help boards work effectively, stay on track

By Debbie Stair, M.N.M.L.

I think we can all agree that the work of school boards is challenging, but it's some of the most meaningful work one can do! If we begin with that premise, then we should also agree that we should do everything in our power to make that work as productive as possible. School board work is made up of equal parts art and science. Art is developed over time as we reflect and learn from each successful and unsuccessful endeavor. The art of the work can also be learned by observing others in the field.

When it comes to the science of school board work, it's all about setting up structures and guideposts to lean on when the work becomes more challenging. Some are for the individual and some are intended for the group as a whole. Taking the time and effort to put the structures in place early will pay dividends in the long term. Putting them in place when you think you need them the least is

when it is easiest to do. The proactive approach of developing such standards of behavior should be intended to help a team achieve higher levels of performance, rather than a reactive one to address seemingly bad behaviors.

When I'm called out to districts to provide assistance, it has been my experience more often than not that teams struggling to work together lack the structures to support them. They didn't take the time needed to do the work in a proactive and deliberate way. During that initial conversation, my first question is usually, "Do you have norms or a code of conduct in place?" because norms help establish a positive culture. Team norms guide and direct behavior, provide order and predictability, and make sense of and help us understand each other's actions. Without norms, chaos can — and usually does — occur.

Norm (noun):

A standard, model, or pattern;

- 1. General level or average;**
- 2. A behavior pattern or trait considered typical of a particular social group.**

In the context of teamwork and collaboration, norms are agreed-upon definitions of productive behaviors and mindsets that should be usual — or “the norm” — whenever a group works together. Norms are a social contract that supports a group’s collaborative work. Norms are explicit and visible to the entire group. When they are in place, they can provide a framework for addressing behaviors that might be distracting from the work of the team. Your norms don’t have to be an extensive list. Start small and build from there.

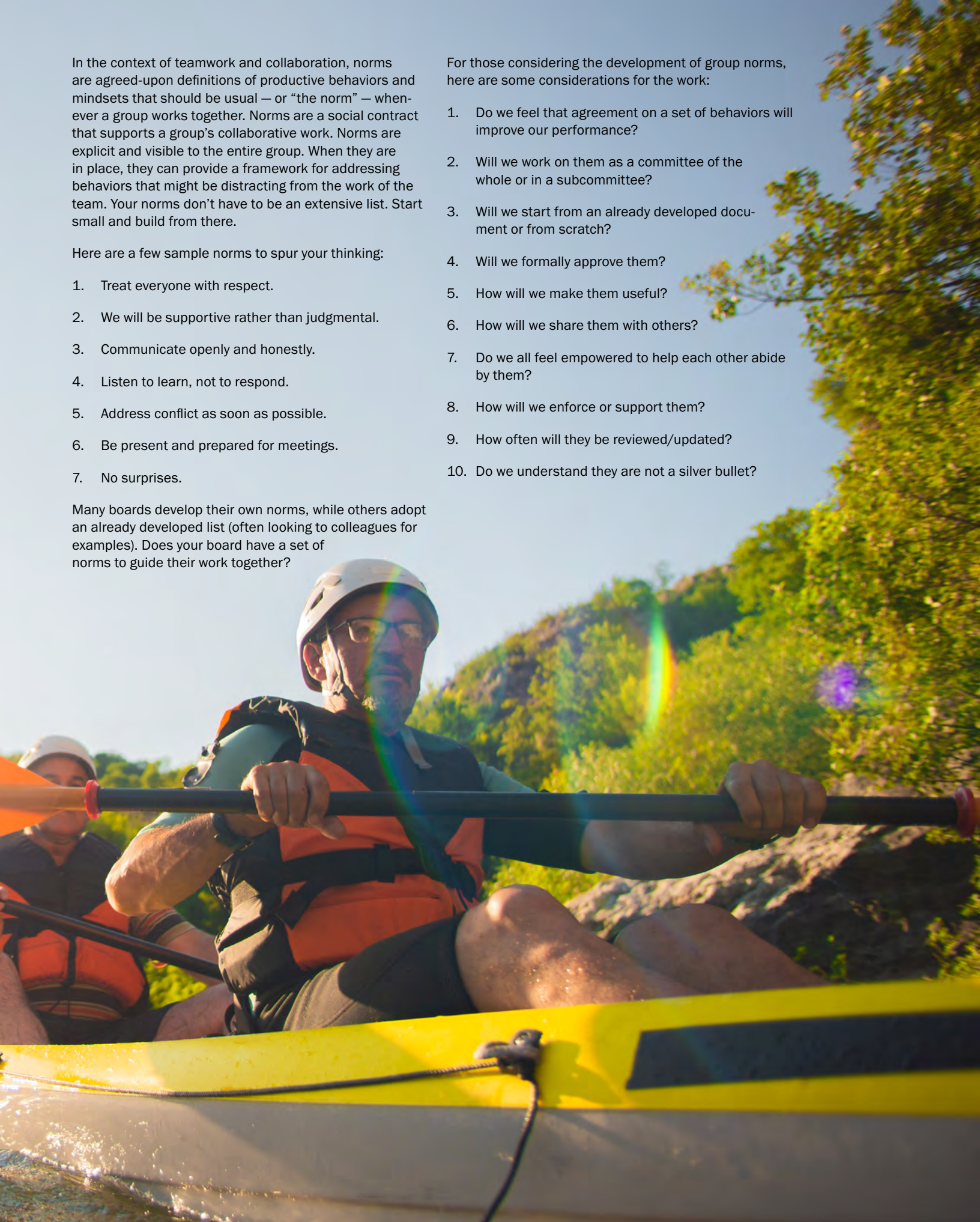
Here are a few sample norms to spur your thinking:

1. Treat everyone with respect.
2. We will be supportive rather than judgmental.
3. Communicate openly and honestly.
4. Listen to learn, not to respond.
5. Address conflict as soon as possible.
6. Be present and prepared for meetings.
7. No surprises.

