

# MANAGING MEETING DISRUPTIONS

When issues around education turn controversial emotions can run high. At these times, members of the public and even board members themselves can behave in ways that can disrupt the smooth conduct of board business. It is important that boards have well established meeting processes and a strong board culture that clearly communicates behavioral expectations. But when a disruption happens boards should have a plan for addressing the situation.

## WHAT IS DISRUPTIVE FOR A BOARD MEMBER? WHAT IS NOT?

Board members are held to a higher standard than the public, and for many boards anything other than a civil tone may be out of order. The listed remarks are always out of order:

- Interruptions (*except points raised to maintain order*)
- Criticizing past actions of the board
- Personal remarks
- Criticizing another member's motives
- Discourteous remarks
- Insulting language
- Personal attacks
- Inflammatory language...or worse

## MEETING MANAGEMENT: FOLLOW YOUR RULES OF ORDER!

- If a board member makes a remark that is out of order, the chair should interrupt and bring the member back to order: "The member will kindly refrain from..."
- If the board chair does not notice or interrupt remarks that are out of order, other members of the board can call "Point of order..." The chair should inquire to the point and if well taken, should implement corrective action.
- If a member will not come to order, don't attempt to gavel them down. This conveys weakness and the chair's lack of authority. Give a few raps of the gavel. If this does not stop the offending behavior, put the board in recess and speak with the offending member privately.
- If repeated attempts to bring the board to order fail, the board does have the authority to remove a member. However, this is a protracted process and it is very likely better to simply adjourn the meeting. In this event, call OSBA!

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- The vast majority of disruptive behaviors can be addressed by a single corrective action in the board meeting.
- If disruptive or insensitive remarks are habitual it is advisable for the chair to meet with the offending member outside of the board meeting.
- As with our complaint process, try to resolve issues at the lowest level possible:
  - In the moment during the meeting
  - In private outside the meeting
  - If private conversation isn't effective, it becomes board work to set expectations and the issue needs to be discussed in a public meeting. It is very useful if the board has an operating agreement to reference. (If your board does not have an operating agreement, reach out to OSBA Board Development).
  - If a member's behavior creates a liability risk then a censure by the board may be indicated. Consult legal counsel and/or OSBA before proceeding with censuring a member.

## WHAT IS DISRUPTIVE FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC? WHAT IS NOT?

- The public has the right to make critical and harsh remarks. Legal decisions have concluded that public bodies may not require members of the public to follow the rules of decorum that apply to board members themselves.
- Members of the public may not disrupt a school board meeting. However, mere words in public comment likely do not constitute disruption.
- The board may prohibit demonstrations (booing, hissing, clapping). These can be chilling to discourse and inhibit free speech, both on the part of the elected officials and of the public.

## MEETING MANAGEMENT: FOLLOW YOUR RULES OF ORDER

- If a member of the audience speaks out of order, either while giving comment with the chair's permission, or interrupting the meeting, the chair should immediately interrupt and bring the audience member back to order.
- If the board chair does not notice or interrupt remarks that are out of order, other members of the board can call "Point of order..." The chair should inquire to the point and if well taken, should implement corrective action.
- If the audience or a member of the public giving comment will not come to order, do not attempt to gavel them down. This conveys weakness and the chair's lack of authority. Give a few raps of the gavel. If this does not stop the offending behavior, put the board in recess and the chair or their designee should speak with the offending member of the public. Such conversations should be direct but done with care.

## REMOVAL OF AUDIENCE MEMBER

- The board chair has the authority to order a disruptive member of the meeting audience from the chamber. However...
- **BE VERY CAUTIOUS ABOUT ORDERING A DISRUPTIVE MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC TO LEAVE A MEETING!** Call district counsel or OSBA/PACE legal first! Consider simply adjourning the meeting.
- If you are in the moment and cannot consult counsel, give three warnings before issuing the order for removal.
- If you give the order to remove, put the board in recess until the ordered member of the audience leaves the meeting.
- If order cannot be restored or if an unsafe condition arises adjourn the meeting.



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