An Agenda That Works

Is your board wasting time tracking staff activities and not paying attention to the big picture? Consider changing how your meetings are run

Rick Maloney

At the end of another late night meeting—after detailed briefings on curriculum, facilities, and finances, as well as reports on school performance and a highly capable program—members of the University Place School Board commiserated about what had just happened.

As we triaged meeting materials, deciding what to keep for reference, pass on to others, or throw away, we realized we had discussed much but accomplished little to benefit students. Our meetings had a habit of piling one hurried agenda item on top of another, each discussion in turn curtailed by an urgency to get to the next. We seemed stuck on a treadmill, using up time and perhaps burning calories, but getting nowhere.

What was wrong? Our agenda didn't work.

Most school boards try to do too much with their agendas, keeping a watchful eye on all sorts of district activities yet failing to accomplish the board's most basic functions. Once we figured out the difference between board and staff business we were well on our way.

The ends-means distinction

The difference between board and staff business is primarily, but not exclusively, a matter of ends and means. As board members we should be in the business of discerning community expectations about desired end results and providing guidance for—but not doing—our staff's work.

Staff should be in the means business, doing the work needed to achieve board-directed end results within the bounds of policy guidance. Do the ends identified by our board justify the means chosen by our staff? The answer is "yes," as long as the means fall within acceptable boundaries of legality, ethics, and prudence. Our policies can provide those boundaries and if carefully crafted will still allow staff the freedom to choose from among any acceptable means.

Once we gained a clear understanding of board and staff business, our board started concentrating on "the right things" during meetings, while delegating most decisions about "doing things right" to the superintendent.

"Still," we argued among outselves, "isn't the board responsible for everything our district does or fails to do? How can we ignore staff activities that generate so much community interest—school closings, boundary changes, new math curriculum, hiring and firing of personnel—and a host of other hot topics guaranteed to draw crowds to our meetings?"

As these questions indicate, understanding the ends-means distinction is necessary but not sufficient for gaining control of meetings. Boards are responsible for everything in the district, and we have authority over all staff activity. Furthermore, we cannot ignore our constituency. So we must pay attention to means without letting concern for staff-designated tasks dominate our time.

In University Place, we needed a strategy for deciding what tasks were most important, which could and should be dele-

gated, and how to monitor the district so that important results were achieved while staff work also was guided.

The annual agenda

Many boards regularly set goals and objectives for the superintendent, but few prepare an actual annual plan for their own work. By setting and following an annual board agenda with a primary focus on ends and a secondary focus on means, we have managed to guide our work and control our meetings throughout the year.

Our plan has allowed us to evolve from followers, who primarily review and approve staff work, into proactive leaders. We deliberately plan and do our own board work and guide our staff's work as well.

Our annual agenda projects 12 months of meetings and limits our focus to four main areas of board business: maintaining the board-community connection; monitoring district ends and means; reviewing policy; and informing our members and improving our board's capacity to govern.

In preparing our annual agenda we watch out for several traps:

■ **Obeying customers who are not acting as owners.** The board must listen to community members and be accountable. Collectively, the community is the board's real boss and occupies a position of moral ownership of the district. In University Place, we build multiple opportunities into our annual plan to listen to invited community members and solicit their expectations, values, hopes, and fears.

■ **Monitoring without declared criteria.** The board must account for the district's end results, which means that monitoring must be scheduled. At the same time, we must resist the urge to monitor without previously declared criteria, because we are too easily diverted by an interest in what the staff is "up to."

■ **Letting others dictate our use of time.** Even when state or federal law mandates certain actions, they still might not rise to a level of importance that justifies dedicated meeting time. When dealing with these and staff-initiated agenda items, we assign all but the most important to a consent agenda. Prudent use of a consent agenda enables the board to minimize time spent on these items, so we can focus on big picture tasks that only the board should decide.

■ **Reversing roles with the superintendent.** Boards that fail to gain control of the meeting agenda leave the big picture thinking and decision-making undone. Responsible and proactive superintendents fill the void, but do so between board meetings without public board deliberations or community involvement. Our board's short-range preoccupation with administrative detail left the superintendent with the task of guiding the district, a reversal of roles and a predictable consequence of our board's failure to do its own job.

What the board can do

After developing an agenda that schedules the right things, we

What board members do to work with the community

Robert Lawrence, a member of Michigan's Birmingham Public School District, takes some of the usual steps to engage his community. He meets with PTAs and community groups.

But like a growing number of board members across the country, he also has started a blog (www.rolawrence. blogspot.com). The reason, he says, is to "track ideas and communicate my information as a member of the board."

Sandy Clevenger, who serves on Kentucky's Spencer County School Board, also has embraced technology. She created an e-mail group of community members and now sends out reminders for board meetings to share.

"Our board books are online and when they are published, I send out a link to them for easy access," Clevenger says. "Immediately after board meetings, I send out a brief summary with a disclaimer stating that these are not the official minutes."

