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The benefits of school board leadership training

Mention leadership training and your initial thought might be, “That’s only for the school board chair or vice chair.” But as veteran school board members know, there’s much more to being an effective board member than just knowing Robert’s Rules of Order.

Ongoing training and professional development is an important piece of growing as a board member. Few people come onto the board fully versed in all the issues they must deal with in their roles. New challenges and initiatives are constantly emerging. To be effective, a board member needs to be current not only on what’s happening in their own district, but also statewide. That knowledge comes through training, networking and professional development opportunities.

This is a shift from years ago when the main role of school boards was approving operational budgets and protecting taxpayer funds. While those functions are still important, boards have broadened their focus to include student learning and achievement.

Understanding the importance of data in improving student achievement is a big topic for many school boards. The Center for Public Education (CPE) received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop training and tools specifically to help school board leaders use data effectively to improve student outcomes. CPE worked with state school board associations in California, Illinois and Michigan for over 18 months to develop and pilot the school board training.

In other research by CPE, they found that boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts. They identified eight key characteristics of effective school boards:

1. They have a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
2. They have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. They are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. They have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. They are data-savvy: they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. They align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. They lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

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WSSDA
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8. They take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Many state school board associations offer regular training opportunities for their members. In Washington, the state association developed a curriculum for board members around a comprehensive set of standards that emphasize strategic planning, community engagement and data-driven decision-making. One set of standards addresses the school board's leadership role in governing through best practices proven to promote high levels of district and student performance. Areas covered include responsible governance, expectations for student learning, conditions for student and staff success, accountability, and community engagement. The other set of standards addresses professional standards for individual school directors. Areas covered include values and ethical behavior, leadership, communication, growth and learning and accountability.

Oregon School Boards Association developed a Leadership Institute, which aligns conferences, workshops, on-site sessions and other leadership activities for board members into a recognition program. Some courses are online, while others are offered in person at workshops and conferences.

Many boards feel it is important for all of its members to commit to learning as a team, just as they expect teachers and students to do. They understand that boards make better decisions when they fully understand the complexity of the issues districts face. They also feel more prepared to make thoughtful decisions when they see the complete picture.

A side benefit is that when board members learn together and focus on the big picture, they typically have less time or desire to focus on personal agendas — which is the source of most board dysfunction.

Training can take many forms, from attending a state conference to local workshops geared to specific topics. Topics often requested include:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Developing a board operating protocol
- Board self-assessment
- Superintendent evaluation
- Teambuilding
- Conflict resolution
- Strategic planning
- Student learning and accountability

Getting elected to the school board is only the first step to being an effective board member. Taking advantage of opportunities for training and professional development can make all the difference in creating a cohesive, knowledgeable board that positively impacts student outcomes.