



BY LINDA J. DAWSON AND RANDY QUINN

# Why Matters

## Board Culture

*Allowed to go unchecked,  
boardroom dysfunction  
will erode the public's trust*

A school board's most critical responsibility is to safeguard the public's trust in public education. That trust hinges on a clear, unerring organizational mission to educate *all* students and challenge their level of achievement. Once that trust is lost, it is difficult to regain it.

As community members, we trust that our school board can define what it wants the schools to achieve for students and delegate the attainment of that vision to trained professionals who know how to achieve it. We trust that the board monitors and evaluates the performance of the organization and of the CEO/superintendent. We trust that the board and its members will hold themselves accountable to one another and to the community of people they were elected or appointed to serve and represent.

Mainly, we trust that members of the board can find ways to work together. We trust that despite personal or pedagogical or philosophical differences, they will work maturely and civilly to meet the needs and hopes of all students in the district. And, we trust that they will have the skills to discuss, argue, and represent their individual points of view but ultimately vote and move forward as a democratic body to serve a diverse citizenry that expects a reasonable return on its investment.

Can school boards live up to these expectations? Is it reasonable to expect that public school boards should be made

up of board members who are committed to creating an ethical culture and building the public's trust and support?

The expectations may be reasonable, but experience suggests we are far from achieving it. In our work with school boards nationwide, we are encountering with increasing and alarming frequency the rebel board member who chooses not to act for the public good, opting instead to promote a private agenda or advance the demands of a special interest.

Even more alarming is the trend for fellow board members to tolerate one member's unethical and self-righteous behavior. It is amazing how much power a single member can wield over an entire board—even when the others do not share the same views and tactics. These board members usually march to a different drummer—and they have found that they can make the entire board march to their drummer, too.

These mavericks may be a small percentage of any board, but they become a tyranny of the minority, forcing their will on the majority. They constitute a powerfully destructive force that is handicapping, if not destroying, effective board work. The result is a climate of public mistrust—not only of school boards but of public education at large.

### **Behaviors that erode the public's trust**

Most school boards are made up of good people who want to make a positive difference in the districts they serve. But we

have seen good board members who allow themselves to be completely taken over by one individual who refuses to be a functioning member of the board. In their effort to be “nice” to each other, they allow behaviors they know to be destructive to the board and the district to continue unchecked.

They permit a single member to dictate what they will and will not spend their time doing, to limit or delay significant actions that need to be taken, to direct major staff activities without board authorization, and to take over agendas with unrelated and irrelevant motions and comments. They leave unchallenged public comments that are demeaning to the staff and other members of the board.

Consider the following real-life scenarios that we have observed over the past few years:

### Case Study A: The Queen Syndrome

Sandra has come on the board to take charge of operations. The professionals can educate, but they can’t possibly operate a multimillion-dollar enterprise without her tenacious vigilance. In her opinion, this lackadaisical board needs a watchdog to make sure buildings are built on time and without change orders. Finances must be scrutinized and every line item explained. Vendor complaints of injustice in the contracting process must be examined and reexamined.

At board meetings, Sandra takes advantage of every opportunity to put staff members in the hot seat with remarks that start, “Can you explain? ...” “How could you let? ...” or “Do you mean to tell me? ...”

She garners increasing public attention with her veiled and unveiled innuendos and accusations. She likes the notoriety. She dismisses the idea of the superintendent ever appearing on television or at political or social events. “That’s the board’s role,” Sandra declares.

Through careful politicking, Sandra has recently been named board vice chair. She is working to defeat her board colleagues who are running for reelection and is increasingly revved up, trying to flex her muscles over all board decisions.

The superintendent and staff are stressed, trying to focus time and energy on their main job of educating the students and operating the district effectively. The board is worn down and worn out.

### Case Study B: The Champion Syndrome

Milt delivers. He sees himself as the lone voice for the special-interest groups and individuals in the community. Since that is Milt’s primary reason for serving on the board, all other concerns come second. His job is to fight at the table for special consideration and then to deliver on promises.

