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## Media tips for school board members

Some school boards are in the hot seat right now because of the strain of COVID-related school closures and disagreements over whether and when schools should fully reopen. And other issues, like strong opinions about renaming schools and disruptions to athletic programs. It's a tough time to hold a school board seat in some communities.

School board members have signed up for a difficult potion. They should be feeling a tremendous amount of gratitude and respect from their community for volunteering their time for an unpaid but impactful job with the very best intentions.

School board members walk a careful line communicating about district operations and issues. They are caught between the expectations of constituents and the media, who expect elected officials to demand district accountability and the administration, which expects them to be on the district team.

How can they balance all of the expectations of this role when they are approached for media interviews? Here is a refresher of tips to help guide responses during these challenging times.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

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### Be tough but respectful.

News shows often resemble daytime talk-show drama. Heated discussions become arguments on a frequent basis. It could be tempting for a board member to take a cue from this media climate, but it isn't helpful, and it sets a negative tone. Name-calling and questioning of your opponent's motives are not helpful for the students, staff or patrons in your district. Avoid zingers and sharp sound bites. It may feel good to say, but it will make you look petty and small in print.

Board members set the tone for how the media and the community talk about the district. The whole community will benefit if the district is held in high regard during even the hardest debates. The goal for board members should be to remain respectful while still fulfilling their role in supervising the administration.

Respectful responses are not the same as being soft on issues. A misguided board member might think that taking a verbally rougher approach will prove they do not rubber-stamp everything the district staff recommends.

The key is to question data, decisions and processes. Those are fair game. But board members should avoid questioning the integrity or competence of their colleagues and district staff unless they are truly addressing a crisis of trust. Integrity and competence should not be questioned casually during other business. Those traits should only be questioned as part of a purposeful process and, likely, only in executive session. Ongoing, unofficial public questioning of integrity and competence only undermines the effectiveness of everyone involved with the district.

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Even the toughest board members are generally very supportive of the district. But too often, the wrong choice of words can unintentionally convey a lack of trust in the motives or effectiveness of staff. A careful board member can be tough as nails without ever making staff or other board members feel defensive or insulted.

### **Debate the issues, do not attack people.**

When ideas are questioned, decisions are stronger. A robust debate of the issues is productive. When people are attacked, good decisions become almost impossible, and support for the district is eroded. The benefit of a healthy debate is in airing a variety of perspectives. Decisions are better when board members consider input from many sources.

Diversity of opinion cannot be punished when it occurs, or it will go underground. Board members who feel unsafe sharing their opinions in public may start sharing them in the parking lot, the grocery checkout line or letters to the editor. And when the staff feel attacked, employees will withhold valuable input just to avoid being embarrassed. Question the issues, but do not insult the people to whom you are asking the questions.

### **It's not you, it's me.**

The best way to keep the focus on the issues is for board members to communicate about themselves, not their colleagues or staff. For instance, one should say, "I am not sure I understand" rather than "you are not making sense." Use "I" statements. Say, "I need a little more data before I can decide," rather than "You did not provide us with enough information." Pointing out someone else's deficiency or misstep creates an atmosphere of defensiveness and hostility. Pointing out one's own deficiencies invites others to help.

If board members have not had enough time to review his packet of materials, they could say they were not able to read the materials until this afternoon, and they need more time." This is more effective than accusing district staff of incompetence by saying, "Staff didn't send out the materials until just before the meeting." There may need to be a private discussion with staff about getting materials out earlier, but that shouldn't happen in a public forum, which could undermine the reputation of district staff.

### **Be careful with your quotes.**

Media thrive on conflict, and that is fine as long as the conflict is between ideas, not between the board and staff. The news media are under no obligation to make sure you do not impugn staff or other board members. A critical quote can make a more compelling headline.

A media tactic is to quote someone on the other side of the issue and ask you to comment by offering a question with a personal angle, such as, "Don't you think the superintendent is being a little short-sighted by suggesting this?" or "Does it seem like the people on the other side of this issue are being a bit selfish?" Of course, the reporter is hoping you will answer in a way that emphasizes interpersonal conflict. Remember to stay focused on the issues, not the opponents. In fact, a good reminder to yourself can be part of the quote: I like to stay focused on issues, not personalities, so I will say this..."

Another tactic is to set up a virtual confrontation by asking, "What would you say to the people who are critical of your position?" This approach simulates a confrontation with someone who isn't even there. If you take the bait, it can amplify any conflict and minimize cooperation. Redirect back to your position and away from a conflict by saying, "My position is that I favor this idea because..."

**Take your time to think about your response.**

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Most board members are volunteers, so they have jobs and lives outside of the board room. Chances are that sooner or later, they will get a media call at home or work.

When you are surprised by a media call, take a breath, ask what they need to discuss with you and offer to call them back within 30 minutes. Reporters cannot expect you to be ready immediately to discuss board issues when you are in work or family mode. Before calling back, talk to the district administration and other board members to see if they have gotten similar questions. It is good to have a unified message or at least a coordinated approach to offering separate opinions.

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*Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant*