

Essential Attributes of an Effective School Board Member

Even the most experienced board members never stop learning the technical details of the job, and those who are successful learn early that being effective requires more than knowing the details of the tenure law or how to interpret the budget. Being a successful board member begins with a genuine commitment to striving for high-quality public education that supports the full development of all children. There are certain skills and attributes that are consistently present in effective board of education members.

Here are some steps to consider:

Be prepared to participate responsibly. Do your homework, come prepared to work, remember that sometimes the work is to listen, agree and disagree as your values dictate, and accept that the group decision is legitimate even if it's not your personal choice. It's not acceptable to have opinions and not express them.

Focus on serving all children. Ensure every deliberation, decision and action reflects the best interests of every student you serve. No child is more important than another.

Remember that your identity is with the community, not the staff. It's easy to identify with staff as you probably will have more discussions with them about issues. But you must remember that your job is to serve in trust for the community.

Represent the community, not a single constituency. You will understand and/or identify with certain constituencies (parents, neighborhoods or communities, special ed, etc.), but you **MUST** remember that being a board member means serving in trust for the entire community. There's no way seven people can provide a spokesperson for every constituency or legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. You can be **FROM** a constituency, but you must not let yourself **REPRESENT** it.

Be responsible for group behavior and productivity. You are responsible for not only yourself but the group. If the group doesn't do its job, meddles in administration or breaks its own rules, you personally share that responsibility.

Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them. You are obligated to express your honest opinions on issues, and so are each of the other board members. Encourage your colleagues to speak their opinions and listen to them carefully and respectfully. But don't allow yourself to be intimidated by louder or more insistent board members.

Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom. If you have special expertise (law, accounting, construction, etc.) remember that you're **NOT** personally responsible for decisions relating to that area. Use your expertise to help inform your colleagues (i.e., help them understand what fiscal health looks like versus fiscal jeopardy) but don't assume sole responsibility for those decisions. Also remember that you're not on the board to help the staff or even advise them with your special expertise. Your job as a board member is to govern. If you wish to offer your help as an expert, make sure that all parties know you are acting as a volunteer, not a board member, and remember that asking for or accepting your help is a staff prerogative, not yours.

Be aware of the community and staff's perceptions of the board. If the board is perceived as being unethical, dishonest, secretive or self-serving, whether justified or not, that will become reality for the community and staff. Consider how stakeholders might interpret your behaviors and decisions then act accordingly.

Think upward and outward more than downward and inward. There is a great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the district should make in the larger world. This requires ignoring the minutia or details in order to examine, question and define the big picture. The latter is a daunting and awesome task, but it's board work—governance!

<https://www.masb.org/attributes-of-an-effective-school-board-member.aspx>