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# Preface

*Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.*

(A.A. Milne, 1926, p. 3)

**W**hy would anyone write, or read, a book on board meetings? The answer is simple: Board meetings have the potential to impact, in a very direct way, the quality of teaching and learning in a school district.

A good board meeting contributes to the achievement of district goals. It opens the door to student success. A poor meeting may have the opposite effect even to the point of creating confusion and dissension throughout the district. That is why we think it is important for every superintendent to stop and think about his or her board meetings and consider ways to make them more effective. When superintendents are clear about the strategies and actions that lead to effective board meetings, they are better equipped to help their board members meet their responsibilities to ensure high-quality teaching and learning.

Board meetings are mission-critical work for superintendents and board members for several reasons. The first reason is simple—the right actions of the board result in policies and decisions directly affecting student achievement. A board thoughtfully deliberating a proposed policy that will lead to more students being able to enroll in Advanced Placement classes is doing its job better than a board debating the most recent phone bill.

Second, the time and commitment put into these activities of preparing for, conducting, following up after, and recovering from board meetings is considerable. So, if we are doing all this work, it only makes sense for us to do the right work so the board meeting truly makes a difference in the quality of teaching and learning.

**xii A Practical Guide to Effective School Board Meetings**

This leads to the third reason with which all superintendents are familiar, namely the impact of board meetings on those who work directly with the board along with many others throughout the district. What people hear and see, and how they are treated, sends a strong message about “how we do things around here” and what the values are. That, of course, carries over to the students we serve.

A fourth reason is that board meetings are a focal point in forming public opinions about the quality of education in the individual district and of public education in general. In most locations, press coverage of board meetings is extensive, and many districts televise their meetings. As a result, board meetings play a significant role in increasing or decreasing public confidence in the local educational system.

Finally, we believe board meetings strongly influence board and superintendent relations, for good or ill, and that the meetings reflect and define the nature of these relations. Good board meetings strengthen superintendent-board relations; poor ones weaken those relations.

These reasons are the basis for our belief that superintendents and board members ought to give more attention to ensuring that board meetings contribute to student achievement and model the principles of good teaching and learning. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. We often hear conversations from our colleagues that indicate concern about the quality of board meetings and their impact on the important work of the district. For some superintendents, board meetings become something to get through, to check off the to-do list, and to sigh with relief when they are over so they can get on to their real work. Or worse—in some districts the meetings become entertainment and create a negative impression about the quality of education.

Superintendents often describe the anxiety they feel about upcoming board meetings; they always worry about what might go wrong. There is no denying the potential of something unusual happening on any night, at any meeting. Yet, we believe—because we have seen many powerful examples—that board meetings offer the best opportunity for moving districts forward to achieve their stated goals. Each part of this book relates to creating these meetings, starting with the big picture—the mental model of board meetings themselves.

Part I focuses on teaching and learning, for that is the heart of the matter. Board members are civic leaders; so are superintendents. Together they form the governance team with significant power and responsibilities that impact the students, staff, and other district stakeholders. Being an effective leader requires the superintendent to attend to detail on many levels and in various situations. Despite the complexity and competing demands, the governance team must focus the district’s attention on the importance of powerful teaching and learning that will lead to student achievement. The outcome of the board’s actions must result in supporting what goes on in the classrooms so all students can learn and achieve their goals.

Part I continues with thoughts about building the superintendent–board team. Board members and superintendents have some responsibilities in common, but there are many that are distinct and unique to their position. Role confusion leads to wasted time, lowered morale, interpersonal difficulties, and resentment. When each person fills the proper role and carries out the proper responsibilities, the likelihood of achieving district goals increases.

Knowing one’s “job” is the first step, but is not enough. Boards and superintendents need to spend time reaching agreement on how they will operate with each other as they lead the district. What are the general operating procedures, the protocols, by which they will govern the district? The board and superintendent must be clear with each other and agree on how they will govern. The staff and community also need to be clear as to the roles of the superintendent and board members; they need to know what they can expect and what the limitations are for their district’s leaders.

Our experience is that few governance teams have discussed role differentiation, nor have they developed operating procedures. We offer suggestions to assist superintendents and board members in this effort. Operating procedures are a precursor and foundation for planning and carrying out effective board meetings.

A board meeting is not just a task to check off the “to do” list; it is an important path to reaching the district’s goals. Board meetings also are the litmus test of board and superintendent relations. Good board and superintendent relations translate into effective work on behalf of students. That is why we say board meetings are mission critical.

