

## Public Advocacy



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# Rogue on Board

Gadfly board members wreak havoc within and outside the district

**IMAGINE YOUR REACTION IF YOUR** child comes home with a note from the teacher that reads, “Does not play well with others.” Your first response is to try to understand what is happening and why, followed by finding ways to improve the situation. If necessary, you bring in others to help.

Now apply this scenario to your school board. What happens when you have a member who cherishes the role of self-anointed gadfly?

This is a communications issue, both internal and external. A rogue board member who hogs the spotlight, constantly stirring things up, can derail even the best-run

school districts. Time that can—and should—be devoted to more pressing matters is spent addressing issues raised by a member who has no individual power but uses the position as a bully pulpit.

“In the midst of an internal crisis, too many dysfunctional boards don’t see an issue from the public’s perspective,” says Brad Hughes, who now works as a freelance trainer for the Kentucky School Boards Association. “It diminishes, if not discredits, the action you take on many issues, even when there’s not discord.”

Bringing a board member who does not “play well with others” into

the fold can be a tough task, but it’s not impossible. I spoke with several state association trainers who provided advice and tips for what you can do, as well as with a communications director who found out what life was like on the other side when he was elected to his school board.

### FLEA ON A DOG

Steve Knagg worked for Texas’ Garland Independent School District for three decades, 20 years of that as the communications director. Five years after he retired and opened a consulting company, he was urged to run for the school board.

When he was working, Knagg says a number of board members were self-appointed “junior superintendents” who tried to give orders to the district staff. After his election in 2012, he realized quickly that “unless you’re sitting in a board meeting with an agenda and an action item, you don’t have any authority to do anything.”

“It was fascinating to me,” says Knagg, who has made more than 1,000 presentations to school districts and communications directors in 27 states during his career. “After going to 30 years of school board meetings and sitting in the audience, I thought I knew more than I did. I thought school board members had all this power. When I started sitting in the big chair up there, I realized I had a lot to learn.”

Kitty Blumsack, a longtime trainer for the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), advises new board members to “bide your time that first year.”

“I always tell them, ‘Sit, watch, and get the lay of the land,’” she says. “The smartest, most strategic thing you can do is watch and listen. You will build

credibility, authenticity, and expand your knowledge base tremendously.”

Some board members refuse, feeling they were elected with a mandate to make changes immediately. Rather than build trust, they go rogue. “Usually it’s someone who thinks they are representing the free world because they were elected to be the voice of the people,” Blumsack says.

Blumsack, who now conducts superintendent searches for MABE, says she worked with one person “who called his board a dog and described himself as a flea on the dog.”

“He was quite proud of that fact,” she says. “But what happened to that person was eventually his ideas were ignored, even the good ones. You have to move on without that person, because all they do is create more havoc.”

## ROGUE NONE

So what should you do when faced with a rogue board member? One approach is to have a discussion between the member, board chair, and superintendent about any problems.

Blumsack, Hughes, and Knagg say it’s critical for the superintendent to be involved in these discussions. And even though it may be tempting, the superintendent can’t be seen as having favorites on the board. Information must be distributed to all board members equally.

Another approach: Ask someone outside the school setting who has the board member’s trust to take up your cause. Hughes says this usually is a friend or confidant, but never a family member.

“Most of the time, you’re talking about perception and impact,” Blumsack says. “While the board member may see their actions as something that is helpful, they need to understand

there are unintended consequences.”

If strife continues, consider turning to your state association for help. Face-to-face training that focuses on building what Hughes describes as a “cohesive, collaborative, functioning group” also can be helpful.

“We’ve used that I don’t know how many dozens of times over the years,” Hughes says. “I’m not going to say it’s been 100 percent effective, but having a person with no direct role who can get the conversation going often can work, because that objectivity is there. Think of it this way: You don’t want to have someone come in from outside and then act disrespectfully in front of the guest.”

Encouraging all board members, including the rogues, to share their rationale for decisions in an open board meeting also can be effective.

“Part of the challenge is that people who are outliers don’t get their energy from being part of the board,” Blumsack says. “They get it from people on the outside who tell them what a good job they’re doing, people who say they’re the only one they can talk to and trust. If you can get them engaged in the process and help them to understand the impact of their actions, then you can sometimes turn them around.”

## UNITED FRONT

A common communications term is “speak with one voice,” but board members naturally will disagree on some issues. After all, you don’t go to meetings, rubber stamp in hand, to serve as mouthpieces for district administrators.

“The public needs to see you working together,” Hughes says. “They don’t need to see you slapping each other on the back and making great comments about each other at board meetings.

They need to see you collaborating, working to resolve issues in the best interest of students.”

Knagg says it’s not realistic to “expect a group of people to agree on everything that happens.”

“I think that’s OK,” he says. “It’s never bothered me to vote outside what the majority wants to do. In fact, I think it’s kind of healthy to have some 4-3 votes when you’re dealing with different kinds of issues, because that’s life. People disagree. Majority rules.”

Constant discord, however, erodes the public’s trust in your decision making. The trainers I spoke with believe the board must be united about its mission, even when members don’t always agree on issues. Compromise and understanding are key.

And on large issues, such as a bond issue or hiring a superintendent, Knagg believes the “one voice” rule still applies.

“What gives me heartburn is when you see the board divided on something that can have such a dramatic impact on your student and staff,” he says. “If you aren’t united, you need to work at it until you are. The stakes are too high. It’s that simple.”



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