

**There's a Board Member in the Building!**  
**A Guide for School Board Member Actions While on School Property**

Congratulations! You won your school board election and are now on the school board, the board that governs the public school district. But what does that mean? Most school board members have never been a member of a governing board and are unsure of their authority and role. This can result in awkward moments when visiting district buildings. This guidance will give Board members some legal and practical rules when they come onto school property.

**You Are Just a Member of the Public**

You may be an elected Board member, but you are just one person of a seven-member governing Board. You have no authority outside of the Board room, unless the Board has assigned you additional duties, such as being appointed to a committee. That means when you come onto school property or interact with district staff, you do not have any more privileges or authority than other members of the public.

You must park in places designated for the public. You must sign in and out of buildings like other members of the public. You cannot roam the halls or walk into classrooms or the staff workroom if other members of the public are not invited to do so. You should make an appointment to meet with a busy teacher or administrator. You must follow the building rules the same as anyone else.

**Set a Good Example**

While you are just a member of the public when you are acting individually, the public and staff still know you are a school board member! The public will hold you to a higher standard, and your actions will be scrutinized. You need to set a good example for all who are watching, including students. You need to respect the rules, be polite to district staff, ask permission and be patient and wait your turn. If the public sees a Board member misbehaving, they are likely to follow suit. How can the district expect the public to follow the rules, if individual Board members do not?

**You Do Not Have Access to Confidential Information**

The Board as a whole has access to confidential information when necessary to make decisions, but individual Board members do not. As an individual Board member, teachers and building administrators cannot legally share information with you about students other than your own. While you are free to share praise and concerns regarding district staff, individual Board members are not entitled to view the performance evaluations of district employees.

If you feel strongly that the Board needs to be involved in a student or personnel issue, or any other confidential matter, ask for the issue to be added to the Board's agenda for the next meeting. Then the Board as a whole will determine if it wants to discuss the issue and whether the Board members need access to confidential information.

### **Staff See You as a Board Member Even When You Are Not**

While you have no legal authority as a single Board member, it is easy for a newly-elected school board member to accidentally intimidate district staff. While you might feel like you are the same person as you were before the election, some district employees now see you as one-seventh of the “boss.” Be careful not to abuse this perception! Do not use your position as a Board member to ask for exceptions to the rules, seek special treatment for your family and friends, or intimidate district staff. This is misuse of your position, violates Board policy, sets a bad example for students and the community and will not endear you to fellow Board members or district employees.

### **You Pay the Administrators to Do That!**

Most Board members want to help the school district in any way that they can, and sometimes that gets Board members into trouble. The school board is charged with monitoring district progress, making long-term plans, setting the budget, adopting policy, and working with the community to adequately fund and support the school. Board members are not ambassadors for family or friends who have problems, are not charged with investigating complaints and should not directly evaluate individual staff members other than the superintendent. That is why the school board hires trained and certified professionals to run the school district!

A Board member who visits school buildings to “check out” concerns or to fix problems is overstepping his or her role. Instead, the Board member should share any complaints with the superintendent and allow the district staff to do their job. If the Board member does not trust the staff to take care of the problem, then they should share that fact with the superintendent. The Board should require administrators to do the job they were employed to do, not do the work for them.

### **Do Not Get Used**

Sometimes parents ask Board members to come to a confidential school meeting. It could be a disciplinary conference or a meeting to create a special education plan. While the parent might be a friend or family member, the real reason the parent wants you to attend is probably because you are a Board member. They hope the outcome of the meeting will be different if you are present. MSBA strongly recommends that Board members refuse these requests.

While it is appropriate for Board members to attend meetings regarding their own children, they should politely decline to do so for other people. It is inappropriate for Board members to use their elected position to intimidate the staff or attend meetings that they were not invited to attend. You do not have any authority to change the result in these meetings, but your presence implies that you do.

Further, Board members need to maintain their neutrality so that when concerns come before the entire Board they are not biased and can participate in the final decision. When a suspension is appealed, there is a termination hearing, or a complaint goes through the chain of command, the Board makes the final decision. As a Board member, your role is to funnel complaints to the administrative staff for resolution. If the concern is still not resolved by the administrative staff, that is when the Board gets involved.

## **There are Better Ways To Do It!**

Board members have good intentions, but sometimes they do not know that there are more appropriate methods they should use.

### *a. Staff Input on Board Decisions Should Be Systematic*

It is not surprising that a Board member would want staff input before making a decision, but that Board member should not get that input by roaming the halls of a building. Instead, the Board member should rely on or initiate systematic processes where staff members are more involved in decision making. This could mean including staff members on committees, conducting annual school climate surveys or surveys specific to a particular topic, holding a staff forum where employees are encouraged to bring their comments and concerns to the Board as a whole, or using other creative methods of engaging staff members. Whatever method your district uses, make sure it is planned, inclusive, and that the information collected goes to the entire Board, not just one Board member.

### *b. Use Established Channels for Complaints and Concerns*

Likewise, if parents or employees think that information is not getting to the Board like it should, the Board should make sure to provide clear channels so that the entire Board – not just an individual Board member – is hearing the concerns. MSBA policy provides the community a number of methods for communicating with the Board, including public comment, asking to be on a Board agenda, or writing letters to the Board Secretary, which will be sent directly to all Board members. *See Policy BDDH*. There is a process in place for reporting illegal discrimination or harassment (Policy AC), allegations of fraud or misuse of funds (Policy DA), employee grievances (Policy GBM), complaints about federal programs (Policy KLA), and other complaints or concerns (Policy KL).

Some employees and community members claim that they do not want to use existing communication channels because they are afraid of retaliation. Likewise, some employees or community members will ask that you share (or fix) their problem without identifying them due to fear of retaliation. Board members should make it clear that the Board and Board policy explicitly prohibits retaliation against any person for making a complaint and that the Board will back that up with disciplinary action. *See Policy KL*. Further, complaints are handled as confidentially as possible. The district cannot get better unless people feel free to openly discuss problems.

### *c. Planned Visits*

Board members must make decisions about construction projects, some of which are expensive. Understandably, some Board members would feel better about making these decisions if they viewed the facility first hand. The intent of these visits is not to second guess the administrative staff, but rather to better understand the problem so that the Board member can explain the concern and expenditure to the community. In those situations, district staff can arrange for a tour by the Board as a whole, or might invite Board members to make an appointment with the building principal to take a tour. Regardless, the visit should be planned and purposeful to minimize disruption.