

# KEEPING THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*By Tom Simpson, ISBA President*



**V**irtually all of us have heard or even uttered the phrase, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” In doing some research on the origin, the authority on all things (Google) attributes the basis for this phrase to Alice Roosevelt Longworth, daughter of our 26th U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt. Her actual quote was “If you don’t have anything nice to say, come sit next to me,” or “If you can’t say something good about someone, sit here by me.”

The exact wording may be lost to history, but the inference appears to suggest that she was willing to take the brunt of or the bite out of someone’s potential criticism. For most of us, especially if you are serving as a school board president, those words likely ring true.

Public comment at local school board meetings has taken on a whole new meaning for many of us in the last 12-18 months. Prior to 2020, most board meetings were sparsely attended save for occasional local issues such

as a referendum. Contrast that dynamic with the present where virtually every school board in Indiana has seen increased public attendance, even to the point of moving meetings to a larger venue to accommodate the crowd. Additionally, that crowd may include groups or speakers from outside your districts, as well as local patrons.

The most common topic of contention for virtually everyone has been masking. For some school corporations, the “alphabet soup” of CRT, DEI, and SEL has also spurred emotional and sometimes heated debate. The worst of these exchanges have created anger, animosity, and genuine fear among local school board members, even prompting a few to resign out of principle or concern for their emotional and physical well-being. Due to the lack of civility and the inability to simply conduct board business, some school corporations have curtailed or even temporarily suspended public comment at their meetings. That is unfortunate and not consistent with our standing in the communities we serve.

My guess is if you were to poll sitting public school board members, a significant majority would likely echo two sentiments; they have never seen anything like the current climate, and it’s not what they expected when they decided to run or serve. Regardless, we must find a way to reach common ground with parents and patrons.

So, what’s the answer, and how do we restore civil discussion once again? The first step is to accept that our job as elected school board members is not to convince a dissenting opinion that we are right. Among the early lessons I learned as a new board member was the job is not a popularity contest. There will always be someone unhappy with a “big” topic decision; it comes with the territory.

To be clear, there’s nothing wrong with sharing, in the appropriate forum (which may not be in a regular board meeting!), the reasoning behind a decision. But let’s remember that we have been elected to serve and make decisions on behalf of our constituents. With that responsibility comes a duty to listen, gather data, and ultimately make policy that benefits all or

the majority of the students in the district.

Parents and critics often forget that the majority of public school boards are made up of patrons with children or grandchildren in the school system. Some are former educators and administrators. They are neighbors. They are the people sitting next to you at your kid’s soccer match or recital. School board members aren’t in it for the money. The job doesn’t come with special powers or privileges, and it requires far more specialized training and continuing education than most other offices. Contrary to popular belief, it also involves far more time

than the one or two public meetings each month. I would propose that public school boards are perhaps the most dedicated of all elected officials, given the scope and importance of the job and how precious the commodity they are entrusted with... our kids.

With all that said, school boards aren’t looking for sympathy, but rather a shared empathy and willingness to walk alongside each other to do the work that ensures our students are given the very best education and preparation for their future, wherever that may be.

In conclusion, school boards must encourage and welcome civil input from our patrons. We are PUBLIC schools, and we serve the public. Parents absolutely should be knowledgeable and involved in their school system. Attending school board meetings is one way, but I would posit that the best place for parents to start is to meet your teachers and principals, get

to know your superintendent, and volunteer if possible. They will discover that the vast majority of staff are incredibly dedicated, passionate, and caring professionals who work extremely hard to prepare children to succeed. They’ll realize that teachers don’t have hidden agendas or ulterior motives, but rather a single-minded calling to grow and nurture eager minds.

As an eternal optimist, I believe better days are ahead. I also believe that public school boards and parents still share the ultimate and most important common ground. We want what is best for your child! Let’s start there and keep it that way! 🍀

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