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Memo to a New School Board Member

A former superintendent offers some good advice for newly elected officials

By Paula Delaney

To: New School Board Member

From: A Former Superintendent of Schools

Congratulations on your election to the school committee in your town! You should consider it an honor that so many community members have confidence in your willingness and ability to work to make the schools the best they can be for their children.

One of your roles will be to meet regularly with the Superintendent of Schools, who is essentially the CEO. The relationship you have with the Superintendent is perhaps the most critical factor effecting the continued improvement of the school system.

As a former superintendent, I have had many experiences with school boards. I thought it might be helpful to offer some suggestions on things a superintendent appreciates in a school board member. Your superintendent may have his or her own ideas to share, but you might also find these points interesting to consider as you assume your elected position.

■ **Don't make promises.** During your campaign, you spoke of the many burning issues that are facing the school system. You also shared many of your ideas on how to resolve them. Now it's time to investigate. Look at all aspects of the issue, the history of the problem, steps that have been taken so far, and who are the key people involved. A seemingly simple problem may have a very complicated resolution. Do the research.

■ **The public is counting on you to listen.** You will become a sounding board for anyone who has a complaint or a problem with a bus driver, teacher, or administrator. Be prepared to be stopped while grocery shopping or eating at your favorite restaurant. Listen with an open mind. Try to remember that every story always has many sides and refrain from making a quick judgment or promising to take care of the matter immediately. Instead, get as much information as you can and share it with the superintendent. Sometimes, the issue will have been resolved by the time it is brought to your attention. If not, the superintendent needs your information.

■ **Be prepared for meetings.** You will receive a packet of information from the superintendent before each meeting. The packet will contain an agenda and related documents and information. Take time to read the packet's contents so you are prepared when issues are discussed in open session.

■ **Learn to distinguish policy from procedure.** Remember this mantra: Policy is the "what"; procedure is the "how." Your role as a school committee member is to work with the other board members in developing policies (the "whats") that are in the district's best interest. The superintendent's job is to focus on the "how" — the procedure that will best carry out the policy or directive. Although it may be tempting, try to refrain from telling the superintendent how to implement a policy decision. The superintendent is in the best position to decide how new policy will be implemented and should inform the committee of his/her actions.

■ **Establish ground rules.** Work with the other committee members to establish ground rules for public meetings. What is the protocol for comments? Will you go through the chair? Should you respond to public comments? You may deal with some very volatile issues during your tenure. Sometimes emotions will run high. Discuss with the board the importance of civility at meetings. Members can certainly disagree, but it can be done respectfully. The public needs to know the board acts appropriately, works cooperatively and is in control. You need to give them that confidence.

■ **No surprises.** If at all possible, don't surprise the superintendent at meetings. In other words, try to contact the superintendent before bringing up a new issue that might require an immediate response. No one likes to be put on the spot before having a chance to look into an issue. Expect the superintendent to return the courtesy.

■ **Stay focused.** The number of issues that need to be addressed may seem overwhelming. Work with the other members to establish a plan with priorities and timelines instead of tackling all the problems all at once. You must be patient to do this because each member will have an issue that they feel is most important.

■ **Be a cheerleader for the schools.** Support the efforts of those who work in the schools. I'm certainly not advising you to ignore or deny problems, but remember to let the public know of the good things that are happening. You and I know that the things that need correction will be found quickly. Show the community that you are seriously working to improve the system, but that you also recognize progress and achievement.

■ **Kids first.** Always remember whom you are really working for. It's not the people who elected you. It's the children of the community who are counting on you to look out for their welfare and make decisions that will allow them to have the best education possible.

Finally, thank you in advance for the many long nights that you will spend at committee meetings and other events. You should be commended for the diligence and seriousness of purpose that you bring to your role. Sometimes, you may feel that you are not appreciated and are doing a thankless job. But keep your eye on the prize. You are preparing the next generation to take on the challenges of the future. Be proud.

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