Many boards develop their own norms, while others adopt an already developed list (often looking to colleagues for examples). Does your board have a set of norms to guide their work together?

For those considering the development of group norms, here are some considerations for the work:

1. Do we feel that agreement on a set of behaviors will improve our performance?
2. Will we work on them as a committee of the whole or in a subcommittee?
3. Will we start from an already developed document or from scratch?
4. Will we formally approve them?
5. How will we make them useful?
6. How will we share them with others?
7. Do we all feel empowered to help each other abide by them?
8. How will we enforce or support them?
9. How often will they be reviewed/updated?
10. Do we understand they are not a silver bullet?



Prefer to use an already developed list of preferred behaviors? MASB's Governance Standards is a great resource, based on extensive research that benchmarks best practices of highly effective school boards. It was developed by school board members for school board members. Its development was intended to provide boards a shared framework for effective school district governance. It's a tool that not only identifies desirable behaviors, but also provides common definitions for regularly used terminology and questions to give structure to the discussion of each standard. The standards are broken into two sections—one for the board as a whole and one for the individual board member. To find a downloadable version of the full document along with companion resources, you can use this link: masb.org/tools-and-templates/toolkits/governance-standards.

If you find MASB's Governance Standards a useful tool for your board, do the real work and have the rich dialogue that ensures

real ownership in them. Schedule time at an upcoming work session to dig deep into each standard.

Once you have agreed upon a list of norms, what's next? Formalize them with board approval. Keep a copy handy at board meetings, print them on your agendas, post them in your board room and share them with everyone! Send a message to your staff and community about how your board is going to treat each other while doing the tough work of leading. Make them real by using them, referring to them when needed and, most importantly, ensuring the whole team holds each other accountable when someone steps away from them. Norms are not intended to be used as hammers, but rather as guideposts.

Finally, set up a regular schedule to review and update them, offering new members a voice in this governing document. Ask, "How are we doing with our current norms? What might we need to update or add?"

Having a clear set of norms can build trust among your governance team by making sure everyone feels they will be heard, that attention is paid to inclusive behavior, and there is space and time for questions and contributions from all participants.

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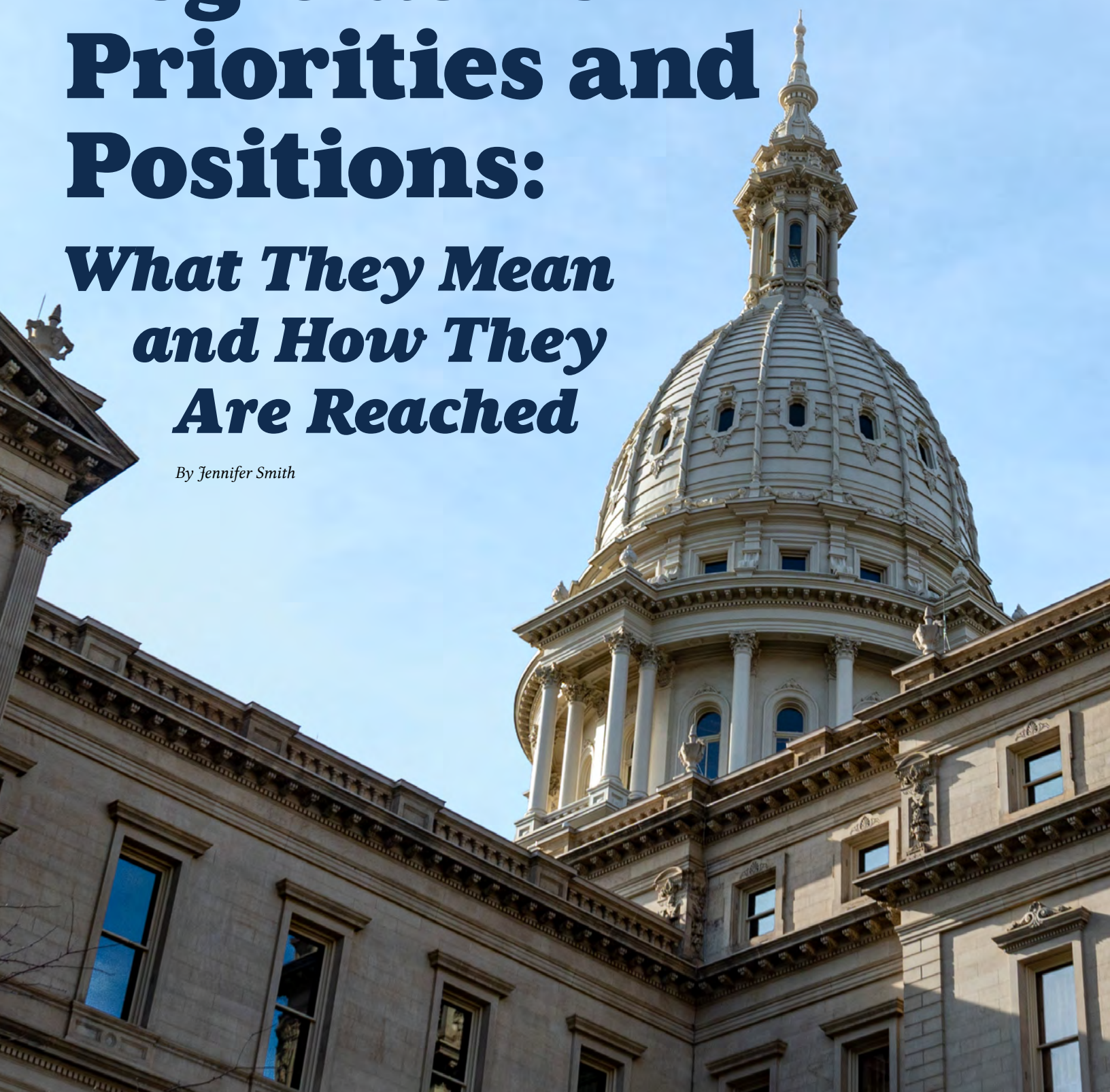
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MASB Resolutions, Legislative Priorities and Positions:

What They Mean and How They Are Reached

By Jennifer Smith



MASB is a member driven, member focused organization and our members have both a strong interest and a strong voice in the future of their organization. This means that MASB reflects, as best it can, the views and voices of member districts in the legislative priorities and positions we put forth. MASB's Government Relations team works at the state and federal level to make sure that policies and legislation being considered are in the best interests of our members, their districts and the students.

We use input from the Government Relations Committee, MASB's Resolutions (adopted by the membership at the annual Delegate Assembly), Legislative Priorities (generated and voted on by MASB members), and direct feedback from all of you to advocate on legislation.

The Government Relations Committee is made up of school board members from around the state, encompassing different types and sizes of districts. The committee monitors state and federal policy and budget legislation and executive actions pertaining to public education and school districts. Through conversations and debate at monthly meetings, the committee forms MASB's position on pending legislation. If you are interested in becoming more involved in the legislative process, you can apply to be a member of the committee. For more information on joining an MASB committee, please contact Cheryl at chuffman@masb.org.

MASB's Resolutions are the driving force behind positions taken by the Association on issues important to public education and school boards in Michigan. General resolutions include things such as increasing board member effectiveness, promotion and advocacy of public education, continuous school improvement, and implementation of Association programs. Advocacy resolutions include allowing schools to choose to start before Labor Day, encouraging parent participation in our schools, and maintaining healthy learning environments for all students and staff.

Our Legislative Priorities are set every two years, through meetings held in each of MASB's regions, bringing together board members, superintendents and MASB's Government Relations staff. The ideas generated in these regional meetings are put into a survey for all members to identify their top three priorities in four issue areas: governance/infrastructure, finance, staffing, and student supports/curriculum. The top priorities in each area are then given to the Government Relations Committee to consider and create the final document.

Setting legislative priorities allows us to create and set the

dialogue around issues that are most important to public education in Michigan. Priorities for this legislative session include increasing mental health support in schools, implementing state programs to increase teacher recruitment and retention, and expanding free lunch and breakfast programs to all students.

Legislative positions are taken on specific pieces of legislation after discussion with our Government Relations Committee. These are things that legislators introduce that were not originally identified as priorities but are important pieces that our members want to ensure we are taking a stand on. We then engage with the legislature through testimony before committees, statements of positions on specific legislation, letters to legislators, and more.

While we are your voice at the Capitol, we often need your help to amplify the message. We will reach out with information on legislation and ask you to contact your elected officials to share personal stories and what impact the legislation could have on your district, students or staff. Only you can tell your Representative and Senator exactly how their actions and votes will affect your district and their constituents. Tying a state legislative issue directly to its impact on the community is the most powerful form of advocacy.

MASB tries to make being involved in advocacy easy. At www.masb.org/votervoices, you can sign up to receive the weekly News From the Capitol email, find out who your state and federally elected representatives are, keep track of legislation we are following and our positions, and respond to any legislative calls to action. In addition to the state budget, there are hundreds of bills introduced each year that impact local districts and public education. The calls to action will explain the issue and why it matters. When you respond to an alert, it automatically populates an email or phone script for you to your specific legislator and gives you talking points from which to draft your own message. We always encourage you to use specifics from your district to personalize the message.

