

## **Peaceful, Productive Public Meetings**

The living nightmare of almost every superintendent and school board member is the public meeting that turns into a confrontation.

Picture the following: the board sits stoically on a dais or behind a table, facing rows of chairs filled with community members waiting impatiently for a turn at the microphone. Some are lined up behind the microphone. Each person's testimony is limited, and a timer pings officially to signal that time is up. Occasionally, an opinionated, persuasive community member harangues the crowd and converts some to his or her point of view that the administration and board are doing everything wrong, don't really care about public opinion and don't really listen.

Anticipation of such a scene makes many school administrators and board members dread public hearings and input sessions. They want to listen to members of the public and hear their opinions, but, all too often, those who come to public meetings intending to give positive, helpful input end up not feeling positive about how long they had to wait to speak or are intimidated by the formal atmosphere of the meeting. In the worst cases, the opposition takes over the meeting, dominates the discussion and intimidates those who do not agree with them.

There are many other ways to hold public hearings that establish a friendly, welcoming atmosphere; show consideration for the busy lives of the participants; place the board in the position of being friendly, sympathetic, attentive listeners; and keep detractors from dominating the meeting.

### **A model that works for many public bodies**

Many public bodies are holding public meetings using a format which establishes a friendly, informative, flexible atmosphere that portrays consideration for those who come to give their opinions and assures them that they were heard. Here's how to do it:

- ▶▶▶▶ Do away with the dais and formal atmosphere. Have your meeting in a room that will allow people to come and go as they please, one that will accommodate several tables or stations from which to distribute information and to gather written input and hear oral comments.
- ▶▶▶▶ Advertise your meeting as a public hearing or opportunity for public input (depending on the requirements of what you are doing) that spans one to two hours. Make it clear that people can come and go at any time during that time span.

*(Over)*

▶▶▶▶▶ Plan your meeting and room setup to include:

- ◆ One or two staff members or community members to act as greeters. They should welcome people as they come in, invite them to have refreshments, point out where they can get more information about the subject of the hearing and give directions as to where they can present written or oral comments. These greeters should tell people to come back to them for help if they have any questions at any time about the process.
- ◆ Establish a place for people to get information about the subject at hand. Be sure to arrange for informed people to answer questions rather than just handing out written materials. People who know about the topic under consideration should be located at a table or near a display so that meeting participants have easy access to accurate information before they offer opinions.

If the subject of the hearing is complicated, such as boundary changes between several schools, you may want to have people who can explain the impact on each school that is involved. For example, for a boundary change involving Lincoln School and Kennedy School, have people behind tables clearly marked with signs that say “Information about Proposed Lincoln Boundary Changes” and “Information about Proposed Kennedy Boundary Changes.” If you had a task force looking into a subject such as boundary changes, you will want those task force members to provide the information about their recommendations for that school. It will be even better if those task force members are from the school in question so that parents of students currently attending Kennedy School are providing information about that school and why they have reached their conclusions about those changes.

Instruct these people that they are only to give information and are not to argue or try to convince. Tell them that if some of those who attend try to argue with them they should make it clear that they are only part of the task force making a recommendation and the school board will make the final decision. People who have been asked to help provide information should emphasize that the reason the board is having the hearing is that they want to hear from everyone on this issue. They should explain that board members are in another part of the room listening to testimony and that there is also a place to leave written opinions.

- ◆ Provide a place for people to leave their written opinions. Some people will want to know the board received their information but will not particularly care if they talk personally with a board member. Provide tables and chairs where people can sit and write comments and a box designed to assure privacy in which they may leave those comments. You will probably want to have a staff member or volunteer at this table to make sure people have pens and pencils, assure them that the board will definitely see all written comments and thank them for taking the time to provide their views on the issue at hand.
- ◆ Provide one or several locations where people can give oral testimony. Each of these stations should have a table with one board member sitting behind it. It should have a chair in front of it so the person giving testimony can sit down and talk face to face with the board member. There should be several

*(More)*

other chairs behind the person giving the testimony for people who are waiting for their turns. There should be a tape recorder on the table and you may want to have a volunteer at a flip chart behind the table or a secretary with a computer sitting with the board member taking notes. This demonstrates that you are listening several ways, and that the testimony will be recorded in writing and made available to all board members.

The board member behind the table should warmly greet the people who want to give testimony, tell speakers that their comments will be relayed to all board members and the tapes made available to all board members, ask them to speak into the microphone attached to the tape recorder and request that each begin by giving his or her name and address (for public records). Speakers should not be limited in time and the board member should not engage in conversation or argue with the people who testify. The board member should listen intently, take a few notes if he or she wishes and, when each person is finished, thank him or her for the information.

- ▣▣▣▣▶ Those who testify should be assured that other board members will listen to the tapes and/or read the written summary of the information left by those who testify.
  - ◆ Provide a way for people to leave their names and addresses if they wish to receive a summary of what was heard by the board, information about the progress of the decision and/or a report on the final decision.
  - ◆ Arrange for the greeter or another staff member or volunteer to thank each person for attending as that person leaves the meeting place.

### **Why this model works well**

- ▣▣▣▣▶ Those who wish to provide testimony can do so without waiting in long lines for their turn at the microphone.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ The format is friendly and less intimidating than a formal hearing setting.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ Those who wish to provide input can come at any time during the “hearing,” stay as long as they wish and leave.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ No “stage” is provided for people who come to the hearing for the purpose of swaying other community members toward their way of thinking.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ There is no venue for loud, aggressive people to inflict their mannerisms and views on others. Those giving oral testimony are across the table from one person and have little opportunity to raise their voice, gesture wildly or attract a crowd.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ Those who provide oral testimony have the full attention of one person and are encouraged by the informal setting to be friendly and personal as they make their remarks.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ Board members can review the input in an unhurried, rational manner.
- ▣▣▣▣▶ The news media can move amongst those who come and go and interview anyone present who is willing to talk to them, and are more likely to get a balanced story rather than one that focuses on one negative person who happened to steal the show.