He questions the integrity of the other board members. He accuses them of not understanding or caring about “his” constituents. He enjoys offering evidence to refute every recommendation the superintendent makes and even writes lengthy counter-comments on the superintendent’s weekly newsletter to the board. The confidentiality of executive sessions has lit-

tle or no application to him—his responsibility is to his constituents.

Milt views facts as mere points to be manipulated and staff members as people who are meant to be distrusted. He accepts efforts to bridge misunderstandings and find common ground only for the night of the retreat—with the daylight comes renewed vigor and commitment to the fight.

The superintendent has had a long and honored career, but the idea of leaving before his contract is up is beginning to look attractive. Senior staff members are frustrated and question why the other board members fail to confront this destructiveness. The local paper has an unending source for new stories that question the competence of board and staff members alike. And, discontent is growing among diverse factions of the community.

### Case Study C: The Keeper-of-All-Knowledge Syndrome

Thomas is a native of the community who takes great pride in serving his hometown. He considers it his rightful role to be the repository of all information about district dealings. Every hiring, extension of tenure, curriculum decision, and building project must be scrutinized through laborious committee and board processes to satisfy his hunger for facts and figures.

Thomas needs to know everything, every detail—right now. Otherwise, he complains, “How am I supposed to answer questions when I get phone calls?” Or he says, “I can’t look stupid and say I don’t know. It’s my job to know—my constituents believe we have the answers to any concern they have.”

The highest sin, in his view, is not being informed before everyone else is. “I heard about this incident on the television, not from you,” he fumes at the superintendent. “Your job is to keep us informed!”

The superintendent and senior staff members labor to get information to the board members in a timely fashion. But, some decisions seem to be clearly within the purview of the staff, with the board informed after the fact. For some operational decisions, it doesn’t occur to staff members that the board would even care.

But Thomas cares. He punctuates board meetings with comments like, “I wish we had known,” or “Once again, we have failed to be informed.” Staff members look forward to board meetings with all the enthusiasm of awaiting a root canal—they never know when Thomas will inflict a public tongue-lashing, chastising them for their “purposeful intent to keep the board in the dark.”

### Improving board culture

We could continue with other examples, and you can no doubt add your own. In the face of these kinds of behaviors, how can a high-profile board address its own culture, its own commitment to ethical behavior, its vested trusteeship to build broad community trust and support for its school system? We have several suggestions:

#### 1. Resolve to govern as a body, not as individuals.

Board members should represent their individual perspectives

## Boards behaving badly

Consider the following checklist of destructive board member behaviors. Be honest: Have you ever fallen into any of them yourself?

- Passive-aggressive behavior, including refusal to participate during meetings but openly criticizing the board's decision afterwards.
- Dominating meetings by talking too much, intimidating other members, and shutting them up through bullying and ridicule.
- Publicly criticizing the board or the superintendent with the intent of promoting yourself and undermining public confidence in colleagues.
- Refusing to participate in board development, choosing instead to revel in "lone wolf" notoriety.
- Circumventing the superintendent to give directives to the staff.
- Trying to "fix things" for your constituents rather than referring problems to the district for a systemic fix.
- Declaring your First Amendment right to say and do as you please, without regard for the responsibility you have assumed as a member of the board to work for the whole.

Often, the individuals who manifest these behaviors are bright people who are accomplished in some field and gifted with a measure of ability that, if used properly, could reap enormous benefit for the board and district. Instead, they choose to strike out on their own and refuse to engage as constructive members of the board.—*L.J.D. and R.Q.*

and rigorously deliberate issues at the board table, but they must resolve to act as a single entity through the most powerful tool in a democracy: the vote.

This commitment should be written in policy, and it should be self-monitored routinely by the board to ensure full compliance. Then the board majority must faithfully practice the commitment. A single board member should never be allowed to override the whole to dictate the actions, the timing, the agenda, or any other aspect of the board's or the staff's operations.

**2. Develop a board member code of conduct.** The code, which should be adopted as board policy, should articulate written values by which the board will responsibly self-govern. Once adopted, the policy should be routinely monitored for compliance by all members.