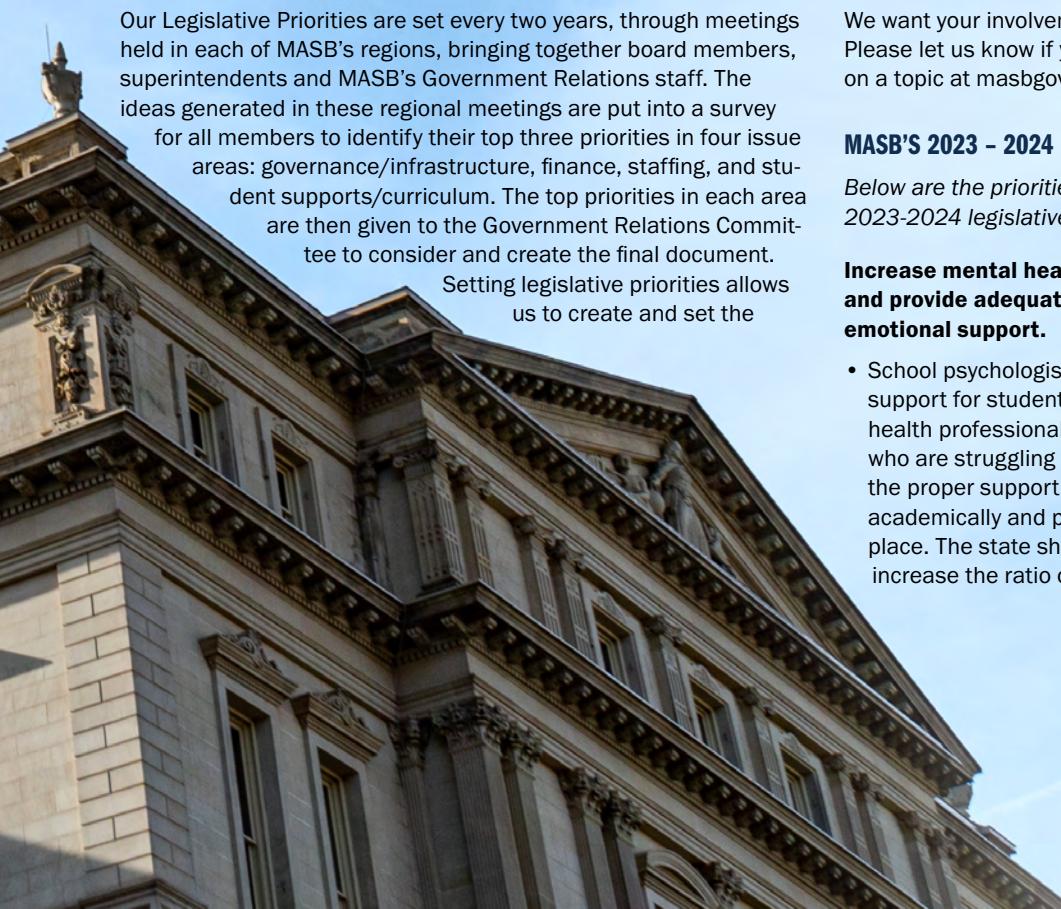
We want your involvement in advocating for public education! Please let us know if you have any questions or need information on a topic at masbgov@masb.org.

MASB'S 2023 - 2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Below are the priorities adopted by our Board of Directors for the 2023-2024 legislative session.

Increase mental health services and professionals in schools and provide adequate state resources for needed social-emotional support.

- School psychologists, social workers and counselors are critical support for students and staff in our schools. These mental health professionals can support our teachers and aid students who are struggling emotionally or are troubled. Giving students the proper support early on can help them perform better academically and possibly prevent tragic events from taking place. The state should give districts the proper resources to increase the ratio of mental health professionals to students.



Implement state-based programs and modify certification requirements to address teacher shortages and retain teachers.

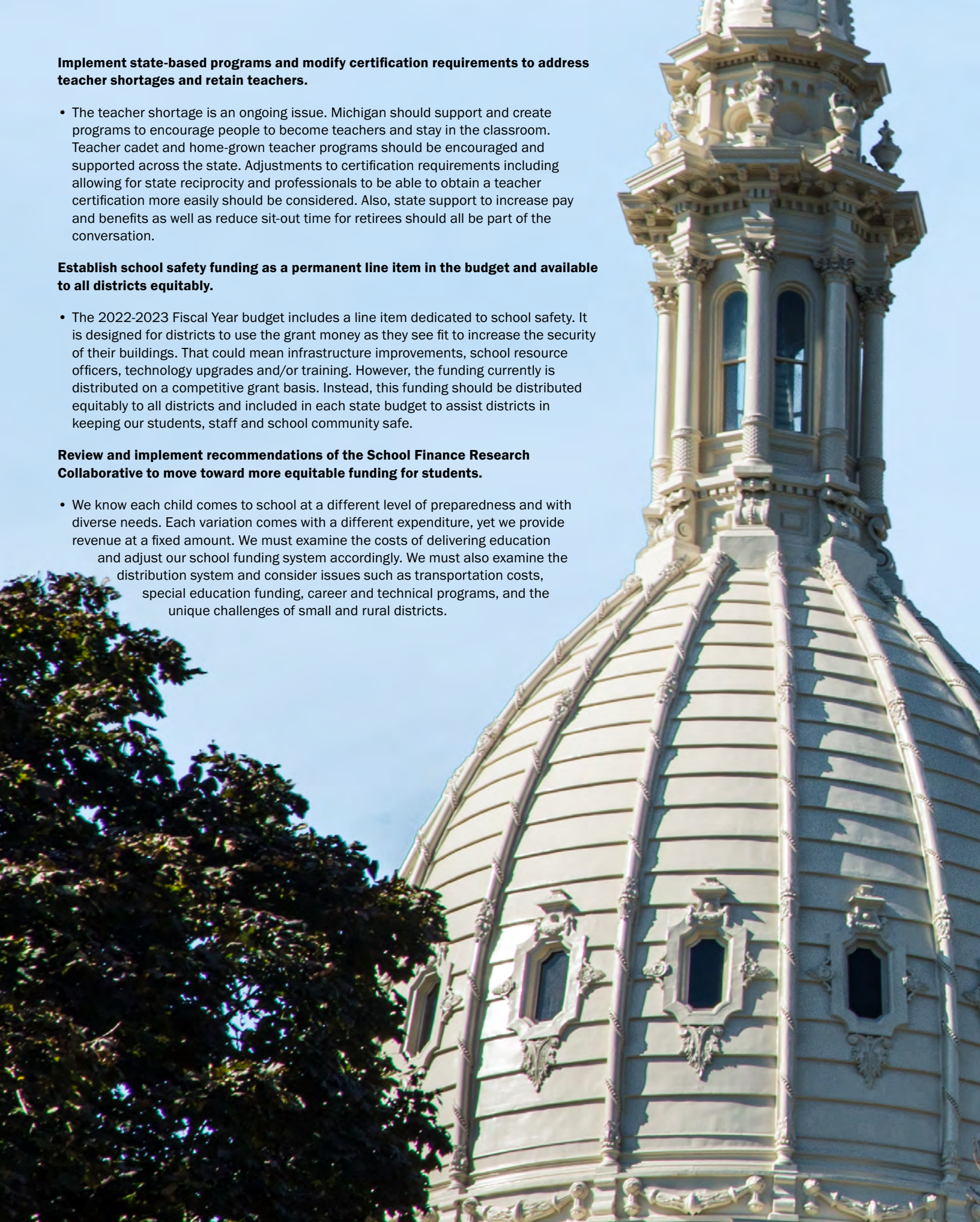
- The teacher shortage is an ongoing issue. Michigan should support and create programs to encourage people to become teachers and stay in the classroom. Teacher cadet and home-grown teacher programs should be encouraged and supported across the state. Adjustments to certification requirements including allowing for state reciprocity and professionals to be able to obtain a teacher certification more easily should be considered. Also, state support to increase pay and benefits as well as reduce sit-out time for retirees should all be part of the conversation.

