

PLANNING THE EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD MEETING

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Think of the many hours you spend on planning for your system—things like budget forecasting, strategic planning, and disaster preparation. Do you put the same forethought into organizing your meetings? Probably not. Both board and committee meetings tend to be loosely thought-out and implemented by the seat of the pants.

This is unfortunate. Because, just as meticulous preparation leads to a seemingly effortless party, good meeting plans lead to better meetings.

BEFORE THE GAVEL STRIKES

What happens before a meeting is often as important as what happens during the meeting. Indeed, the success of most meetings is determined long before the opening gavel comes down. Start by asking—and answering—each of the following questions before you call your next meeting to order:

Why meet at all? Some groups have to come together because statute or their governing documents require so many meetings per year.

However, studies also show that many meetings are a waste of time. Generally, the best reasons for meeting as a group are for decision-making, problem solving, planning, and evaluation. By contrast, if the sole purpose of a meeting is to give information, there may be easier ways to accomplish that, such as via a letter or e-mail.

What are the desired outcomes? There's a difference between *discussing* a reassignment plan and *adopting* one. Your meeting plan should reflect such differences. For example, if the desired outcome is to adopt a recommendation, you should arrange the meeting so there is a specific proposal, followed by discussion and a vote (with consideration on how to verify a close vote). To plan an effective agenda, it's essential that you know your desired outcomes.

Who is responsible for each item on the agenda? Far too often, the presiding officer handles everything on the agenda. This is understandable, in

that the chairman usually feels most responsible for a meeting's success. However, meetings run more smoothly, are more inclusive, and likely will be more productive if you give other board members responsibilities as well. Even allowing a board member to report on a project can help prepare that member for future leadership roles. Also, you're likely to have better attendance if people have a part on the agenda. And members are more likely to feel they're an important part of the board if they do more than sit and listen.

Have you confirmed the setting? Meetings often fail not because of the items on their agenda, but because of the atmosphere in which they occur. Rooms that are too large or small, hot, cold, or noisy can affect participation. Plus, have you tested all the equipment—lectern, microphone, overhead projector—to make sure it won't malfunction during an inopportune moment?

Even a room's layout can drastically alter the atmosphere. Auditorium or "classroom" style seating, for example, usually leads to less participation by members. In contrast, an oval or circle arrangement invites discussion. That said, depending on the purpose of the meeting, an arrangement around a table can result in too much member participation. A compromise often used for board meetings is a horseshoe pattern, with the presiding officer at the leadership position at the open end. This layout encourages participation, but acknowledges the chair is running the meeting. While board meetings are often arranged based on

what works best for the camera, the effect of room arrangement on participation should not be ignored.

Do you follow the standard order of business? The general outline in which business is taken up during a meeting is known as the "order of business." Parliamentary procedure books, including *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (10th Edition)*, recognize a "standard" order of business, the sequence of which will vary depending on the type of meeting:

A. Opening the meeting. Once a quorum is present and it's time to begin, the presiding officer calls the meeting to order by stating, "The meeting will come to order."

B. Approval of minutes. In meetings where minutes are to be approved, distribute the minutes to members in advance (and have extra copies on hand), so you don't have to read them aloud. The presiding officer can ask, "Is there any objection to approving the minutes?" If there is no objection, the minutes are approved.

C. Reports of officers, boards, and standing committees. The first substantive business item is usually to hear from the officers, established boards and committees, and staff. Your presiding officer should find out in advance who needs to report, and only call on those who have reports.

Reports are generally for information only. In such instances, no motion is necessary following the reports. A motion "to adopt" or "to accept" a report is seldom wise except when the report is to be issued or published in the name of the organization or there are recommendations to be implemented. For example, the Building Committee may have studied

renovations of a particular structure. In her report, the committee chair might thank the members of her committee for their hard work and explain in detail the committee's position and reasoning. At the end of her report, the chair would close with, "On behalf of the Building Committee, I move that the ABC School cafeteria be renovated in an amount not to exceed \$100,000."

