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Indiana Convention Center

UPCOMING ISBA EVENTS

6.5.2019--ISBA June School Law Seminar
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6.6.2019—Webinar-- Indiana's Property Tax System, School Corporation Budgets, and You: What School Board Members Need to Know About this Revenue Source in 2019
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6.12.2019—ISBA/IAPSS/IASBO Joint Budget & Finance Seminar
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FAST FACTS ON INDIANA K-12 EDUCATION

\$7.33 B

Did you know that the new state budget appropriates **\$7.33 billion** in K-12 tuition support for Fiscal Year 2020?

\$5,548

The Foundation funding amount will increase from \$5,352 per pupil to \$5,548 per pupil next fiscal year.

When Things Go South

By Dr. Michael T. Adamson, ISBA Director of Board Services
(madamson@isba-ind.org)

Being a school board member can be one of the most rewarding positions anyone can have. However, it can also be one of the most trying, especially if there is a conflict between board members, or between board members and their superintendent. This really is not about whether board members like each other or whether board members like their superintendent or vice versa. Liking each other is not a prerequisite for either position. Of course, not having personality issues removes a layer of complexity, but it is seldom that inner conflicts within the school board/superintendent team are not compounded by personality issues.

There is a difference between disagreements and conflicts. Disagreement is a normal byproduct of individual perception, interpretation, and experience. Nothing mandates that everyone always agree on everything; however, if a single member or consistent group of members constantly disagree with everyone else, it is clear there are more than philosophical or interpretive differences at play. It is not uncommon for there to be occasional disagreements within the board or between board members and their superintendent, but when disagreements are the norm, it is an indication that a board or the board/superintendent team is in crisis.

Constant disagreements erode trust and threaten the confidence placed in the highest levels of leadership in the school district. While board member/board member or board member/superintendent in-fighting makes great fodder for greedy reporters anxious to grab a headline, it does nothing to evoke respect for the governance structure entrusted to act in the best interests of local stakeholders.

The problem arises when boards are caught in this dysfunctional loop and are unclear how to exit. Slipping into dysfunction is always much easier than returning to effectiveness and that is why many training modules urge regular reviews of roles, responsibilities, and board protocol. The goal of professional development in these areas, beyond their initial introduction, is more about the prevention of practices that render school boards less effective, as well as to introduce and emphasize methods that enable school boards to self-govern. Perhaps, just as importantly, professional development in the area of conflict resolution stresses that when a board finds it is in trouble, there is a remedy to employ from within. A board can work its way out of conflict, but it is, in every sense . . . work!

First, there must be a mutual resolve to fix whatever is causing the discord. Unless both sides are willing to put forth a conscientious effort towards reaching a resolution to an ongoing conflict, the effort is defeated before it begins. Remember, fixing what is wrong is different than forcing compliance. Issues are seldom one-sided; there are usually major and minor contributors to any ongoing conflict.

Next, identify the facts. Be sure to separate the objective components from those that are subjective, or more emotionally driven. Sometimes separating these pieces of the conflicting concern are sufficiently adequate for enabling participants on both sides of the conflict to separate their feelings that by themselves are not emotional, only different. Of course, it is seldom as simple as that. Board members, after all, do have certain areas of public education or school governance that they are more passionate about. However, being passionate always carries with it the individual responsibility to not allow emotion to govern the position the member assumes. Separating the objective components from subjective interpretation is a critical element in the resolution process.

After they have been identified, it is time to discuss them . . . individually. Internal conflict is rarely a single issue; it may have several layers and not until you have separated them and addressed them individually can a long-term resolution be found.

Lastly, there is no guarantee that a discussion fueled by honorable motives will make the board unanimous, but if the motives are pure, the effort can and should be successful, allowing the board to move forward, respectful of the simple democratic process for decision making. Ultimately, it is not being unanimous that is most important; it is being able to disagree agreeably.