Establish school safety funding as a permanent line item in the budget and available to all districts equitably.

- The 2022-2023 Fiscal Year budget includes a line item dedicated to school safety. It is designed for districts to use the grant money as they see fit to increase the security of their buildings. That could mean infrastructure improvements, school resource officers, technology upgrades and/or training. However, the funding currently is distributed on a competitive grant basis. Instead, this funding should be distributed equitably to all districts and included in each state budget to assist districts in keeping our students, staff and school community safe.

Review and implement recommendations of the School Finance Research Collaborative to move toward more equitable funding for students.

- We know each child comes to school at a different level of preparedness and with diverse needs. Each variation comes with a different expenditure, yet we provide revenue at a fixed amount. We must examine the costs of delivering education and adjust our school funding system accordingly. We must also examine the distribution system and consider issues such as transportation costs, special education funding, career and technical programs, and the unique challenges of small and rural districts.



Specify that the School Aid Fund is only for pre-k to 12th grade public education in Michigan's Constitution. Also, oppose any attempts to create private school voucher or tax credit programs.

- School Aid Fund dollars have been redirected to higher education and community colleges for a decade. The 2021-2022 Fiscal Year alone resulted in more than \$790 million not being available for our public schools. We must protect the integrity of the School Aid Fund by making sure it is only used for pre-k to 12th grade public education.

Reduce the MPERS legacy cost burden on districts and continue to increase state support of paying down debt to reach the target before 2038.

- School districts in Michigan are paying more than 30% of their total payroll costs back to the state for the Michigan Public School Employees' Retirement System. Much of that money is to continue to pay down the unfunded accrued liabilities in the system. By paying off that debt faster and with increased state support, more funding would be available to be used in the classroom and for direct support to students.

Establish universal preschool for all 4-year-old children.

- Reaching children at a younger age increases a child's achievement levels and reduces future remedial costs for school districts. Michigan currently does not fund slots for every 4-year-old child to participate in a preschool program. Funding should be increased to give universal access to all 4-year-olds and support the related infrastructure needs.

Support legislation that will put public school academies and management companies on equal footing with traditional public schools on issues related to transparency, reporting and treatment of employees.

- Billions of dollars each year are spent on public education in Michigan. Whether that money is sent to a traditional public school, a charter school or a cyber school, the public should be able to see how those dollars are spent. No school, including traditional public schools, should be able to hire a management company that does not provide transparency regarding expenditures of public funds that are fundamental to the operations of a school district.

Expand the federal free and reduced lunch and breakfast programs to all students, regardless of income status.

- During the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture expanded the free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs to all students regardless of income. This expansion benefited students by providing meals to those families who hadn't filed paperwork or who were just over the qualifications. It also lessened the paperwork burden on our districts. This program should be available to all students on a permanent basis to support proper nutrition and learning.



Jennifer Smith

Jennifer is MASB's Director of Government Relations, and can be reached at jsmith@masb.org or 517.327.5900.



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Board/ Superintendent Q & A

By Don Wotruba, CAE and Tina Kerr, Ph.D.