Whenever new members come on board, the code of conduct should be reviewed for understanding and reaffirmation. Members should be expected to comply with the agreed upon code, without exception. If a member fails to comply, the board has reason *and responsibility* to privately and even publicly question the behavior as a violation of board policy. Individual situations must be dealt with, no matter how difficult that is. The board expects the superintendent to deal with policy vio-

lations by members of the school staff; the board must be equally diligent in confronting violations that fall in its area of responsibility.

**3. Ensure that individual points of view are heard.** Encourage rigorous floor debate and deliberation to explore conflicts and perspectives. This is demanded by our democratic society. But once a vote is taken, every member should accept the majority vote to provide clarity of direction to staff and the community.

**4. Encourage rigorous and frank dialogue with the public.** As a board, explore significant issues in public forums and other representative groups. Such dialogue gives board members the perspective they need to govern clearly on behalf of the diverse community they serve. It also exposes the narrow agendas promoted by board members who seek to represent only a small fraction of the broader public.

**5. Don't ignore bad behavior.** If your board has a rogue member, the first step is to make every reasonable effort to encourage that member to work with the group in a contributing manner. This could mean conversations initiated by the president or other members, discussions with the full board, facilitated retreats to get to the root of the behavior, and any other reasonable attempt to establish full understanding of board behavioral expectations.

**6. Consider public censure.** Continuing and willful violation of the board's code of conduct challenges the board to take further steps. This requires soul-searching, courage, and determination to be an ethical board working for the benefit of the entire community. After pursuing logical and reasonable attempts to address and mitigate destructive behaviors, the only avenue left might be public censure—that is, a public statement that the board has chosen to publicly separate itself from the destructive member.

This is not an easy choice to make. Certainly, the board will want to exhaust every other option first. But, failure to act allows the misery to go without challenge and the damage to remain unchecked and unchallenged, thereby signaling to staff and community that this board cannot responsibly govern itself—let alone govern the organization.

**7. Reaffirm the board's role in relation to the staff.** The staff cannot work to achieve defined goals for students if individual board members direct the staff's work. The board must reaffirm to the superintendent and staff that they are not to perform any work directed by a single board member. If such demands or requests are made, they should be referred by staff to the superintendent and by the superintendent to the full board for disposition by the majority.

**8. Be strategic and speak the truth.** Because some boards value unity and civility at any cost, they too often succumb to the temptation to allow renegade, political, undermining behaviors to go unchecked. Some board members even refuse to speak out truthfully when they are being attacked or challenged or when campaigns are run against them.

Who benefits from not confronting maverick board members? Certainly not the board. At the board table or when re-

sponding to news queries or meeting with small groups of citizens or staff, speak the truth without rancor. "My colleague knows exactly what happened," you might say, "and I challenge him to speak the truth about this issue in the context of our mission and purpose here of governing a system to educate children."

**9. Recruit citizens of high ethics and integrity to serve on the board.** Target people who want to work with a board made up of members who value good governance, people who care about the district as a whole and not their own self-promotion. Make sure your school system has a legacy of good governance by people who have a demonstrated ability to express ethics and integrity not only in theory or talk, but also in how they live their lives.

### **The will to act**

Our democracy and the school boards that are a manifestation of it need clear, consistent, value-centered leaders who are unafraid to confront rogue board members. When these mavericks' destructive behavior is allowed to continue, the result is erosion of public trust in public education. Progress is slowed by poor morale and fear. Good staff members and leaders leave, and it becomes difficult to attract good people to replace

them. The community suffers the image of a toxic system that is unable to govern, lead, or educate.

This is happening in districts across the country.

No one can tell a school board when enough is enough; the board must decide that for itself. When board members realize they are being dominated and hindered by a single member, when it becomes apparent that one member is compromising the effectiveness of the board and the district, it is time to act.

We hope your board has not fallen victim to this situation. It is not a pleasant, constructive, or wholesome environment in which to govern a district. But if you find yourself there, our best advice is this: Don't allow bad behavior to go unchallenged for the sake of temporary peace and harmony. In the long term, the cost of doing nothing is far too great.

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