
Preface

Who Is This Book For?

If you are reading this book, you are probably interested in how school boards work. Maybe you are thinking of running for office, or perhaps you are a newly elected school board member. Maybe you have been serving on a school board for a while and are interested in doing the best possible job you can. Maybe you are a school administrator who is just trying to figure out what goes on inside the heads of your school board members. If you fall into any of those categories, or if you are just plain curious about how to make school boards work better, then this book is for you. In short, this book is for prospective, current, and past school board members and school administrators.

How Did I Write This Book?

In writing this book, I am supposing that you have just asked me something like this: “Hey, Richard, you’ve been a school board member since the beginning of time. What advice do you have for becoming a good school board member?” This book is my earnest attempt to answer your question.

My approach is to let you in on the many ways you can do a terrible job as a school board member. It’s not that I like focusing on bad behavior (although I must admit, it turned out to be more fun than I expected). Instead, my rationale is that focusing on terrible school board member moves is the fastest and most memorable way to help you learn how to be a good school board member. Even though the title talks about being a terrible school board member, my real goal is to help you see, by contrast, how a successful school board member operates.

In short, I am taking a case-based approach in which I analyze 28 scenarios (or cases) that cover all the wisdom I have to offer—one for each of my 28 years on my local school board. Case-based learning is used in many professional programs, such as in business, law, medicine, and even teacher education. Research on learning by example has a strong and growing empirical research base. (I describe some of that research in my recently published textbook, *Learning and Instruction*, Second Edition.)

Each scenario ends with a *Lessons Learned* section for board members, with advice for how to avoid becoming a terrible school board member and start on the road to becoming a successful one. In addition, each scenario ends with a special *Superintendents' Lessons Learned* section, intended to help superintendents understand the predicaments that school board members get themselves into. I show how superintendents can help prevent board members from engaging in terrible boardsmanship, because helping the board look good and function properly is an unwritten part of each superintendent's job description. As board–superintendent collaboration is crucial for successful district operation, eliminating terrible board behavior is of interest to both board members and superintendents. If you are a board member or a school administrator, this book is intended to help you do your job better.

A Word to School Administrators

On the surface, it might appear that this book is written exclusively for school board members. However, as indicated in the subtitle, this book is directed equally at school administrators who work with school boards. In writing this book, I found that the roles of school board members and school administrators—particularly the superintendent—are so intertwined that it is impossible to talk about one without the other. Being a school administrator is an increasingly challenging job, and as administrators rise to the upper ranks in their district, a major part of their job involves working with the board. If you are a school administrator, this book is intended to give you some insights into what is going on in the minds of your board members and the many ways they can get themselves and the district into trouble. In short, if you are a school administrator whose job involves interacting with your school board, then this book is very much for you.

Being a leader within the context of a school district requires a special appreciation of shared decision making. The success of a school

district requires teamwork among board members and the superintendent. This book is intended to help you see the role of the board, the board president, and the superintendent in this collaboration.

Why Did I Write This Book?

Being a school board member is a unique and rewarding experience that allows you to be part of an amazing institution. Local school boards are a form of democracy—or more technically, a form of representative government—on a human scale. Decisions about how to educate a community’s children are made at a local level. Citizens can confront the decision makers and tell them face-to-face exactly what they think. They can vote for candidates they like and against those they don’t like. According to the National School Boards Association, there are 14,890 school boards in the United States alone, with 95,000 school board members.

I have come to respect the institution of local school boards and the role they play in enabling high-quality education for children. I truly want school boards to work effectively so they can serve the communities in which they operate. However, effective school boards depend on effective school board members. In short, the success of any school board depends partly on the people who are elected to serve on them. In my experience, the overwhelming majority of school board members have good motives, but even people with good motives can make bad moves, even terrible moves. This book is dedicated to preventing situations in which your good intentions can lead to bad outcomes.