For a school district to operate successfully, board members and superintendents need to be on the same page when it comes to dealing with conflict. Both need to be able to hold outliers accountable to an established set of norms in order to lead effectively. Below, MASB Executive Director Don Wotruba and MASA Executive Director Dr. Tina Kerr, Ph.D. highlight some common friction points and provide answers from each point of view. These scenarios came from a webinar cohosted by MASA and MASB, as part of our strategic partnership to ensure better public school leadership practices. If you have a question for Don or Dr. Kerr, please send them to dwotruba@masb.org.

BOARD BOUNDARIES

We have one board member, who is not an officer, who routinely steps out of their lane, including trying to influence hiring decisions, programming decisions, job duty assignments, etc. They contact the superintendent almost daily with questions or concerns they would like addressed. Some fellow board members have also expressed concern about the individual's actions. What is the best way to address these issues while still maintaining a positive relationship, knowing they will likely continue to be on our BOE?

Tina: Establishing norms is a critical part of a successful governance structure. It helps ensure everyone is aware of communication protocols and there are no surprises at the board table. It is also important that the board and superintendent have an open line of communication as well as formal and/or informal training so the governance team is functioning at a high level and roles are clarified.

Don: This is an issue that really should be tackled by the board. The board needs to set norms and the president should hold the board member to those norms. The offending board member should be part of that norm setting so they can buy into both the process and the outcomes. You should not put the superintendent in a position to have to convey norms or continually tell a board member they are overstepping. A board workshop would help to address the roles and responsibilities component of this scenario.

PUBLIC CIVILITY

We have had hundreds of people show up at recent board meetings, causing disruptions, making people feel unsafe, deliberately stalling and extending meeting times, etc. How can we work together to keep meetings under control and encourage public civility from our education community?

Tina: Establishing a governance structure and meeting protocols helps ensure civility and decorum at the board meeting—both at the board table and from the community. It's also important to make sure public comment protocols and rules are established and followed before a critical situation arises. Having pre-conversations with local law enforcement will promote a peaceful environment should a meeting get out of hand.

Don: This is a place where the board needs to get on the same page regarding how they will interact with the public. Create board policy or operating procedures to handle public comment as well as how to respond in and out of meetings. Communicate the meeting norms with the public and hold them to the standards you have adopted. These agreements among board members can set the tone for how community interaction will move forward. A united board may also calm some of the crowd issues, as they can often feed off board friction.

SUPERINTENDENT EXPECTATIONS

How should a superintendent best navigate answering to seven bosses who could have differing expectations of their role and responsibilities as the district's leader?

Tina: This goes back to governance training and work sessions with the board and superintendent so everyone on the team understands roles, responsibilities and expectations. Overcommunication and building relationships with and among board members and the superintendent are essential. The board president should be the conduit and representative of the board when working with the superintendent. Additionally, it's important not to depend on an

annual evaluation for the superintendent but rather have monthly or quarterly check-ins. This helps establish clear expectations and lines of communication.

Don: Expectations and goals should be set as early as possible in this relationship. Even viewing it as having seven bosses is problematic. It should be viewed as having one boss and that boss is the whole board. We often say an individual board member doesn't have any authority, because authority is vested in the board and that should hold true in the employment relationship as well. That looks like regular communication with the whole board, responding to the whole board even when it might be an individual's questions, and setting expectations in concert with the board. This might be a good place to bring someone in to facilitate the conversations so everyone can fully participate. If you have a less-experienced board, bring in an outside consultant to talk about the board/superintendent relationship and what is appropriate for your specific district. Clear goals as part of the evaluation process should be set and regular updates should be provided by the superintendent. This keeps up constant communication and prevents surprises at the end of the year.

POST PUBLIC COMMENT

The board doesn't respond to speakers during public comment, which oftentimes leads to "homework" for the superintendent and cabinet members. However, we as board members don't always know that things have been addressed and taken care of. How might we institute a better communication cycle among the central office and board members to ensure our community's concerns are addressed in a timely manner?

Tina: Many districts have public comment forms, which are collected at the meeting. These provide an opportunity for the superintendent to document their response and activity on the form, which can then be shared back with the board. Most superintendents will also utilize a weekly communication to the board that should have a section where any follow-up to public comment can be addressed.

Don: Have a conversation between the board and the superintendent about how best to communicate with the board on community responses from board meetings. This could be done by blind copying the board on responses, creating a summary of responses at the end of a week, or by having a brief period at a board meeting where the superintendent addresses the previous meeting's questions. Oftentimes you will have the public making comments that don't require a response, but when there are direct questions it's best to try to respond at some point after the meeting.

NEW SUPERINTENDENTS

I'm a longtime educator but just started in my first superintendency. I thought I knew what to expect, but there are just some situations I've never been part of before. How can I work to ensure I get off on the right foot with my board and we work collaboratively to better the district?

Tina: The most important step as a new superintendent is to build a relationship with your board—especially the board president. The significance of this relationship cannot be understated, as it will help improve clarity of expectations. Standing monthly or bimonthly check-ins between the superintendent and board president can be extremely helpful. Lastly, both the superintendent and president should work together to create board meeting agendas to ensure they are on the same page and important items are being addressed.

Don: As a new superintendent, there are a few things you should do very shortly after starting the job. First, engage with your state association and sign up for professional development programs geared toward new superintendents. MASB encourages boards to have their new superintendents participate. You also should be a regular attendee of your ISD superintendent meetings and your regional meetings. Colleagues are a great resource for learning how to deal with specific situations in your district and with your board. I would also encourage a governance training session for you and your board about the roles and responsibilities of your respective positions. This will put all of you on the same page. The list could go on, but this is a starting point to work from.

