

GETTING OUT OF THE BLOCKS

Planning the Start and Strategy for the Race Before it Begins

By Steve Horton, Director of Board Services



In the last edition of *The Journal*, I appreciated Dr. Michael Adamson's track and field relay race reference, both on a personal and professional level. When I was a teacher, years ago, I coached track and field, and additionally, my youngest son's passion is competing as a runner. I would agree with Dr. Adamson that among the many track events, the most exciting and fun to watch are the relays. An important consideration for every team is not just the baton exchange, but also the start. Sprinters refer to it as "getting out of the blocks." Often that is where a race is won or

lost. A disciplined and well-trained runner will think about the start and strategy for running the race before it begins.

I have thought about the start quite a bit lately, as I begin my responsibilities as director of board services with ISBA. I realize that my service is not a sprint, but a marathon. However, the start is just as important to me. I want to be focused, like any runner, on what is ahead. That means getting around Indiana and meeting school board members and administrators and learning about what is important to your school corporation and school community. It

is valuable to consider where you have challenges and where your board is succeeding. Perhaps those challenges are relational, communication, meeting process and protocol, or coming together to develop long term goals. Those are all areas where I hope to be a valuable resource for your team.

In my eight years of service with the Ohio School Boards Association prior to coming to Indiana, I had the privilege of working with dozens of school district leadership teams. I enjoyed helping boards understand their roles and responsibilities, prepare for the future through strategic planning, work through conflict, and strategize for better communication. When there was a need, I facilitated many superintendent searches.

In all my work in Ohio, and as I have collaborated with colleagues in the school board associations across the country, one thing has been very clear: the challenges you face in your board governance and school leadership are shared by your colleagues nationwide. You could say we are all in the same boat, but the reality is that you do have a unique school corporation and community, and it is of the utmost importance to me to focus on those unique needs and customize my work with you as an outside consultant.

In the world of school governance, there is no such thing as just starting once. Here are some ways you should prepare to get out of the blocks.

YOUR NEXT SCHOOL YEAR:

There is always a next school year. Consider as an individual board member and governance team your steps for being prepared for the new academic year. Here are some to-do items for you to think about and work on preferably before the next school year begins:

- ▶ **Look at your strategic initiatives.** This should be an ongoing process, but certainly as you are looking to next year make sure your team's goals and objectives are aligned with the strategic plan. A good measure for the board is to ask yourselves, if we make this decision how will it support our strategic plan?
- ▶ **Use the summer well.** The most effective boards I have worked with make a summer retreat a part of their annual schedule. Ideally it should prioritize two separate chunks of work. One is to review data from the previous year. Make sure your work is data driven and not focused on hearsay or anecdotal evidence. Your superintendent and his or her administrative team will work with you to understand and

interpret the data effectively. The second part of the retreat is to look ahead. What are your greatest needs and priorities, and how do those translate to your superintendent's goals and objectives for the next school year?

- ▶ **Understand your financial picture.** Board governance is multi-faceted, and one of the functions is good stewardship of your communities' financial resources. As a board, you rely on your administration to create the budget, but you approve the budget. While there is a fine line between oversight and overreach, it is critical that you understand what is in your budget, how resources are being allocated, and what the future looks like. An effective board member will seek to understand but let the financial people of the corporation do their jobs.

ONBOARDING NEW BOARD MEMBERS:

More times than not, school boards struggle at orienting new members. Orientation is far more than job training. Well-planned and executed orientation is a statement of acceptance and value to the organization. My start as a new school board member was being shown to my seat at the table where I had a name plate and reference books for my library. The rest was left to "sink or swim." I would suggest there is a better way to bring new members into your work as a board. Here are some things to think about and are typically overseen by the board president or superintendent:

- ▶ If your board has documented protocols or standards that govern the way you work and communicate (hint, this is a very good idea), it is important to **get those to the new member before they are sworn into their duties**. Consider that it is not just important information, but it is also a way of saying welcome, we are glad you are here.
- ▶ **Offer to have lunch** with the new member or members. Make this a time to get to know the new person and establish a working relationship, trust, and open communication.
- ▶ **Make sure new members are familiar** with the organizational chart and schedule time for new people to meet with key administrators and learn about their work within the organization.
- ▶ **Schedule a tour of the district** and offer an opportunity to meet building level administrators. Don't assume that new members are already familiar with the district and that this step is not necessary.

It is true that these things take time but consider that you are building relationships for the future.

BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR A NEW PROJECT:

Perhaps you are considering new facilities or a facilities upgrade, community engagement, or restructuring the budget to reduce expenses. These are examples of big decisions that deserve a good start. I have seen too many boards flounder and struggle over who has the best idea. That is the perfect path to division and split decisions that do not ultimately benefit your children. I believe strongly in five basic consensus-building steps for decision making. Here they are:

1. **State the problem clearly.** Too often boards end up at odds with their community because they moved forward without ensuring that stakeholders fully understand the issue or need. It takes more effort than you may realize.
2. **Seek to hear each member’s “non-negotiables.”** We all have those things that would prevent us from supporting a decision if they were not considered. Get them on the table.
3. **Allow the superintendent to move forward with the non-negotiables as criteria for developing potential solutions.**

4. **Brainstorm ideas that incorporate the needs of each member.** You may not get everything you want as an individual, but it is important that your needs are heard and considered.
5. **Decide on the best course of action.** It is not about who has the best idea that will win the majority but what is the solution that best satisfies the needs of the whole.

There you have it. Three distinct ideas to help you and your governance team get out of the blocks well.

How you start is as important as how you finish. Whether it is the next school year, bringing in new board members following the upcoming election, or making a big decision, a poor start means you waste important time and energy correcting course before hitting your stride and crossing the finish line.

Personally, if I can meet as many of you as possible and assist you in your work, then I have indeed gotten out of the blocks well. Here is to a productive and fruitful 2022! 🎓



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