Productive board meetings do not just happen. Careful planning is essential, and the quality of that planning impacts directly the effectiveness of a meeting. Part II focuses on preparing the agenda and preparing for the meeting itself. Superintendents must know how to plan an agenda, organize pre-meeting details, design the board packet, and communicate the agenda to board members and other key people.

Then there is the board meeting itself—sometimes referred to as “the big show.” Part III describes critical aspects of the meeting itself, from before the opening gavel to adjournment. Our philosophy is that board meetings present an opportunity to develop, emphasize, reinforce, and implement the district’s mission, goals, and core values.

This philosophy is reflected in each option and suggestion we offer regarding details of the meeting. If board meetings reflect the highest priority work of the district—teaching and learning—they are far more likely to contribute directly to growth and progress of students. Ineffective, sometimes even dysfunctional, meetings detract from accomplishing the fundamental purpose—addressing student achievement. Poor meetings distract the adults, wasting precious time that should be spent in productive, proactive ways on issues related to students.

## xiv A Practical Guide to Effective School Board Meetings

A separate chapter addresses the closed session where the board and superintendent meet in private, out of the public view. Along with basic, general guidelines reviewed by a legal firm specializing in schools, we provide some common sense tips about dealing with difficult situations.

The final section, Part IV, covers a frequently overlooked area, which is what happens after the board meeting is over. Post-meeting, the superintendent is responsible for doing or delegating many follow-up activities. Most are formal actions the staff must do, but there are also informal activities that affect and influence the culture of the district.

Then we turn our focus to the superintendent as a person. What do superintendents do for themselves, for their recovery and renewal after meetings? The connotation here is not meant to be negative; it simply acknowledges that the work of the superintendent and board members *is* frequently stressful. Therefore, it is not only useful, but also essential for you to pay attention to your recovery—your renewal.

Decisions the board is making are important, whether on routine or controversial items. Ideally, the superintendent and staff have worked hard and thoughtfully to bring forward those items for board action that they believe will improve student performance and achieve district goals. And, ideally, trustees have studied, read, considered, and made initial decisions regarding the agenda items.

All of this hard work comes together at the board meeting. After the meeting, superintendents and trustees need time for their own reflection and renewal so they can continue pursuing the district's mission and goals with passion. From experience, we know too many superintendents make the mistake of not paying attention to their own well-being, especially following the stress of preparing for and implementing board meetings.

Since the superintendent is responsible for planning board meetings and preparing the board agenda, this book addresses the superintendent. However, the book is also intended for board members, the aspiring superintendent, leadership staff, and community members. Improving school districts is a team effort. Effective board meetings are critical to this improvement effort and require the involvement and commitment of the governance team and many others in the district.

In fact, we encourage superintendents to use the book with their board members as a professional development and continuous learning tool. We see superintendents as professional educators, as coaches for school trustees. Each chapter provides opportunity for dialogue and for reaching agreements on how superintendents and trustees can improve their individual and collective effectiveness.

In each chapter, we give our opinions and advice based on years of involvement in board meetings. Among us, we have been directly responsible for well over 1,000 board meetings and have observed and studied hundreds more. We have also assisted superintendents and superintendent-board teams to increase their effectiveness.

From outstanding and effective meetings to ones that still make us shake our heads, we have seen them all. We have seen board meetings lead to positive transformations for schools, and we have seen superintendents dismissed when meetings have spun out of control.

Our goal is for you to know, and to remind you of, what a good meeting looks like, to have the benefit of understanding the specific practices that offer the best opportunity for success. We know it is possible to have effective meetings, ones connected to teaching and learning in a way that moves districts to accomplish their goals.

We believe in the old saw that “if your only tool is a hammer, the whole world is a nail.” There are many tools in the superintendent’s toolkit. Just as teachers continue to add to their repertoire of teaching strategies, so must the top district leadership build its capacity for continuous improvement. This requires learning about each tool, and taking time to decide, consciously, which tool to use and when to use it, and then to reflect on the outcome.

We hope you, as a superintendent, will look carefully at the options in each section, analyze your practice, and consciously decide how you can operate in the most effective way. Then we hope you will involve your board in a dialogue leading to decisions your governance team can make to improve your meetings. We offer options, but you must decide what is best for you.

Board meetings have a powerful influence on everything from district goals to district culture. For this reason it is essential that the superintendent and board members work together as a governance team to make board meetings as productive and effective as possible. It is the responsibility of the superintendent and the board leadership team to create the environment to support and sustain powerful teaching and learning that leads to student achievement.