



Sycamore County School Board

Not the Best Use of the Superintendent's Time

Ed Ukates, Sycamore Public Schools Division Superintendent, sipped his morning java and ate his "Special K" with a smile on his face. He was remarking to his wife that he had successfully led his school division through another contentious school board election and that he was on top of the world. "That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger, well I'm not dead. I am made of steel. I'm a lean mean, fighting machine. The school board understands its role, and life is grand." Ed's bubble was about to be popped.

As he walked into the office, Ed knew trouble must be brewing when he saw the pained look on Debbie Doall, school board clerk. Andrew Thrifty, a newly elected school board member, had requested that Debbie schedule an appointment with Ed for 11:00 that morning to discuss some serious issues that had been raised with him by people in his division.

When Andrew arrived, he had a legal pad full of notes. His dentist's daughter had received a "C" in spelling, and he wanted to know what the grading criteria was and why the Board couldn't adopt standard criteria for grading. Andrew's neighbor was interested in starting his own paint business, and he thought it would be nice if the Board gave him a contract to paint the middle school over the summer. A friend mentioned that her son's high school teacher did not wear a tie to school, and this set a bad example for the students. Andrew was going to visit all the schools during the next week to observe the teacher's attire, and then he would provide Ed with a new staff dress code. Ed's to do list grew and grew as the meeting went on.

At the next meeting of the Sycamore County School Board, Andrew mentioned the wonderful meeting he had had with Ed. The next day, all the other school board members called to schedule meetings with Ed to discuss "Constituent issues." Ed began to feel more like putty than steel.

Do Andrew and the other board members need a refresher course on the powers and duties of a school board member?

√ Yes, otherwise Ed is going to end up in the cardiac care unit of Sycamore County General Hospital. Section 22.1-71 of the *Code of Virginia* provides that school board members have no organization or duties except those that are assigned to them by the school board as a whole. **Board members do not have authority as individuals.**

The school board is a policy-making body, not an administrative body. In 1974, the Supreme Court of Virginia made it clear in Pleasants V. Commonwealth "214 Va. 646 (1974)" that a school board can act only through its duly authorized agents and must delegate responsibility for the day-to-day operations to its agents and employees. While school board members must listen to concerns raised by friends and constituents, they should refer them to the superintendent since he or she is charged with the day-to-day operation of the school division.

Board members who get involved in matters before they are properly brought before the school board can interface with the operations of the school division and can potentially bias themselves for any later vote on a matter. Furthermore, school board members should remember that when they hear concerns from neighbors and others, they are only hearing one side of the story.

Finally, while it is important for the Sycamore County School Board members and their division Superintendent to remain in close contact, if each school board member meets with Ed on a regular basis to discuss constituent matters, the superintendent will have very little time to perform his duties as the educational leader and chief executive officer of the school division.