

GOVERNANCE
BEST PRACTICES

Guide

GOVERNANCE IN A TIME OF CHAOS

Managing
board
meetings
in turbulent
times



Donovan Group
School Communications



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Managing board meetings in turbulent times

School boards continue to face unprecedented challenges in the pandemic era, not just in schools and in the community, but in the boardroom as well. Many governance teams are struggling to manage meetings as tensions boil over on issues like COVID-19 mitigation strategies, independent study, learning recovery, ethnic studies and critical race theory. In 2021, we have seen a marked increase in political division at school board meetings, open hostility toward board members, mass protests, disruptions that forced the board to

pause or abandon meetings, and physical abuse and death threats against trustees and their families.

This document offers information and guidance about handling chaotic board meetings, including disruptive protests — as well as specific tips related to questions about face coverings and equity. We begin with some general information on how to hold productive board meetings and set policy for these difficult times so boards can better perform their essential duties for students, families and communities.

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Basic principles

1. THE MEETING MUST PROCEED

- » The board must be able to conduct its business. A board meeting is not a meeting of the public, but rather a meeting to conduct the public's business
- » Board members have a responsibility to conduct board business in an open and transparent manner, but should take appropriate action when disruptions are keeping the board from being able to proceed with business.
- » Any action to stop disruption must be based on the disruptive actions of individuals, not on the viewpoint they are expressing.

2. FOCUS ON STUDENTS, MISSION AND VISION

- » For board members and administrators who face ongoing disrupted meetings, a disproportionate amount of attention can get paid to the disruption. Board members and administrators should keep in mind that their work should always center on students' needs and the mission and vision of the school district or county office of education.
- » People will disagree about the methods by which goals are met, but the mission and vision — what the district seeks to do for the children it serves — is usually not a point of contention.
- » At the end of the day, we must all remember that what makes school district governance

so difficult is that we are working to meet the needs of children. The success of our students is something on which we can all agree.

3. SAFETY IS A PRIORITY

- » While we want constituents to be free to voice their opinions in accordance with board rules, board members must recognize they have an obligation to keep those in attendance — including fellow board members, staff and others — safe. The best way to do this is to ensure meeting rules are followed, order is maintained, and clarity is provided regarding how the meeting will proceed.

4. THE PUBLIC HAS THE RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH

- » Free speech and the ability of community members to address their elected board members are critical to the success of any democratic government.
- » We must recognize that people communicate differently. While board members should never feel they are being threatened, it is helpful to recognize that some people will raise their voice to make a point. It's important not to match emotion with emotion.
- » Reasonable people can disagree. As long as constituents are following board rules, the meeting is safe, and it can proceed. Having a large number of attendees exercising their right to speak to the board is a good thing.

2 Key topics

FACE COVERINGS

Most school boards are addressing issues related to face coverings at this time. There is a lot of misinformation out there regarding the usefulness of face coverings, including claims that masks can actually be harmful to children.

Below are some ideas for communicating about face coverings

- » Acknowledge that most would prefer not to wear face coverings and that we look forward to a time when they are no longer necessary.
- » Continue to explain to all what process, procedures and policies are being used to make decisions about face coverings in an effort to be transparent, including the legal requirements the board is following and does not have discretion to disregard. Use the opportunity to explain how the board's governance works and where community members can receive information about future and past board meetings. Invite them into the process.
- » Continue to acknowledge that, as a board, you are doing the best job you can on behalf of all members of the district and COE community to implement a statewide public health directive.

EQUITY

In recent months, we have seen an increasing number of parents and other community members engage with their local board members about issues of equity and protesting critical race theory (CRT). Some also believe the state of California's recent notices to schools about ethnic studies are tied to CRT.

Below are some ideas related to communicating about a district's equity work

- » Acknowledge that students come to school with different needs and that the district works to meet the needs of all students where they are. Consider leaning into the district's mission and vision statements and efforts to ensure all students receive a top-notch education.
- » Remind community members of important policies, procedures and processes the board uses to make decisions — and that it does so with full transparency. Encourage community members to continue engaging with the board as it conducts its work.

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Preparing for difficult board meetings and communicating after meetings

BEFORE THE MEETING

- » Review your district's/COE's policies for board meetings and consider whether there is a need for the superintendent to seek legal counsel.
- » Consider the following policies before the meeting:
 - › Public comment or participation at board meetings
 - › Rules of order or engagement at board meetings
- » Anticipate the worst and prepare board members and the superintendent for possible scenarios at the meeting. The superintendent and the board president should develop plans for action in response to each scenario.
- » The superintendent or legal counsel, as appropriate, should remind board members of the district's/COE's chain of command for communications regarding public concerns or complaints.
- » The board president should prepare to maintain order during the meeting or recess or clear the room where necessary to address disruptive behavior of the public.
- » The superintendent should notify local law enforcement or collaborate with school security officials of a potential concern at the meeting and have a plan if there is disruption.
- » Establish safe entry and exit points for board members and staff to not have to

engage or confront hostile individuals.

- » Assign members of the leadership team to monitor social media during the meeting and address misinformation in the moment.
- » If possible, the superintendent should share a news release and/or communication to staff and families prior to the meeting to dispel circulating rumors or misinformation.
- » Invite media members present at the meeting to interview the superintendent or board president after the meeting. Prepare with key messages in advance.
- » Coach the superintendent and board members to be intentional in not confronting or becoming emotional with the public. Stick to the facts with responses and lean on the tenets of your district/COE strategic plan.

AFTER THE MEETING

- » The superintendent and board president should follow up the meeting with a prompt news release with key messages for both internal and external stakeholders so the district is the first to communicate out.
- » Consider whether there is any negative impact to students, staff or families from the meeting. If so, take action to address the impact.
- » Encourage the superintendent to follow up with individuals with personal emails or calls to build and maintain trust.



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