MAINTAINING A POSITIVE BOARD

Our board has a great working relationship, but we've all heard the stories from other communities across the state. Do you have any resources or thoughts to share about how to continue to maintain this healthy relationship moving forward and forgo any surprises in the system we have running?

Tina: Several opportunities exist for governance training and it's important to take advantage of them. It's also essential to have conversations about board norms and procedures before there's a problem. There should also be rigorous conversations around strategic action planning, so the vision and mission of the district are clearly articulated, which helps ensure everyone is working toward the same goals.

Don: Adopt governance standards—which can be found on the MASB website—board norms and operating procedures, along with communication expectations of the board. These are much easier to put into place when you have a high-functioning board and can be leaned on if or when disruption occurs. It seems counterintuitive to work on these things when everything is going well, but having a long-standing board culture can be beneficial, and it puts the board in a place to hold each other accountable.



Don Wotruba, CAE

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Tina Kerr, Ph.D.

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**Board action must include either a copy of the minutes noting the decision or a signed letter from the district superintendent.*

Keys to Success: The Relationship Between Board President and Superintendent

By Pamela Dickinson and Jeff Thoenes, Ed.D.

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A BOARD PRESIDENT: PAMELA DICKINSON

I have served on the Comstock Public Schools Board of Education for nine years. This experience has been a tremendous growth journey for me. I have served on several nonprofit boards and committees within my community, state and region. But nothing could have prepared me for the toughest job I would ever love, serving the students of our district and working with an amazing group of diverse individuals that have a heart for education. I feel that the key to success for an effective Board-Superintendent team is having a relationship built on trust, respect and collaboration.

The board president and the superintendent have a unique relationship. Because the board president is the leader of the school board, and the superintendent is the chief executive officer of the district, they likely communicate and meet more frequently.

Within this relationship, it is important to identify specific roles. The board president is the public face of the school board who leads the board, collaborates with other board members on board practices and procedures, and coordinates the work of the board. The superintendent is the face of the district who manages district staff, collaborates with them on instructional programming and student support services, and holds them accountable for student achievement. Together, the president and the superintendent set the culture of the governance team and should agree on mutual expectations.

One important expectation is to always be respectful. Another is to be open-minded: to disagree without being disagreeable and to develop a process for sharing confidential information. In the case that a conflict between them occurs, they may determine that it is because one of their mutual expectations is not being met. As a board president, I have found it helpful to seek MASB advice to determine the best practices and best options for moving forward with sensitive relationships.

Good governance team relationships are built on well-defined roles and good relationships between the board and superintendent. In effective school systems, the superintendent and the board of education work together as a team. The board of education is the policy-making body for the district, and the superintendent and staff provide the operational leadership to implement those policies. The common goal should be to function as a united front, providing positive leadership to the district and fostering transparency and open communication between administration, students, staff, parents and stakeholders.

As President of the Comstock Community Schools Board of Education, I have the pleasure of working with Superintendent Dr. Jeffrey Thoenes, who collaborated with me on this article. He has been instrumental in moving our district to the next level. He is an exemplary leader who is laser-focused on making Comstock Public Schools an elite performance model of educational excellence in Kalamazoo County.





FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT: JEFF THOENES, ED.D.

My name is Dr. Jeff Thoenes (TAY-nes), and I have the honor of serving as the Superintendent of Comstock Public Schools, located in Kalamazoo, MI. During my nearly five-year tenure, I've come to the realization that what empowers the district is our strong, positive, and student-centered Board of Education. As with any board, our trustees come from a variety of backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences. They don't always agree or see eye-to-eye. However, our Board actively recognizes and resolves a multitude of challenging issues and educational concerns with a willing, supportive and thoughtful approach. The trustees model their community service through their proactive and positive leadership style. And that is continually recognized by our appreciative students, families, staff, and members of the superintendent's team.

Importantly, the board's track record, collaborative culture, and collective progress over the past five years have not occurred by random accident or good fortune but rather by careful design and purpose. While all the trustees have contributed to the board's high functionality and shared success, a large portion of the credit certainly goes to our leader, President Pamela Dickinson.

President Dickinson understands that the role of the board is to govern and that the day-to-day leadership and management of the district is the domain of the superintendent's team. To help ensure that all current and future trustees understand, respect and support that delineated relationship, the board and I drafted, developed and approved the board's Governance Guidelines and Practices in the first semester of my tenure. Just as most board policies have parallel administrative guidelines that outline how to carry out or enforce the policy, our district's Governance Guidelines and Practices detail how our board and superintendent function together, operate separately, and collaboratively lead the district. President Dickinson and I often reference this unifying document.

Our Governance Guidelines and Practices present and review a variety of key or pivotal board and superintendent protocols in a practical and informative fashion. Topics and subjects include a code of ethics, board meeting procedures and expectations, communication protocols within the board and between the board and superintendent, new member orientation and trustee professional development, parameters for district oversight, policy development and committee participation, and a detailed board calendar.

If your board does not have a similar norming document, bylaws, or governance guidelines, we urge you to collectively create your own version right away. For a copy of Comstock Public School's Board Governance Guidelines and Practices, email Superintendent Dr. Jeff Thoenes at jeff.thoenes@comstockps.org.

