

Difficult Decisions

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Everyone likes being a board member when things are running smoothly or when the board is making popular decisions. However, the enjoyment quickly disappears when decisions that will likely be unpopular or controversial must be made.

Questions regarding how to make those difficult decisions are regular queries at seminars and board training workshops. Unfortunately, there is not a single right answer that fits all the scenarios that could confront a school board. However, here are a few tips that can assist any board as it confronts and deals with unpleasant decisions:

1. Remember that every board member has been elected (or appointed) to make decisions, or more appropriately, to contribute to the decision-making process. It may not be pleasant, and it might not be what you want to deal with when you are faced with a tough decision. Still, you were not elected to disappear from the difficulties of the office, you were elected because your constituents wanted you to represent their best interests in your local school district.
2. Unless your superintendent is the object of the decision, he or she is the person you rely on for the information necessary to inform your decision-making process. Your superintendent may not be the only source of information, but he or she should be the person who orchestrates the conversation and secures the objective data necessary to guide and frame a difficult decision. This does not insinuate that boards blindly accept information that is not supported by objective data. However, it clearly suggests that superintendents are all school boards' go to people. Additionally, a board should expect superintendents to make recommendations for boards' considerations in these situations, especially to anchor any recommended action, aligning it with policy, process and impact on district personnel, operations, etc.
3. Difficult decisions are not personal. If they truly are personal, then you should recuse yourself from the decision entirely. Decisions by board members with legitimate conflicts of interest or ethical conflicts are best resolved by members of the board not affected. That does not suggest that the member with the conflict could not make the right decision, it only relieves any suspicion from the public that a vote they might cast would be completely objective because of their conflict. If you legitimately have a conflict, that is your ticket out of the decision-making process. If not, carry your weight and stay the course.
4. Keep your thought process as neutral as you can. It is important that you not allow your own biases, opinions, alliances, or sentiments rule your decision-making process. If possible, weigh every issue on its own merit, without inserting the personalities involved or impacted, and then determine what your recommendation might be.
5. Once the board makes a decision, put the issue behind you and move on. If the issue was decided in a split vote and you are in the minority, live with it. Obviously, this is easier for some issues, but it is imperative to effective board governance that members whose votes were in the minority of a final decision not use the vote to continually revisit the issue in future sessions. You were not elected to get your way; you were elected to make educated decisions and vote your convictions.

Lastly, making easy and/or popular decisions is the icing on the cake, but the board's collective character, as well as individual members' characters are tested when the decisions are difficult, controversial, and contested, both in the board room and perhaps, in the court of public opinion. Be resolved to pass the test by using your passion to accent your decisions, not override them. Being a board member is not about winning a popularity contest, it is about conscientiously contributing your best effort every time you meet.

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