



Coming to Order

How to plan and conduct effective school board meetings

When it comes to running effective school board meetings, the work and preparation that a school district does before a school board meeting can be crucial to the success of the meeting. The school district should have board policies in place to handle meeting elements such as parliamentary procedure and public comment periods.

How a school board handles its meetings says a lot to its community and staff. Holding smooth and effective school board meetings not only

positively reflects your school leaders, but allows for the important work of school governance to take place.

■ Open Meetings Law

The state Open Meetings Law helps ensure that the public is made aware of public meetings and can therefore attend the meeting if interested.

To abide by the Open Meetings Law, governmental bodies must give appropriate and timely notice of the time, date, place, and subject matter of their meetings. In almost all circumstances, notice of the meeting

must be given at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting. Notice must also be given to news media that request it and a notice has to be posted with an official newspaper designated pursuant to state statute or, if none exists, a news medium likely to give notice in the area.

When it comes to the meeting itself, meetings must be open and accessible to members of the public, unless the meeting has been lawfully convened in a closed session. Outside of meetings, a governmental body (school board) shall not conduct public business outside of

the context of a properly noticed meeting.

By definition under the Open Meetings Law, the term “governmental body” includes school boards and subunits (*i.e.*, committees) created by a board. An exception is made for bodies created for or meeting for the purpose of collective bargaining. However, the exchange of initial proposals must be made in open session.

In order for there to be a lawful meeting, a numbers and purpose requirement must be met. Typically, if one-half or more of a governmental body is present, the numbers requirement is met. Those members must be present to conduct government business — discuss, decide or gather information. In some limited situations, a negative quorum of the board may constitute a meeting if the gathering could, in essence, block school board action that has specific voting requirements.

School board members also need to use caution when communicating with other board members via email and other forms of electronic communications. Depending on how they are used, electronic communications such as email or texting could create a meeting.

■ Closed Sessions

Closed sessions allow a school board to discuss sensitive or confidential issues or topics. To call a closed session, the meeting has to start in open session. Then a motion by the presiding officer must be made to go into closed session. Once in closed session, board members can only discuss those items for which it legitimately convened in closed session.

It is of utmost importance that school board members keep information discussed in closed meetings confidential. Disclosing closed session information can weaken trust between board members and between the board and administration. Additionally, disclosure could result in legal liability for the individual who discloses the information.

■ Agendas and Meetings

School boards are required to hold a regular school board meeting each month. The agendas for those meetings are typically set by the district administrator and/or school board president. In most districts, agenda setting is a collaborative and somewhat fluid process, with some deference given to the final decisions of

the district administrator and/or board president as to how items will be prioritized from meeting to meeting. Individual board members most commonly place their requests for items to be placed on an agenda through the school board president or district administrator.

School boards may get requests from the public to place certain items on the school board meeting agenda. Generally, it is undesirable for board policy to state or imply that students, parents, non-administrators, or other individuals in the community have the power to place specific items of business on a board meeting agenda. However, as a practical matter, regardless of any board policy, any individual in the community can raise a suggestion for an agenda item simply by communicating with administrative staff or with an individual board member.

■ Public Participation

In some instances, state and federal laws require the school board to hold public hearings or seek other public input prior to taking certain actions or adopting certain policies. These include: annual budget hearing, hearings on borrowing resolutions, hearings on school district



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requests for a waiver of rules or statutory requirements from DPI, and hearings regarding the establishment of a charter school. In some cases, school board policy may specify that the school board will hold a public hearing before the board takes certain actions (e.g., changing school attendance boundaries).

Public participation can also occur during regular school board meetings if there is a public comment period posted on the meeting agenda. The public comment period can raise a number of issues for school boards unless they have and follow formal board

policy regarding periods of public comment. Most school boards find that it is important to both allow and limit periods of public comment at board meetings. To achieve this balance, the presiding officer of the meeting must be willing to assert a strong presence, consistently enforce the “rules,” and, at the same time, exercise patience.

Legally, a school board has no obligation to regularly include a period of public comment on its meeting agendas. However, when a school board chooses to allow members of the public an opportunity to address the board at a meeting, the period of public comment must be included on the meeting notice. It is also important to remember

— MORE RESOURCES —

Parliamentary Procedure

WASB *Legal Comment* December 1992 – “Reconsideration and Recission of School Board Action” and WASB *Legal Comment* January 1993 “Reconsideration and Recission of School Board Action”

Election of School Board Officers

WASB *Legal Comment* March 2007 “Duties and Responsibilities of School Board Officers”

Meeting Minutes

WASB *Legal Comment* May 2009 “Minutes of School Board Meetings”

WASB School Board Self-Evaluation Tool

For more information, visit WASB.org and select the “Governance” tab.



Legal Roles and Responsibilities of School Boards Workshops

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Be Prepared...

Chris Hambuch-Boyle, president of Eau Claire Area School Board, offers some tips on running good board meetings:

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Acknowledge the public “I always start my board meetings by thanking those attending and highlighting how important it is for the board to have people from the community address the board during our public forum.”

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Deliver an efficient meeting “I believe that members of the board, administration and participants want a well-run, efficient meeting using Robert’s Rules of Order. When I first became board president, I wrote out all the rules of order prompts to help me move the meeting along.”

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Be transparent (and bring cookies) “In this day and age where we are funding our public schools more and more through referenda, it behooves us as school boards to run our meetings as transparent and participatory as possible. This has served us well in Eau Claire. It might be good, too, that our high school culinary arts class makes cookies for every meeting.”

that issues brought up by members of the public cannot be brought up by the board and voted upon (if they are not part of the publicly noticed meeting agenda). However, it is permissible for board members to briefly discuss and respond to the issue.

When developing board policy regarding the public comment period, districts should consider a couple of key factors, such as: what meetings will public comment periods be allowed, can comments be on any topic or only issues on the posted meeting agenda, how much time will be allocated to the public comment period, where will the public

comment period occur in the meeting, how long can each person speak, will there

be a registration or sign-up process before people can comment, and will the district prohibit repetitive appearances or comments that are obscene or threatening.

Many districts start the period of public comment by having the presiding officer deliver a standard “speech” that: (1) identifies procedures; and (2) reminds speakers that they are not immune from legal consequences related to the content of their speech. The presiding officer needs to consistently enforce any established limitations on speaker time or content.

■ Other Issues

While we covered some of the bigger issues and concerns related to running effective school board meetings, there are several other issues to

consider. In the more resources sidebar on page 16, you can find resources for parliamentary procedure, meeting minutes, and the election and duties of school board officers.

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the work that a school board puts in before its meetings is crucial to running successful meetings. Make sure your district has the proper policies in place and that your respective school board members and administrators understand their roles in your school board meetings.

The WASB’s legal staff is available to respond to your individual questions and to provide training for individual school boards and administrators on how to run an effective school board meeting. ■



Questions? For more information, contact the WASB:

Robert Butler WASB Associate Executive Director, staff counsel (rbutler@wasb.org, 608-512-1703)

Barry Forbes WASB Associate Executive Director, staff counsel (bforbes@wasb.org, 608-512-1707)

Ben Richter staff counsel (brichter@wasb.org, 608-512-1719)