D. Reports of special committees.

Special committees do not have continual existence. Instead, they exist for the purpose of a specific project—to plan a function or event, for example, or study a particular issue. Special committees typically go out of existence upon their final report.

E. Unfinished business. Unfinished business refers to matters carried over from a previous meeting—a category that is sometimes incorrectly referred to as "old business." "Old business" is a misnomer in that unfinished business is not simply items that have been discussed previously. For organizations that meet at least four times a year, unfinished business may include any matter that was pending when the previous meeting adjourned, was on the previous meeting's agenda but wasn't reached, or was postponed to the present meeting.

Your presiding officer should know if there are items to be considered under unfinished business and doesn't need to ask, "Is there any unfinished business?" Instead, the presiding officer simply proceeds to the first unfinished item. If there is no unfinished business, the presiding officer skips this category altogether.

F. New business. Most work in a meeting is accomplished during the time slot devoted

to "new business," when members can introduce any new item for consideration. As a result, your presiding officer may be unaware of what items will arise under new business (unless you require advance notice for this category).

The presiding officer introduces the heading of new business by asking, "Is there any new business?" A member then can introduce a new item of business by making a motion and obtaining a second. Following the consideration of each item, the chair asks, "Is there any further new business?" This process continues until there are no additional items. For boards that require new business items to be submitted in advance (either due to statute or a local rule), the chair can simply call on the next member on the prepared agenda.

G. Closing the meeting. In most boards, the presiding officer can adjourn the meeting without waiting for a motion to adjourn. If all items of business have been considered, your presiding officer can ask, "Is there any further business?" If there is no response, the presiding officer simply states, "Since there is no further business, the meeting is adjourned."

If custom requires that a motion to adjourn be made, the presiding officer can ask, "Is there a motion to adjourn?" Once the motion is made and seconded, the presiding officer asks, "Is there any objection to adjourning the meeting? [Pause.] Hearing no objection, the meeting is adjourned."

Have you created an effective agenda? As the structured order of business suggests, there's nothing more important to a successful meeting than

a well-planned agenda. At a minimum, a good agenda has a start *and* an end time for the meeting. Obviously, knowing in advance when the meeting will end requires careful planning and a review of every item on the agenda.

Some boards also like a start and end time for each individual item. (See “Sample Timed Agenda”) Such scheduling is a good idea if you’re trying to rein in long meetings or have several controversial items to be considered. If you do adopt a timed agenda, realize that the start and end points are locked in. When the designated time for finishing an item arrives, your presiding officer announces that the allotted time has elapsed; a vote is taken if the item is for action. Obviously, you can always vote to modify a timed agenda. By contrast, if you don’t adopt a timed agenda, any times listed next to your items of business are for guidance only.

Sample Timed Agenda

7:00	Call to Order
7:01	Consent Calendar
	a. Minutes of May Meeting
7:02	Reports
7:02	a. Building Committee
7:30	b. Superintendent Search (in Executive Session)
8:30	Adjourn

Should you require agenda items in advance? Some governing documents require that business items be submitted in advance. Without

question, it helps in planning your agenda to know if there will be one or 10 business items. Plus, allowing items to be brought up on the fly can lead to poorly thought-out motions—and even if you require prior submission, you probably have a mechanism to suspend the rule on a case-by-case basis.

Is everyone prepared? Distribute the agenda and any documents needed for the meeting in advance, even if only by e-mail. In addition, make sure everyone on the agenda knows his or her role.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Of course, all the planning in the world will mean nothing if you can’t then use that planning to run a smooth, productive meeting. Here are some suggestions for putting your plan into action.

Start on time. Delaying a meeting encourages members to be late and punishes those who were on time.

Stick to the agenda. Stay focused on your desired outcomes by using an agenda. An agenda—particularly a timed one—can keep the meeting from getting bogged down on one issue. If you’re using a timed agenda, stay on track by ending each item on time.

Have an endpoint. Similarly, to avoid unproductive tangents and circular discussions, establish an end time in advance—and adjourn the meeting when you reach it.

Preempt debate. Resolve non-controversial items through “general consent” or “unanimous consent.” Under this method, the presiding officer asks, “Is there any objection to...?”—for example, “Is there any objection to ending debate?” If no one objects, debate is closed. If a member objects, you can resolve the matter with a motion and vote. Otherwise, you can use general consent to adopt reports and motions, approve minutes, and end debate. In fact, try to place a “consent agenda” near the start of the meeting that includes all non-controversial items, such as adoption of the minutes. Any member can request that an item be removed from the consent agenda and placed on the regular agenda for consideration and vote. The remaining consent-agenda items are then unanimously approved as a unit without discussion.

Manage discussion. Set the discussion time prior to addressing potentially lengthy issues: “Is there a motion to limit total debate to 30 minutes?” (Such a motion requires a two-thirds vote.) And encourage new discussion—and prevent repetition—by asking for speakers who have not spoken.

Alternate pro and con. After hearing from a proponent, ask, “Is there anyone who wishes to speak against the motion?” When no one wishes to speak on a particular side, ask for unanimous consent to end debate: “Is there any objection to closing discussion? Hearing no objection, discussion is closed.” If people from both sides do continue to speak, pay attention to the length and quality of their remarks. When the discussion seems to have reached

the point of diminishing returns, ask for a motion to end discussion: “Is there a motion to close debate?” Most parliamentary books allow debate to be closed with a two-thirds vote.

Encourage and equalize participation. Discussion at meetings is often monopolized by a single person, but several formal parliamentary rules are designed to prevent this. For example, no one should speak a second time while there are members who wish to speak a first time. Ask, “Is there anyone who wishes to speak for [or against] the motion who has not yet spoken?” If a member has not participated during a discussion, your presiding officer might even ask, “Mary, do you have any thoughts on this matter?” If you’re following formal procedure—such as during a particularly controversial issue—once a member has spoken twice to a motion, he or she is finished on that motion for the day.

Use proper procedures. Several states have adopted or considered legislation that mandates a parliamentary authority for board meetings. For instance, some school boards are required to follow the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*. If your state has such language, you should obviously follow it. However, even in the absence of a statutory mandate, proper procedure can help turn long, confrontational meetings into short, relatively painless ones.

Use informal procedures when practical. Smaller boards can be less formal. In fact, formality

can actually hinder business in a meeting of fewer than about a dozen. As a result, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly* recommends that in smaller boards:

- Members are not required to obtain the floor and can make motions or speak while seated.
- Motions need not be seconded.
- There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a question.
- Motions to close or limit debate are generally not used.
- The chair can make motions.
- The chair can vote on all questions.

Some smaller boards don't like this informality and stick to formal procedure at every meeting.

Certainly, even informal boards should be more formal on matters of sufficient importance or controversy. That means observing limits on debate to keep the meeting on time and using formal votes to help avoid legal challenges.

Control interruptions and digressions.

Digressions are matters off-point to the issue under discussion. A good presiding officer might acknowledge a tangential issue that has been raised, but note that it's not relevant to the discussion and should be taken up later. (If you do make such a

promise, remember to follow up on it.) Some boards and committees use a chalkboard or flip chart to “park” such digressions. Similarly, take care to deflate any windbags in attendance. If a member attempts to monopolize discussion, you may have to nicely state that because the member has already spoken, other opinions are needed.

Manage conflict. During meetings, members should never get into an argument—or even a direct discussion—with each other. If a confrontation begins between two members, your presiding officer should remind everyone to address all remarks to the chair.

End on a positive note. You cannot thank your volunteers too often—especially these days, when people can come up with many alternatives to serving on a school board. Thanking members for their time is not only gracious, but likely will result in greater enthusiasm for the board's work. And that in turn can lead to even better meetings.

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