

4.A. BOARD CHAIR

School Board Chair: A Key Leadership Role

by Laura Soares (Randolph Elementary School Board Chair & VSBA President, 2001-2003)

The selection of the chair of the Board is an important one and should not be made without thoughtful discussion by all members of the Board. The position of chair should not be automatically rotated among members or routinely go to the most senior member; instead, it should be given to the person who has the best capacity to fulfill this leadership role. Before determining who is the most qualified board member to serve as board chair, first consider the responsibilities that go with the position.

Build a Team

An effective board needs to work together, focused on the common purpose of providing a high quality education to all children at a reasonable cost. The chair can encourage the Board to work as a team, but only if he/she makes the necessary effort. For example: take time to get to know each member of the Board, what their interests are, why they serve on the Board, and what they do outside of the Board room. Welcome new board members and ensure they receive an orientation to their role on the Board. Ensure all members, veteran and new, understand they are an integral part of the Board. Be aware of board dynamics; don't allow personal differences or personal agendas to dominate a board meeting.

Ensure the Board Sets Annual Goals

An effective board knows where it is headed. Each year the Board should take time to reflect on what it has accomplished and what should be on the agenda in the coming year, and the chair should make sure that certain basics are included. For example, board goals need to be in step with the district strategic and action plans. The Board should consider what policies need to be reviewed, revised, or created during the year to ensure policies are current and support the district vision. The chair should consider issues about which the Board needs advance information in order to make informed decisions, and he/she must allocate adequate time for deliberation of key issues on the agenda. Finally, the chair must not lose sight of the Board's role in keeping the community informed and engaged in their public schools.

Build Board Agendas

The chair needs to collaborate with the administration to build effective agendas for each meeting. The agenda needs to include a manageable number of issues, so that each item can be given necessary consideration and so that meetings can be kept to a reasonable length. The agenda should not contain any items for action that the Board has not had a chance to consider. The chair needs to anticipate what information the Board may want before making a decision. Knowing what questions could arise allows the administration time to prepare information to be distributed in advance.

Run Effective Board Meetings

The chair needs to know parliamentary procedure and ensure the Board upholds the law during all public meetings. The chair needs to know what items are appropriate for executive session, as well

as which must be handled in open session. The chair needs to ensure that the public feels welcome at meetings, while taking care that meetings stay focused on the agenda and remain productive. This sometimes calls for redirection of the Board, the administration, or the public. Without dominating the discussion, the chair must ensure all viewpoints have an opportunity to be expressed, that the discussion is open and fair, but that the Board moves from discussion to action. A chair must also know when an issue should be tabled so that more information can be gathered or so that people can have time to reflect.

Follow Up

The chair should keep track of items that come to the attention of the Board and must consider the questions each item raises. What are the next steps? Whose responsibility is it to carry out those steps? Will the Board need regular updates on progress? Will this issue come before the Board again? When? I keep a yearly calendar with me at every board meeting, and I make notes about such issues. When the Board says it wants an update in three months, I jot that down and ensure that the item makes it onto the appropriate agenda.

Work with the Community

The chair of the Board is often the first to receive phone calls from the public. It may be a parent with a complaint, a community member with a question about taxes, or the reporter from the local paper. The chair needs to be familiar with the Board policy on handling complaints and other communication with members of the public. As is true for all board members, he/she must never act alone. Chairs may speak on behalf of the Board, but should do so only after receiving authorization from the Board. The chair is usually the presenter of information at public meetings, including Town Meeting, and needs to be able to speak effectively in front of a group. The chair should be seen within the community as an advocate for public education and for the local district.

Act as a Liaison

The chair needs to keep the Board informed. Often times information is provided to board chairs with the assumption that the chair will pass this information on to other board members. This will only happen if the chair makes a concerted effort to do so. Information coming from the Agency of Education, from VSBA, and even from your own supervisory union board and central office needs to be shared with local board members. We have recently set aside a shelf designated for board materials in the room where the Board meets; this allows all board members access to the information. The chair of the Board is not alone in carrying out these responsibilities, but is part of a leadership team that includes the superintendent and principal.

Very few people step into the position of chair with all of the skills needed to take on this important role. Don't worry; with support from the administration, a commitment to do your best, and some time and experience, most people will soon find they enjoy the challenges and rewards associated with the position of board chair.