

“Our message to new board members and communications is this: You are not the person to solve everyone’s problems. You are the person who needs to direct people to the district person who can solve their problem.”

— Greg Abbott, director of communications for the Minnesota School Boards Association.

the impact your comments will have on the district and know who speaks for the board.”

As new board members learn their roles, they should follow the chain of command when it comes to questions about policy and operations, Tramontana says. Talk to the board president or superintendent first.

“New board members will soon learn more about roles and responsibilities so they know what’s appropriate and what’s not,” he says. “Until you have those figured out, talking to the board president and/or superintendent is the best approach.”

Tramontana also suggests that you should not be afraid to ask questions, especially at the board table.

PART OF THE SYSTEM

Last year, I wrote a column about dealing with rogue board members — those with an agenda that leads to distrust and dysfunction. While you may have been elected on a platform of not fitting in, taking the time to understand the issues and build trust with your fellow board members may alter your view and help you to avoid that toxic brew.

Here are some other tips: Take the time you need to understand and be well-informed on the issues you face. Respect the confidentiality of privileged information. Finally, look for ways to

create and develop what Heidi Vega calls “authentic relationships” with your school community.

“When people communicate about a school, what do they say? Most likely they are going to share their personal experience or an experience of someone else they know,” says Vega, communications director for the Arizona School Boards Association. “Think about the types of experiences and relationships your local school has with your community [and] ensure the experiences in your public schools are the best ones for students, families, and community members.”

Miller agrees, noting the entire board should discuss “how to interact with staff and connect with the community” so “well-meaning new members can avoid precarious situations.”

“I know of school boards where its members are expected to be in the schools helping in the carpool line or doing whatever is needed in the district,” Miller says. “There’s an understanding about expectations that allows all of the staff and parents to be comfortable with casual conversations with those board members. Abbott suggests asking the superintendent for a monthly report on what he calls “the positives.” Having that information in hand will help you when community members or staff ask questions about the schools.

“Become part of the system,” Abbott says. “Use three items as your elevator speech when you’re approached by a member of the public about how the schools are doing. Knowing three positives in your district and being able to concisely talk about them builds trust in your district — especially in the age of social media.”

Finally, Tramontana notes, new board members should become involved with their state association as soon as possible.

“They have resources, from learning opportunities and conferences to publications to networking, that can really help new board members become effective at the board table,” he says.

Sound advice, indeed.



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