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Training for school board members

School board members make decisions that have a significant and long-lasting effect on the students, staff and schools in their districts. That's why it's so important that they have the knowledge and tools to do their job.

More than 20 states require school board members to receive some type of training. Most mandatory-training states require training for all board members, but others only require it for newly elected officials. Typically the school districts pay for the training.

In Washington, all school board members are required under the state's Open Government Trainings Act (ESB 5964) to complete training on the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA), Public Records Act (PRA) and records retention. The training must be completed within 90 days of taking office following appointment or election of a new board member. Refresher trainings must be completed by each board member every four years that they remain in office.

Whether mandated or not, school board associations in most states recognize the need to offer a variety of training and development opportunities for board members. Public education has become much more complex over the past decade and continues to change. Many board members come into their role with little background in education. Often they find themselves in the middle of highly public, complicated and sometimes controversial decisions about issues that they don't fully understand. It's critical that board members receive the information, training and support they need to make good decisions and serve their communities well.

Many associations offer online training and customized in-district trainings. The goal is to provide practical strategies and resources to help your board and superintendent function as a high-performing team.

While the information gleaned from trainings is crucial, the opportunity to interact and share ideas and frustrations with other board members is also important. That's why the annual conferences and regional meetings that state school board associations sponsor are a great resource for board members. They allow board members, superintendents and other education professionals to interact, get up to date on issues and discuss ways to improve education in their districts.

The National School Boards Association annual conference is another opportunity for board members to become informed and energized in their roles. More than 7,000 school board members, superintendents and education leaders from around the country attend every year.

Whether they receive online training or attend a conference or workshop, board members must be current in a wide range of issues. Topics should include:

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- **Roles and responsibilities** — Board members must be clear about the role of the board and its relationship with the superintendent; how board members interact with each other; and how the board can encourage system-wide change and improvement.
- **Assessments** — Board members should understand the array of data regarding student achievement and how they can help drive decisions that improve student success and close achievement gaps.
- **Ethics** — Board members should be knowledgeable about ethics laws and the consequences of failing to comply.
- **Budget** — Fiscal oversight is one of the key roles of the school board, and board members should be clear about the budget process and how the district's money is spent.
- **Community engagement** — Successful districts recognize the importance of parents and community engaging with schools through volunteering and participation on boards and committees. School board members play a key role in welcoming and encouraging citizen involvement in schools.
- **Policies** — Board members should be familiar with their district's policies and administrative regulations and have a system for regularly reviewing and updating them.
- **Effective meetings** — Conducting and participating in efficient and effective meetings requires more than knowledge of parliamentary procedure, so it's important for board members to have the tools and information they need.
- **Charter schools** — Many districts have one or more charter schools, so it's important that school board members understand the relationship between the district and the charters.
- **Communications** — School board members should understand the strategies their districts use in communicating with students, staff and community and be supportive of staff to continually improve communications efforts.
- **Media relations** — Reporters often contact school board members to comment on the education-related stories they write, so it's important that board members have an understanding of the media and how to respond appropriately to requests for comments.
- **Labor relations** — Collective bargaining and other labor-related topics are important for school board members to understand.
- **Public meetings** — Understanding open meeting laws and requirements regarding executive sessions are important for school board members.

Developing well-trained and effective school board members requires some effort, but it should be considered an investment that will positively impact your district and its public perception.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant