

Governance Tips: Leadership in a Divided Community

Leadership sets the tone that defines the culture and civility of a community and a school division. School boards are tasked with making hard decisions that impact the well-being of students, staff, and the community. This task is even more challenging when the community itself is divided.

Promote a positive vision of education, opportunity, and inclusion in your community.

Advocate for your school division's values.

Be clear about what your school community stands for. Routinely remind your staff, families, and community of your school division's shared values, with a particular emphasis on values such as fairness, respect, inclusion, kindness, responsibility, etc.

Stay laser-focused on your students, their needs, and your local actions.

Respond as appropriate to critics- keeping note of your board norms and protocols- but reserve most of your energy for doing the good work of educating your community's children.

Stay focused on your division's priorities, supporting and governing the team that gets this important work done, and your primary purpose: student achievement.

Refocus the conversation on what your division is doing to achieve its achievement priorities. Highlight the positive work surrounding student achievement and community partnerships.

Consider the following:

- “Rather than getting caught up in the national debate, let's talk about what is actually happening in our community...”
- Highlight aspects of your strategic plan or division mission and values that reflect your work toward educational achievement, for example: serving all students, ensuring all students are treated fairly, empowering all students to succeed, working to close achievement/opportunity gaps across the system and making sure our schools are safe and inviting places for all children to learn.

Reframe the issue in your own words.

Having clarity about student needs that are guiding your decisions and actions will give you strength to stay on course if you are questioned and not be pulled into unproductive debates. There is no benefit in debating about whether a particular word or phrase is being used correctly. Stick to terms you have already used and defined in your community to describe the work you are doing to improve outcomes for all students.

Tips for handling abusive speech

- Remind all of the rules of decorum.
- Be as brief as possible.
- Be meticulously factual.
- Avoid emotional engagement.

Be honest and emotionally neutral in your assessment and description of your community's current reality.

Acknowledge any division that exists and resist the urge to minimize differences. It is disingenuous and harms trust. Use emotionally neutral words and phrases such as:

- “This is an area where our community has differences of perspective ...”
- “We acknowledge that there is a wide variety of opinions on this issue ...”

Have strong procedures and protocols in place to ensure fair and safe public meetings.

It is imperative that school division leaders review their policy and share that policy with the public to avoid questions or confusion during a meeting. School boards have flexibility in how they structure the opportunity to hear from the public. If you have not already, talk with local law enforcement leaders about how to work together, if needed, to ensure the safety of public meetings or address potential harassment.

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Anticipate and accept that issues surrounding public education bring out big emotions.

Strengthen your ability to hear people who are emotionally charged without becoming dismissive, defensive, or emotionally charged yourself. It is not appropriate to dismiss the content of constituents' concerns simply because we don't agree, or they might be expressed in a way that is uncomfortable for some. Provide a welcoming environment for your board meetings, as some may be attending for the first time.

Utilize active listening strategies.

Resist the urge to lump those critical of public education together and dismiss their concerns. The work of public education asks us to seek to understand the perspectives of others. What personal concerns and emotions are driving them to think and behave as they are? Listen respectfully to those who are critical of the school division and emphasize common ground, even if it is small.

Acknowledge that there are some instances where you will need to agree to disagree.

However, while it is important that you remain open and respectful, bigotry, racism, and abusive language should not be tolerated. When this occurs, calmly, respectfully, and firmly reiterate your personal and organizational commitment to all students and the celebration of all members of your educational community. Remind speakers about the rules of procedure if necessary.

Be conscious of nationalized campaigns.

While there may be varying opinions within your community, boards should also be conscious of the growing presence of national groups that are attempting to influence local boards through a variety of tactics. Do not let yourself get distracted from the good work you are doing to address the needs of all students. Make every effort to ensure that your local community members are being heard.

Be aware of who is present and who is not.

Consider whether those present represent the totality of your community. Does the majority of those coming to speak at meetings accurately reflect the population you serve? If not, how can you increase opportunities to hear from the rest of your community?

Educate yourself about the experiences of people who are different from you.

Every community has diversity. Your school division likely serves many people different from yourself. One of the jobs of a leader is to understand the needs of the people you were elected or appointed to serve. Let your students, their experiences, and their outcomes be your biggest teacher. Take time to educate yourself about cultures and histories of those who feel most different to you.

Increase the amount of time set aside for dialogue and facilitated reflection.

It is much harder to stereotype, demonize, and dismiss each other if we truly know each other. Supporting strong relationships that cross typical demographic or political lines within your educational community is one way to help avoid polarization. Create opportunities throughout your community for tabletop or small group dialogue with thoughtful prompts. This work is not linear and it is dialogue-heavy. It can also feel isolating, especially if your community is divided. Set aside time for people to connect in meaningful ways.

Remember, you are not alone.

More and more school divisions are working to address opportunity gaps and increase student achievement. Remember to connect with others you trust. Talk about your experiences, share your concerns, seek support and guidance.

Finally, remember that self-care is a leadership decision.

Leaders who take care of their personal needs for rest, activity, social support, and good nutrition are better able to make decisions under pressure than people who are depleted, stagnated, exhausted, or hungry. Take extra care of yourself when stress levels are highest (especially in advance of big public meetings and times of anticipated conflict) and encourage the rest of your division's leadership team to do the same.