Here are some other responses to *ASBJ's* question about community engagement:

I serve on a regional school committee so achievements by town students were not promoted back to the town. So I developed the habit of inviting students to the town school committee meetings so their achievements in the classroom, trade area or in athletes could be recognized.

Ed Hill
Diman Regional Vocational Technical School Committee
Massachusetts

We have tried many things—it is a long list. We can certainly engage if we have to redistrict or want to cut sports or the band—but on getting more people involved, I would love to hear some good ideas.

Paul Herman
Piscataway Township Board of Education
New Jersey

After a very contentious redistricting for a new middle school, I asked that we consider providing more opportunity for community input into our process. We have done so, and after a shaky start, when the community did not believe we were really serious about wanting their opinions, we now regularly receive appreciation and accolades for our new process. Now facing a redistricting that will affect virtually every high school in our system, we are expanding our process even further, to provide for a community committee that will work closely with a consultant and our professional staff to craft actual proposed scenarios. Do I think this will make for a painless process? Of course not! But it makes sense.

Linda L. McBride
Henrico County Board of Education
Virginia

then have an obligation to do things right. In 2003, our board adopted a strategy that changed our approach to meetings and our concept of how board business should be conducted.

Because the board's purpose is to stand in for our owners in the community, communicating with staff is important but secondary. In meetings, our board intentionally engages with community members to discern their values and expectations.

Now, our board directs the superintendent and the district by speaking and directing through written policy. During meetings, we take frequent votes to approve and revise our policy voice. Between meetings, written policy speaks for us.

The board's job is to ensure the district achieves communi-

Obstacles to effective board meetings

Boards that want to make the most of meeting time must overcome six obstacles to be effective:

- **Limited time.** Serving on a board is a part-time activity, so time is a scarce commodity. We typically spend only three to eight hours per month in board meetings. Over the course of a year, our 36 to 96 hours is far less than the 2,000-plus hours a staff member works. There simply isn't much time available for board business.
- **Misplaced priorities.** An agenda without priorities wastes time, because items of immediate urgency can crowd out issues of more long-term importance. Our meetings used to succumb to the Pareto Principle, where 20 percent of our desired results consumed 80 percent of available time, and vice versa.
- **Unnecessary routines.** Routines allow organizations to function without always reinventing the wheel, but our agendas filled up with unnecessary staff updates, management-oriented financial briefings, and ceremonial events merely because that's the way we did things. Board business took a back seat.
- **The staff.** The person who prepares the agenda exercises control over board time. Our staff-prepared agendas showcased staff work, rather than the work that only board members could do and that could not be done when the board was not in session.
- **The public.** Members of the public who attended our meetings always paid attention to plans, programs, resources, activities—in short, staff work. They were not there as owners of the schools with long-term needs, but as customers with short-term wants. Customer interests, to which staff should be responsive, are not the same as owner interests, which boards must obey.
- **Board members themselves.** Board members sometimes were the enemy of our meetings by coming unprepared or obsessing on one agenda item at the expense of others. Personal agendas, inexperience with debate, and insisting on reviewing and approving staff work interfere with meeting effectiveness.

ty expectations while avoiding unacceptable conditions. In meetings, our board connects with the community to ascertain its values and expectations. We develop policy to put those values and expectations in writing, then monitor staff work to ensure district performance is in accord with policy.

Monitoring includes staff reports, external inspections (such as an audit), or direct board inspection. We monitor results against each criterion written in the relevant policy, and compare "what is" with what we've said "should be."

The board chair is responsible for seeing that the board follows its own policies. The chair prepares meeting agendas that follow the board's approved annual agenda and ensures that the board follows it during the meeting.

Governance policies guide board member conduct. Each board member also is responsible to point out whenever we stray from adopted principles. At the end of each meeting, one member assesses how the entire board has complied with policy. At our end-of-year annual retreat, we review these individual meeting evaluations and conduct a summative self-assessment.

Evaluating the superintendent is a continuous process, and part of every meeting agenda. Valuable board-superintendent performance discussions are extensive and conducted in open public sessions throughout the year. This has produced a significant, positive change in the board-superintendent relationship.

Deciding what's important

Rather than just answering the question "What's going on?" our meetings now consider "What is important?" and "How has district performance met our stated expectations?" Under our previous format, board meetings devoted time to staff-generated items that by law or tradition were brought to the board for approval. Meetings were primarily conversations between board and staff.

Now, our meetings give higher priority to conversations between the board and community. Meeting agendas, which previously were dominated by reports about staff activity and board approval of staff business, now emphasize board monitoring of district performance against criteria written into policy and revising those policies.

Agendas are developed by the board at the beginning of each year. Work from previous meeting agendas now is delegated to the superintendent. We have increased the time available for actual board business and replaced time-eating routines oriented on the work of the staff. The public knows it is represented by a board that focuses on long-term community expectations rather than short-term customer interests.

Through this new approach, we now spend meeting time doing board business because we produce an agenda that *works.* ■

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