It's a great day to be a Colt!



Pamela Dickinson

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Jeff Thoenes, Ed.D.

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Do School Boards Need Committees?

It depends on what outcome the Board of Education is looking for.

By Michael Rochholz

Committees can be a practical way to structure and manage a board's work. At times, a smaller group may be more focused and efficient in dealing with issues than a full board. A committee is generally established to provide counseling and advice for the board, or to possibly address a specific task on the board's agenda. Committee agendas should focus on issues that matter to the strategic direction of the school district; committee meetings that are repetitive and committees with overly restricted authority may invite limited engagement and interest.

Be mindful that any recommendations made by a committee will still require approval by the full school board, and the board is not obligated to follow committee suggestions. Committees are more effective when their authority and scope of work is clearly defined by the board from the outset.



Many school boards believe committees to be a necessary part of their work. Historically, the board's bylaws define standing committees and their roles and responsibilities. To allow for flexibility, the bylaws could authorize the board to form committees as necessary and allow for policies to define the details. Standing committees (also called operating committees) are those committees a board uses on a continual basis. Ad hoc committees are formed for a limited time to address a specific requirement. An ad hoc committee may exist for less than a year or for a year or more depending on the extent of the work assigned to it. When the work of the ad hoc committee is completed, it is disbanded.

All committees should be evaluated periodically for effectiveness and considered for elimination if not in use. Initiate effective standing committees that provide quality feedback to the board and initiate ad hoc committees for a specific task or issue that requires attention.

A board does not always need to add new committees to get its work done, nor must committee members always be members of the board. Task forces and advisory councils can be useful tools.

A task force can be formed if there is an objective to be achieved in a relatively short time. Planning a special event or analyzing BOE proposals are examples of work that may be handled by a task force.

Advisory councils assist boards in carrying out their work by providing expertise and advice in select areas. Advisory councils do not have any governance responsibilities and are a good way to include former board members, potential board members, subject matter experts and others in the work of the board, without placing them on the board.

Collaborative school boards may need no committees at all. Board members manage the workload together as a committee of the whole or delegate tasks to individual board members. This requires effective leadership and commitment from every member.

When school boards develop the right committees, for the right reasons, with the right objectives in mind, those committees can become a vital part of the board's work. The problem with commit-



tees comes in when boards take a thoughtless, passive approach to board committee development.

School boards should only form committees to do work that is impossible or impractical for the board to perform on its own. Many boards make the mistake of forming too many committees for too little reason. This approach often stretches board members too thin. Without a solid purpose, committee members become bored and unproductive.

Another mistake school boards make is not ensuring their committees have clear expectations and not holding them accountable for regular updates and results. Committees may make oral or written reports, which should become part of the board's meeting minutes.

So, to this point, we have been discussing the effectiveness and efficiency of various types of committees. But how is effectiveness and efficiency affected if there are issues of trust among the members of the board? How can this influence the use of board committees?

In my current discussions with school boards, specifically those with issues of trust, they often find it difficult to take recommendations from committees. Challenges described by some of those board members included feeling like the committee had an agenda not aligned with what the school board intended. Additionally, they did not trust the data presented or recommended by the committee. Also, they shared concerns about not having all the information the committee utilized in developing their recommendations. And finally, they felt left out of participating in the conversation or having the ability to sway the discussion.

Part of the issue can be the board itself for not providing the committee with clear direction and process expectations. If the board is not clear with the committee charter, it will be hard to respect or trust the results or recommendations presented by that committee.

When trust issues on a school board exist, you must work to resolve them. One of the ways to assist with resolution of those issues may be to do more work as a committee of the whole, minimizing the use of individual committee work. This allows all board members to receive all the data and information at the same time. Additionally, all members can participate in discussions and deliberations rather than taking recommendations from a process that the individual board member was unable to participate in.

Once trust has been reestablished, it may be the time to reestablish committees that add value to the school board's processes. Keep in mind there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to committees. What matters is the effectiveness of both the committee and the board of education.

Trust will be the one factor that will likely impact the effectiveness of the work and, ultimately, the school governance structure.



Michael Rochholz

Michael is an MASB Consultant, and can be reached at mrochholz@comcast.net.

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EVENT CALENDAR

★ GREAT FOR NEWLY ELECTED BOARD MEMBERS

JUNE 14, 2023

★ New Board Member Series Webinar
VIRTUAL

JULY 12, 2023

★ New Board Member Series Webinar
VIRTUAL

AUG. 9, 2023

★ New Board Member Series Webinar
VIRTUAL

AUG. 11-13, 2023

★ MASB Summer Institute featuring Board Member Certification (CBA) Classes and Board Presidents Workshops
MACOMB ISD, CLINTON TOWNSHIP

AUG. 17, 2023

Back to School Legal Workshop
VIRTUAL

SEPT. 13, 2023

★ New Board Member Series Webinar
VIRTUAL

SEPT. 19, 2023

★ Member Matters Webinar
VIRTUAL

SEPT. 27, 2023

Fall Leader Assistant Workshop
MASB HEADQUARTERS, LANSING AND VIRTUAL

OCT. 11, 2023

★ New Board Member Series Webinar
VIRTUAL

For more information about these events, visit masb.org/calendar or call 517.327.5900.



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