

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN THE DAY I BECAME A BOARD MEMBER

By Scott Flood, school board member, Plainfield Community School Corporation



I've served better than two decades on my local school board. Along the way, I've become a lot smarter than I was on my first day. Humans earn wisdom long after the time we first need it. Like me, I'm sure you've wished you could go back and arm your younger self with what you've learned through the years.

This school leadership tenure put me in some situations I could neither predict nor prepare for. The biggest cybercrime to ever hit an Indiana school district. A General Fund cutback of 4.6 percent. Negative news coverage at a national level. A worker's death on a school construction site. A popular teacher facing felony child sex charges. And an angry old guy condemning a school's recognition of a student born in Hawaii because she was a "foreigner."

My faith in my superhero power to mediate disputes between parents and the board disappeared as roomfuls of angry people literally yelled at me. I've spent more time in serious conversations with attorneys than a career criminal. And who would have guessed I'd devote a half hour of my life to establishing the average width of our taxpayers' posteriors so architects could properly size the bleachers?

Some of it has been fun. Some has been downright terrifying. Frankly, a lot of it was painfully boring, but it needed to happen for one reason or another, and I swore an oath I'd make sure it did.

As I read promises from school board candidates, I'm always

amazed at how little they understand the role for which they're vying. Nor am I surprised at the number of board members who drop off after a single term because it wasn't what they expected. So, I thought I'd try to help them prepare not only for the realities of doing the job, but how to do it effectively.

1. **PEOPLE WILL TREAT YOU DIFFERENTLY.** This one usually comes as a surprise. Some employees and people in the community who have been friendly for years may suddenly become arctic-cold the moment you're elected. You had been one of them, but now you're one of "them."
2. **YOU DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH YOU DON'T KNOW.** My mentor told me it would take a year just to find my feet and a full term before I truly understood how this all worked. He was right. Now's the time to listen.
3. **YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO.** If you told me I would one day need to have important conversations with the state's FBI and Secret Service heads, or that I'd have to out-argue a half-dozen testy lawyers at once, I might have thought twice about running. Then again, I never wanted to know as much as I now do about optimal urinal heights.
4. **OTHER PEOPLE IN THE ROOM ARE SMARTER.** Hey, I know you're smart, but you're going to discover other people have knowledge and perspective you've not experienced. You can start listening to them right away, or you can wait until after you've been badly bruised. Either way, you'll end up listening, so why suffer?
5. **STAY IN YOUR LANE.** You're a rookie, so don't expect to dominate meetings. And you're not the direct boss of anyone except the superintendent, so don't act like it. Nothing erodes trust in a school board member more than seeing them try to throw their lack of weight around.

6. **DON'T MAKE PROMISES.** Promising a patron you'll hire a certain administrator, fire a particular coach, or that you'll get them a job is not only unethical, but you'll disappoint them when you fail. And most likely, you will fail.
7. **GET USED TO LIES.** People in the community are going to tell lies about you. They'll spread something you never said in a board meeting as though it were fact. They'll accuse you of getting rich in your role, having no idea how small your paycheck really is. Even worse, your children will sometimes be the audience for cutting messages from people who lack the guts to confront you directly. All you can do is maintain your integrity and toughen up, buttercup.
8. **DON'T BLINDSIDE ANYONE.** You're not in a movie, so your dramatic surprise announcement at a board meeting is only going to annoy everyone else in the room. If a big issue needs a public discussion, make sure you communicate that with your superintendent and board president. They may even offer a more effective approach.
9. **TRUST YOUR ADMINISTRATORS.** I've never met a perfect administrator, but I've worked with a bunch of the best. We hire them to turn our vision into a measurable success because we respect their expertise. We do our best to give them high expectations and the resources to surpass them, then we get out of the way. If your board truly doesn't feel you can trust your administrators, you have the wrong administrators and need to do something about that.
10. **GET TO KNOW ADMINISTRATORS.** I mean, really get to know them. You don't have to become BFFs, but the more you know about each other as people, the better you'll be able to work with them in your board role. We've climbed mountains and gone canoeing together. When you occupy a canoe with someone for several hours, you get to know them.
11. **LIVE THE CHAIN.** Every school district has a chain of command, and good board members not only abide by it, they promote it. If a parent has a gripe with a classroom teacher or a middle-school coach, you're not the person to solve it. Put them in touch with that person, whether it's the coach or teacher's immediate supervisor or the superintendent. (Follow up with both parties to make sure they're connected.) And if you think a particular employee needs a talking-to, don't do it yourself. Tell the superintendent and let them determine the best course of action.
12. **YOUR KIDS WILL SUFFER.** Some will attribute your kids' success to your position. Your daughter worked harder than anyone to make the starting lineup, but word on the street is you demanded the coach start her. Take a deep breath. Let it go.
13. **DON'T BE A GADFLY.** Even if you disagree with a board decision, remember that it belongs to the entire board, including you. Be respectful in your comments in the community. And when you talk about board business, always refer to "the board" instead of naming names. The board should be held accountable as a body.
14. **DON'T FIGHT IN PUBLIC.** You and that board member who represents District 3 may not agree about anything. Okay, everybody's different. But don't get in a heated argument, insult exchange, or deathmatch of egos during a board meeting. Sit down over a cup of coffee or something frostier and hash it out one-on-one. And if you still can't find anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.
15. **GO TO CONFERENCES WITH YOUR BOARD.** The biggest benefit isn't what you'll learn in the sessions, but how much better you'll get to know the other board members. Conversations over meals and walks from the hotel to the convention center can be the foundation of well-running school boards. Some of our district's best moves originated with casual conversation among board members.
16. **YOU'RE NOT AN AD.** Let the athletic directors on your payroll do their jobs. Same goes for coaches. If you see a deficiency in a coach, odds are the AD and the superintendent see it, too. But there may be considerations you've yet to learn. Maybe he's licensed to teach Physics. There may be better coaches out there, but it's a lot tougher to find a great Physics teacher.
17. **SHARE WHAT YOU HEAR.** When you hear complaints and concerns from parents and other patrons, don't spread them to the local gossips or spring them on everyone in a board meeting. Call your superintendent (your board president, too), share what you've heard, and let them determine the best course of action.
18. **IGNORE ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS.** You'll get plenty of unsigned letters from people alleging administrator incompetence, nefarious behavior by coaches, and all sorts of supposed sins. I've always taken the stance that unsigned letters get a quick scan and a quicker trip to the trash – unless they allege behavior I'm legally required to report to law enforcement.
19. **FEAR EXCEPTIONS AND PRECEDENTS.** "I know the rules, but can't you just make a little exception for my son? I mean, it's a gray area and anyway, nobody will ever know you did it." First, you have rules for a reason. Trust them. Second, no exception will ever be a secret. If the parents don't divulge it, rest assured all the kids will know within a day or two. Finally, when you make an exception for one person, you obligate yourself to do the same for others who see themselves in similar situations.
20. **AVOID SOCIAL MEDIA.** If you're tempted to jump into a chatter group and defend yourself or your district, remember my favorite adage: Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time, and it annoys the pig. 🐷

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