During my 28 years on my local school board, I have had the opportunity to observe many instances of behavior by school board members that fell somewhat short of being exemplary, including a fair share of my own. “I should write a book,” I have often thought to myself, summarizing the various ways in which you can be a terrible school board member. This book reports my favorite 28 terrible habits—one for each of my years on the school board. All the events and people in this book are fictional, but they are inspired by things I have seen along the way in school boards with which I am familiar (including things I have done or considered doing). Although the specific laws and procedures may vary from one location to another, the general themes about terrible habits remain the same. My hope is that by analyzing these terrible habits with you, we will be able to create school boards that work for our communities.

For board members, this book is intended to help you avoid engaging in terrible habits; for board presidents, this book is intended to help you deal with situations in which a board member is prone to engage in terrible habits; and for superintendents, this book is intended to help you do all you can to ensure that board members have the training and guidance they need to avoid doing something terrible. Although the title talks about “terrible” school board members, you will see that my goal is quite positive: to show you in a good-natured way how to help build an effective school board. If this book improves your effectiveness as a school board member, board president, or school administrator, even just a little bit, I will consider it a big success. I hope you will feel free to contact me at mayer@psych.ucsb.edu with your comments and suggestions (or even with terrible scenarios of your own).

Should You Become a School Board Member?

Why would anyone in their right mind want to run for their local school board? By running for office, you are pledging to do the following:

Attend lots of meetings—including regular board meetings, special board meetings, public hearings, and committee meetings (and if your board is as cost conscious as mine, don’t expect the chairs to be very comfortable);

Read lots of materials—including agendas, backup documents, reports, manuals, contracts, online information, and even books (and you will certainly need more bookshelves or file cabinets at home to house all that fine reading);

Listen to lots of public input—at regular board meetings, public hearings, and special meetings (and sometimes the speaker’s presentation style can be confrontational, insulting, or painfully on target);

Communicate with the public—on the phone, by e-mail, at schools, on the street, in kitchens, in coffee shops, and occasionally even by postal mail (so essentially you can be called upon wherever you go and anytime of the day or night);

Make lots of school visits—including visits to classrooms and with principals, teachers, staff, and even with the folks in the central office (but you’ll need to be sure not to have favorites);

Attend special school events—such as school graduations, performances, and assemblies;

Attend conferences and education-related events—such as conferences by regional, state, and national school board associations, or education-related events planned by nonprofits or local, state, or national organizations;

Respond to reporters—such as requests from newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations;

Make lots of informed decisions—by making sure you fully understand and think through each issue you vote on;

Run a vigorous campaign—including participating in forums and walking precincts; and

Play by the rules—by trying not to become a terrible board member (and thereby providing me with more material for chapters in the next edition of this book).

In short, when you join a school board, the community considers you a *trustee*—someone entrusted with ensuring the best possible education for every child in the district. This job takes your time, your energy, your thinking, and your emotional commitment.

In spite of all these obligations—or perhaps partly because of them—being a school board member can be a hugely positive experience. Here are my personal reasons for wanting to be a school board member:

Service—Being a school board member allows me to serve my community in a way that has important and concrete consequences I can be proud of.

Mission—Being a school board member enriches my day job, which in my case as a college professor involves doing research on how to design effective instruction.

Interest—Being a school board member satisfies my interest in education.

Personal development—Being a school board member helps me develop team skills based on mutual respect with others and gain

expertise in running effective meetings; it also greatly increases my knowledge of how schools work, challenges me to think through important issues, and links me with what is going on in my community and state.

Structured social environment—Being a school board member involves participating in meetings and an organizational structure in which my role is clearly defined, and I can apply this experience to other situations in my life.

Personal relations—Being a school board member allows me to interact with fine and talented people who care about helping children reach their full potential.

Once you join a school board, you will quickly be able to generate your own list. Being a school board member rapidly becomes a part of your identity, and working for your district becomes a part of your life.

The main goal of a school board is to make decisions in the best interests of all the children in the district. In joining a school board, you become part of a team whose shared responsibility is to make sure every child reaches his or her full potential. In working toward this crucial goal, you deserve the deep respect of your community.