

# Leading in Earnest...

## IT'S A MATTER OF TRUST

*By Tom Simpson, ISBA President*



**T**hroughout my professional career and personal life, I've always been a strong believer in investing in relationships. When we commit emotional capital and time with a willing partner, relationships typically flourish and grow. Conversely, without that intentional investment they usually wither and die.

If you research the topic of “healthy relationships”, you'll find literally hundreds of thousands of resources at your fingertips including surveys, articles, books, blogs, and videos. One of the most cited and universally common factors of relational success is Trust. Without trust, none of the other foundational pillars can gain a foothold. But trust is rarely given freely or immediately in most relationships – it must first be earned. With a new school year just begun, it is a good time to remember that trust is a critical expectation from parents to all schools and school leaders. Here are some fundamentals we probably know but are worth revisiting:

### ELECTION

For the vast majority of our school boards, the election process is where we first earn the trust of patrons and parents. We meet with parents and teachers, immerse ourselves in our children's activities, attend school board meetings, and ultimately share our reasons and ideas for why we are the best person for the job. Hopefully, we demonstrate not just a willingness to serve but a sincere commitment to learn and apply our skills to the betterment of all students in our districts.

### GOVERNANCE

School board members, like all elected officials, are entrusted with very important and specific responsibilities. Among those are safeguarding the fiscal well-being of the district, developing meaningful policies that create a structure by which staff and students can perform to the best of their ability, employing the best superintendent possible for our district, and working proactively to develop a strategic plan that will maximize the performance and potential of every child

### SAFETY

Ask any parent what they consider the most basic responsibility of their public school and you'll likely hear the word safety. Especially in today's climate of increased school violence, there is no bigger or more critical area of trust. Parents trust their children will be safe on the bus, in the classroom, on the playground, and everywhere they are left in our care. Additionally, we're entrusted with providing healthy food, safe drinking water, optimal air quality, and temperature control, along with an optimum learning environment.

### EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL

Although the definition and depth may have changed, public schools have always bore a heavy responsibility for dealing with the social and emotional needs of school children. What adult would not cite a teacher, coach, principal, or school counselor as a role model for helping to shape their life or get them through school? Parents entrust their public school to help provide that guidance and support. Public schools today provide an even broader array of support services to meet the rising tide of students in emotional crisis.

### EDUCATION AND LIFE PREPARATION

Our ultimate job as school board members, the end-product if you will, is educating students and ensuring they are prepared to be successful in the next phase of their life. Whether that “next step” is higher education, vocational training, the military, or going directly into the work force, it is the culmination of our trust pact with parents. Board members are typically not “in the trenches” when it comes to classroom instruction and curriculum and for good reason, as the vast majority of us are not educators. However, it is our trusted responsibility to make certain we are involved in the strategic planning and oversight of curriculum and the use of data, analytics, and instructional tools to ensure students are achieving and growing.

### COMMUNICATION & TRANSPARENCY

To achieve all of the aforementioned responsibilities and be a high-functioning board, mutual trust among your board members and superintendent must be the golden rule. Every board room wall should have a sign that says “No Surprises”. That includes no surprises between individual board members and none to or from your superintendent. We are a team, and without this commitment, you will never achieve the full potential of your district.

In addition, despite the paradox, transparency and confidentiality are two sides of the same coin. There are times when board discussions and opinions must be held in

confidence especially when dealing with staff or student issues. Conversations in executive session and any other one-on-one board communication should be considered private unless mutually agreed otherwise.

Transparency is also a critical element of good relationships, especially with your patrons and parents. Too many boards operate in a vacuum with little to no input on topics that are far too important to not solicit community involvement. Many of the divisive and incendiary issues that have arisen in the past two years causing angry parents to demand change in their schools and on their school boards have a direct correlation to lack of transparency and communication. Trust is earned and kept through open and transparent discussion even on topics we know will be hard. We are public school systems, and the trust we earned on election day cannot dissipate when the subject matter or the questions are difficult to address.

In closing, whether you are a new board member in your first term or a grizzled veteran with a decade or more of service, governing in earnest must always be at the forefront of our mind. The responsibilities we bear for the children of our communities come with the very highest expectations. It's a job with very few perks and not much pay, but that's not why any school board member runs for office or seeks an appointment. We all trust we can make a difference, and the stakes are too high to leave our children's future to chance. Let's make sure we keep earning that trust every day. ✨

