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# ONcall

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## School boards: Understanding your role is critical in a crisis

School board members and school leaders need to work together to be effective. During a crisis, they need to be even more united, which can be challenging. This is a highly polarized time, and school board meetings have become emotional, contentious and sometimes disruptive as tensions are high surrounding pandemic-related school closures, vaccine mandates and mask requirements.

This is a good time to remind board members and stakeholders of the primary responsibilities of the school board and the school district leader.

According to the National School Boards Association, the most important responsibility of elected school board members

*“... is to work with their communities to improve student achievement in their local public schools. School boards derive their power and authority from the state. In compliance with state and federal laws, school boards establish policies and regulations by which their local schools are governed.”*

—[www.nsba.org/About/Public-Education-FAQ](http://www.nsba.org/About/Public-Education-FAQ)

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### Why is this important?

The school board and school leader have important and unique roles. A clear understanding of their respective roles is critical to weather the challenges of the pandemic and the many divisive issues that pop up in communities, schools and social circles.

Knowing clear roles can help the board respond to questions from the community and know when to forward the question to the school leader or other staff members.

A lack of role clarity for board members and school leaders will reduce effective collaboration and hamper progress. A clear understanding of roles is a primary characteristic of an effective board.

### What are the board's roles and responsibilities in relation to the school leader?

- The board hires and evaluates the school leader — the district superintendent — and the superintendent hires and manages staff.
- The board sets district priorities, and the superintendent/leader turns priorities into action by directing and managing staff.
- The board adopts policy, and the superintendent implements policy.



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- The board oversees the overall budget, and the school leader manages the budget and plans expenditures.
- The board monitors district progress toward meeting district priorities, and the superintendent reports progress to the board.

### **How can school boards and leaders support each other during a crisis?**

During these challenging times, it is helpful to remember that we are all on the same team, and we all want essentially the same things: opportunities for students. First, school boards, district staff and parents should assume good intentions. We are all trying our best. In addition, the following tips are helpful reminders:

School boards can:

- Let the school leader lead and set aside conflict
- Allow your superintendent or other designated spokesperson to continue to be the organization's voice
- Stay in regular contact with your superintendent or ask that your superintendent designate a liaison for regular contact and information

School leaders can:

- Support the board by sharing regular updates and making them a part of your communications plan
- Make sure their school/organization maintains a unified public message
- Promote messages that are factual and supported by their full leadership team

### **Build public understanding**

Sharing the school board's roles with stakeholders also has benefits. Consider posting information on your school board's web page or adding a short FAQ to the school newsletter. Building public understanding helps demystify the school board's role in a child's education, guides questions from the community to the appropriate staff contacts, and promotes community engagement.

**School board example:** The Beaverton School District, a suburb of Portland, Ore., has a detailed web page for their school board.

Their school board web page contains four sections about their school board:

- "We direct" lists roles and responsibilities of the board.
- "We listen" clarifies how the board hears public comment.
- "We can help" explains how they can provide assistance or answer questions.
- "We work together" describes the relationship of the board with the superintendent.

*[www.beaverton.k12.or.us/about-us/school-board](http://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/about-us/school-board)*

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*Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant*