

Essential Attributes of Effective School Board Members

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Even the most experienced Board members never stop learning the technical details of the job, and those who are successful learn early that being effective requires more than knowing the details of Board policy or how to interpret the budget. Being a successful Board member begins with a genuine commitment to striving for high-quality public education that supports the full development of all children. There are certain skills and attributes that are consistently present in effective Board of Education members.

Here are some steps to consider:

Be prepared to participate responsibly. Do your homework, come prepared to work, remember that sometimes the work is to listen, agree, and disagree as your values dictate, and accept that the group decision is legitimate even if it is not your personal choice.

Focus on serving all children. Ensure every deliberation, decision, and action reflects the best interests of every student you serve. No child is more important than another.

Remember that your identity is with the community. Remember that your job is to serve in trust for the community.

Represent the community, not a single constituency. You will understand and/or identify with certain constituencies (parents, neighborhoods or communities, special interest groups, etc.), but you must remember that being a Board member means serving in trust for the entire community. There is no way seven people can provide a spokesperson for every constituency or legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. You can be from a constituency, but you must not let yourself represent it.

Be responsible for group behavior and productivity. You are responsible for not only yourself but the group. If the group does not do its job, meddles in administration, or breaks its own rules, you personally share that responsibility.

Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them. You should express your honest opinions on issues. Encourage your colleagues to speak their opinions and listen to them carefully and respectfully. But do not allow yourself to be intimidated by louder or more insistent Board members.

Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom. If you have special expertise (law, accounting, construction, etc.) remember that you are not personally responsible for decisions relating to that area. Use your expertise to help inform your colleagues (i.e., help them understand what fiscal health looks like versus fiscal jeopardy) but do not assume sole responsibility for those decisions. Also remember that you are not on the Board to help the staff or even advise them with your special expertise. Your job as a Board member is to govern. If you wish to offer your help as an expert, make sure that all parties know you are acting as a volunteer, not a Board member, and remember that asking for or accepting your help is a staff prerogative, not yours.

Be aware of the community and staff's perceptions of the Board. If the Board is perceived as being unethical, dishonest, secretive, or self-serving, whether justified or not, that will become reality for the community and staff. Consider how stakeholders might interpret your behaviors and decisions then act accordingly.

Think upward and outward more than downward and inward. There is a great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the district should make in the larger world. This requires ignoring the minutia or details in order to examine, question and define the big picture. The latter is a daunting and awesome task, but it is Board work—governance!

**Adapted from Michigan Association of School Boards*