

THE BLESSINGS OF SERVING ON A SMALL SCHOOL BOARD

What was my first experience at a small-school board meeting like? Well, have you ever started playing a game, only to realize that you have no idea what the rules are?

After teaching at the same academy for almost 12 years, I fully expected my first elementary school board meeting to be just like a faculty meeting. However, the differences were as great as the changes our family had just experienced as a result of the move from San Diego, California, to southern Oregon—quite a culture shock!

It took time, but I discovered that in most small communities, a sense of “family” replaces the businesslike atmosphere normally found in a school boardroom. As I moved from board member to interim chairman and eventually to teacher, I learned at least four valuable lessons:

1. The school board is like a family.

Small-school board meetings often take much longer than other boards and committees. This is because of all the non-agenda items such as often-repeated recitations of historical facts, anecdotes, and detailed stories about members’ experiences. Also, some members feel the need to tell everyone exactly how each board action will affect his or her children. For some members, the board meeting becomes a social gathering as well

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as a business meeting. However, the time “wasted” when the board strays from the agenda can help create an atmosphere of caring and loyalty among its members, somewhat like a family gathering. As a result, the board in a small-school setting often shows devoted support, protection, and dedication to those (often including teachers) whom they have “adopted.”

While this lack of discipline can frustrate the “professional” board member, it’s possible to build efficiency into the meeting format while not neglecting social interaction. The chairperson can allow some time during each meeting for these kinds of experiences, but also make sure to let new members or visitors in on the stories and jokes,

when appropriate. Then he or she can gently steer the conversation back to the agenda.

2. Getting things done is more important than getting credit.

I never feel prepared for a board meeting unless I have a written agenda to follow. During my first board meeting at my present school, I had my agenda, gleaned from information I had asked about the meeting, neatly typed and ready in front of me. To avoid seeming too anxious or giving the impression that I was “taking over” the meeting, I waited for the chairman to ask me for any new ideas. When he noticed I had typed out the agenda for the meeting, he asked if I could give him a copy. Of course, I obliged. Later, a new pastor mentioned that he had not received a copy of the agenda. When other members told him that the board had never used a written agenda, he responded, “Well, couldn’t we all have a copy?” Fortunately, I had made enough for every member.

Now, this is a small thing, but since that meeting, the board has run much more smoothly, and it seems easier for the members to stay on task. I suppose I could have simply asked the chairman if he preferred to type his own agenda or would like me to prepare one. But I found this method a much less threatening way to get the point across. Sometimes letting things speak for themselves and not seeking the credit can make all the difference.

BY JOY BRUNT VEVERKA

I also found this approach helpful during another meeting when I felt the status quo needed to be questioned. Our aging printer (donated by a community friend) simply did not do justice to the beautiful documents the new computers were able to create. When I suggested buying a new color printer, the response was far from encouraging. But since I felt this was an important issue that needed to be discussed further, I simply waited for another opportunity to bring it up. After board members saw several examples of what I had been discussing, they decided that I had a legitimate concern. When the time came to make recommendations, what did they suggest? A color printer, of course! My patience and low-key approach had paid off.

3. Everything I know I learned from my students.

Ask any teacher what's so enjoyable about teaching, and at least one of the answers will be how much he or she learns from students. This is particularly important in the small-school situation, which places teacher and student together for longer periods of time. For example, I now have students I have been teaching for several years who are a tremendous source of good, forthright ideas.

During our board meetings, the children of the members often study or play in the classroom while we meet in the library. One February, at the annual personnel meeting, I followed the board's usual procedure, exiting the library and waiting in the classroom while the

board discussed my employment. I sat down near a student, who asked me: "Is the meeting over already?"

"No, they just asked me to leave."

"What did you do? Something bad?" the student asked, incredulous.

"Oh, that's not it. I just left so they could talk about me."

"Well, that's not nice!" she replied, indignantly.

Before I could explain that this was a normal practice for boards and committees, I was asked to return to the library.

The following year, as I prepared to leave the room at the annual personnel meeting, I shared with the board what had happened the previous year. The members responded: "You know, that really isn't nice. Why don't you stay while we talk?" The student had innocently taught the entire school board an important lesson!

4. It's the thought that counts.

While some rural areas are poor in terms of financial resources, numbers of people available to help, and fancy facilities, they may be very rich in the number of dedicated supporters of the school. I am always amazed how the church and school budgets are enhanced by consistent giving and commitment. Before the children's story at church each Sabbath morning, the tots collect an offering in "the little red schoolhouse" to support the local school. While the weekly total of three, five, or 10 dollars doesn't sound like a lot, these offerings provide funds for needed items that the budget does not stretch far enough to cover. For example, one year's offering purchased a 50-volume set of Eyewitness books. Another year's contributions provided a new computer.

Conclusion

Working with boards in small schools can be a tremendously rewarding experience if one is willing to work with the community, listen carefully, gather support, and appreciate God's blessings. ✍

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