

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

Millburn Public Schools

INFORMATION ITEM

January 4, 2010

To: Board of Education Members

From: Ellen E. Mauer, PhD

Subject: Self Reflection for BOE

You may remember that Barb Toney from IASB spoke a bit about a yearly BOE self-reflection at our fall meeting. I was in contact with her and she told me that we qualified for one free workshop due to the contract that Millburn had with IASB for the superintendent search. We haggled a bit and she agreed to move the regular deadline and make it a self-reflection in the spring if we wanted. I needed to set a date to keep the cost free with the understanding that I could change the date or even cancel at no charge. Given those, I selected April 6<sup>th</sup>, our regular BOE Committee Meeting night. It would take that entire time to do so our regular committee items could be condensed with the regular BOE meeting in April or, if you like, we could have an additional meeting for the committee part. April looked to me like the lightest month this spring for business on the yearly rolling calendar.

I did update you about this with the understanding we would talk about it in January and here it is, January! I will be looking for direction as to whether or not you would like to do a self-reflection, if so, do you want to keep that date? Then we can discuss a separate BOE committee meeting date or simply combine both meetings into the April 19<sup>th</sup> date.

I have attached a brief chapter regarding how IASB regards self-reflections for your review.

# 11 – EVALUATING THE SCHOOL BOARD MEETING

**S**chool boards that want to do a good job of governing their districts and seeing that their schools are properly managed cannot escape the importance of their meetings. For all practical purposes, a school board exists only while it is convened in a legal meeting.

If things are not going right, there is only one place to begin looking for the problem. Look at how meetings are conducted, how decisions are made, and how crises are handled.

A school board can set up a regular procedure for evaluating its meetings. Once a year or once every two years is probably sufficient for a systemic review of how things are going if things are going reasonably well. If there are trouble signs, an immediate evaluation is in order.

There are a number of ways to approach the evaluation of school board meetings. A board with members who are generally compatible and comfortable with one another and the superintendent can use a “do it yourself” method. All they need is a checklist of major factors in effective board meetings to serve as a springboard for open discussion. Checklists are available from a variety of sources or one can be drawn up locally. *Exhibit I* provides an example.

A variation of the “do it yourself” approach is to ask each board member to rate the board’s performance on a list of items. Then have one member or the superintendent tally the results. Areas of disagreement will merit particular attention. A sample instrument for monitoring the quality of board meetings is provided in *Exhibit J*.

## EXHIBIT I – SOME SYMPTOMS OF BIGGER PROBLEMS

Use this checklist to see if your board displays some of the symptoms of ineffective board meetings. Once you have identified some symptoms, the next step in eliminating them is to seek out the real causes by scheduling a meeting to evaluate meetings. Or use the form in *Exhibit J* to launch a board discussion.

- Decisions that should be made by the administration show up on the agenda for board action.
- Major policy decisions that should be made by the board are being made by the staff.
- Items brought up for action by board members catch the superintendent by surprise.
- Items brought up for action by the superintendent catch board members by surprise.
- Some board members seem to receive more information from the superintendent than others.
- The press is regularly critical of closed meetings or other board procedures.
- Board meetings are being used as a platform to reach the public by members of the board or representatives of special interest groups.
- Meetings run too long.
- Meetings don’t run long enough.
- In spite of lengthy discussions, decisions don’t get made.
- There is disagreement as to what the board actually decides.
- Significant meeting time is spent discussing items previously decided.
- Disagreements concerning parliamentary procedure stymie board decision making.
- Meetings produce ill will among board members or between board members and superintendent.
- Board decisions frequently produce unanticipated criticism.
- Citizens and employees persist in contacting board members to get their school problems resolved.
- The board frequently takes action without referring to its existing policies.

If your school board regularly experiences any of these problems, an evaluation of how the board operates may be beneficial.

A board that is badly split should hire a process facilitator who can help members deal with conflict constructively. Board meetings will never improve until all members agree to work at it. The object is to draw all members of the board into an agreement on how meetings should run and then see that meetings actually are run that way. Open discussion is essential.

Help is available for the school board that finds itself with procedural problems it cannot solve alone. Consultants are available from the Illinois Association of School Boards and other sources to help in such situations. With an IASB staff member, the board can conduct its self-evaluation in closed session for a frank and open discussion.

A board also may feel the need for objective analysis. One approach to obtaining third-party opinions is to involve employees and citizens in rating the board's performance on a list of items. Such opinions can bring deficiencies to light, but might not produce solutions. Again, outsiders who are experienced at working with boards can bring impartial thinking to the evaluation. Hopefully, this publication will provide the board with most of the information and insights needed to conduct an effective evaluation.

It should be noted, however, that many of the problems that surface in board meetings are not related to meeting procedures. A poor working relationship with the superintendent, for example, can produce various difficulties at meetings. Unless the board and superintendent have agreed on what is board work and what is staff work, the superintendent may be bringing numerous administrative decisions to the board for action.

By the same token, board deci-

## EXHIBIT J – BOARD MEETING EVALUATION

Meeting date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Instructions:

S = Satisfactory, I = Needs Improvement, and U = Unsatisfactory

- |  |        |       |   |
|--|--------|-------|---|
| 1) Board members were prepared for the meeting.  | S      | I     | U |
| 2) Our agenda was well-designed.   | S      | I     | U |
| 3) The board stuck to its agenda.  | S      | I     | U |
| 4) Each board member was given an adequate opportunity to participate in discussion and decision making.       | S      | I     | U |
| 5) The board's treatment of all persons was courteous, dignified, and fair. There was a respectful atmosphere. | S      | I     | U |
| 6) We practiced good parliamentary procedure.  | S      | I     | U |
| 7) The board demonstrated a sense of responsibility for excellence in governing the district.                  | S      | I     | U |
| 8) The board adhered to its adopted governance style as follows:   |        |       |   |
| a) Emphasized the future and the total community:  | ___Yes | ___No |   |
| b) Encouraged diversity in viewpoints:   | ___Yes | ___No |   |
| c) Exercised leadership more than overseeing administrative detail:  | ___Yes | ___No |   |
| d) Maintained a clear distinction between the roles of board and staff:  | ___Yes | ___No |   |
| e) Worked for group agreement and responsibility:  | ___Yes | ___No |   |

Additional comments:

Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

A school board can use this form – or one of its own making – to monitor the quality of its meetings and the policies that govern those meetings. Such a form enables a board to ask: *How are we doing? What are the things we can do better?* The form is best used immediately following adjournment by asking each member to fill out a copy and turn it in to the president or secretary to be compiled. However, rather than use the form following every meeting, the board might do so only when there are concerns about meeting quality. The president might be authorized to distribute the form when any member expresses concerns. If necessary, the president can present the findings at the next meeting, or other steps for board self-evaluation and/or improvement may be undertaken.

sions that backfire may be symptomatic of decisions made under pressure or with inadequate information. That is, a board may not follow good procedures when it responds immediately to the demands of citizens or employee groups. Or the board may simply rush through a decision with too little information, fail to explore alternatives, or make no effort to hear from people affected by the decision.

One thing seems clear: If there is anything wrong with the way a school district is governed, it will show up in the meetings of its school board. An evaluation of school board meetings, therefore, can have ramifications for all school district operations. A breakdown in the

relationship between a teacher and a parent . . . the inability of a faculty curriculum committee to agree on a reading text . . . an inefficient bus route . . . these matters are easily attributed to employee performance. But many of them can also be traced back to the fact that the school board was not prepared to make the right policy decision at the right time because its meetings were poorly planned.

And, conversely, successful school board meetings are a clear indicator of excellence in local school board governance and a successfully operating public school district.