



# Mentoring New Members

A school board that actively searches for new colleagues and provides them with opportunities to grow into their roles will ease the transition from outsider to insider

**Quintin Shepherd**

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**A**s a school board member, you know that teacher attrition and retention is a problem. Recent data suggests that 46 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. This attrition costs billions of dollars each year in turnover, training, and recruitment costs—not including the educational costs to the students.

You also know that a solid mentoring program can go a long way to decreasing attrition. Successful mentoring programs can drive down teacher attrition by 65 percent or more. Mentoring programs also can help new administrators, superintendents, and, of course, board members.

But as any educator can tell you, programs don't teach. It's almost never about the program but always about the

mindset. So what is a mentoring mindset? What makes it work and how does one know it is successful? And what can school boards learn from the efforts of educators in this area?

### **Situated learning**

Instead of exploring the technical side of mentoring, let's look at it from a cultural perspective. First, we need a quick understanding of "situated learning." Situated learning, first proposed by social anthropologist Jean Lave and computer

## **Welcome to the board**

### **Mark Sasfy**

Several years ago, driving back from the store, I received a call congratulating me on winning a seat on our school board. Like many recently elected board members, I was joyous over the news but apprehensive of what I was getting myself into.

For more than a month, I had campaigned throughout my school district, greeting patrons with a slogan I composed based on the trials and tribulations I had endured. "Chased twice and bitten once," I told the patrons. "I would not be out here talking to you if I did not feel that our children's education was worth it."

Now the campaign was over. I had won, but I did not fully grasp what it meant to be a school board member. All who want to serve on the board believe they can benefit their district, but my lack of understanding meant that my initial experience was not that enjoyable or productive.

Today, as a veteran board member, I believe all districts would benefit from developing procedures that welcome and foster positive working relationships with new members. I also have developed some tips to help you focus on your work in those first few trying months.

Yes, it can be a daunting challenge, but it is well worth the effort.

### **Setting your priorities**

New school board members are exposed to many issues that may or may not be district related, but the board must remain focused on a common goal: promoting student achievement. Prioritize issues based on the impact

they will have on achievement in your district, and you will find they can be addressed with greater objectivity and fewer personal interests.

New board members will soon realize that their point of view is represented by a single vote. In my board training from the Missouri School Board Association (MSBA), what's continually imparted to new members is that we have only one employee—the superintendent. With only one vote and one employee, how can you as a board member achieve anything?

Again, prioritize issues around student achievement and focus on the governing your board must do to ensure those priorities become reality. That's easy to talk about, but it is much more difficult to put into practice.

What's neglected at times is that all board members need to be objective, which can be tough to do when you are confronted by an upset parent or an angry constituent. Fortunately, districts have policies, procedures, and plans in place to guide your work.

Aside from attending meetings and getting board training, one way to become more effective is to take the time and fully read your district's policies and procedures. Yes, policies and procedures can be tedious at times, but understanding their link to your district's programs will help you to be more objective and knowledgeable when you evaluate those programs.

A viable strategic plan is a must. My district has what we call a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). We align all agenda items to the CSIP so it can be easily referenced, and it

helps us to be more objective as well as knowledgeable in our board meetings.

### **Training and mentoring**

Districts realize the value of professional development and mentoring programs for teachers and staff. You also should have this for the school board.

As a new board member, I did not have the benefit of a formal mentorship program. In hindsight, I firmly believe this would have helped considerably as I acclimated to my responsibilities. If your district does not have a formal program, look for someone you feel comfortable with and seek guidance.

The training or certification you receive from your state school boards association also is invaluable. My training from MSBA was excellent, enlightening, and very motivating. It allowed me to interact with new board members from across the state, giving me an educational and professional experience that transcended my district's boundaries.

I can't overemphasize how important it is to get training and/or certification as soon as possible. It certainly helped me understand my role and my work.

I hope your experience as a school board member will be rewarding and positive. I can think of no other public office that an ordinary citizen can assume that has such potential to have an impact on your district and the community in general.

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scientist Etienne Wenger, is learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied. In other words, it's learning by socialization, visualization, and imitation. It's the process of watching others, thinking about how you would do it, and then trying to replicate.

Nearly all sports education uses a variation on situated learning when youngsters are first starting out. When a coach demonstrates how to slide into home plate or shows a video of an athlete doing the same, that's learning.

It's easy to draw parallels between situated learning and board work. Picture a tribal organization where the elders regularly gather to discuss the wants and needs of the group in order to plan for their future. The elders recognize they won't last forever and create a process where they "train" future elders.

This training may take the form of having potential elders hear, see, and have limited practice pretending to be an elder so that when the time comes they will be ready to carry on. If the elders are dancing around the fire, these folks are watching them in order to learn.

This kind of training has many positive outcomes, including the maintenance and preservation of culture. Insiders' knowledge is imparted in a systemic way, and new perspectives and ideas are infused in a controlled manner.

This form of situated learning is called "legitimate peripheral participation." Imagine discovering this tribe and recognizing that they are endlessly preparing for their future and maintaining an historical perspective on their culture through legitimate peripheral participation. These tribes exist for hundreds of years, remaining fully rooted in their history and culture while at the same time preparing for their future.

### Creating opportunities

How often do school boards create the opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation in order to preserve the board and district culture and history while preparing for their collective future? I suspect many of us would be uncomfortable with the responses we might give. This obviously requires the collective effort of the group. Board culture does not simply take care of itself and, in my experience, is not something to be left to chance.

Legitimate peripheral participation is at the heart of every great mentoring program in education. These mentoring programs actively recruit teachers far before the first interview. Pre-service teachers get opportunities in the classroom, where they are informally inducted into the role of insider through early participation in teacher-like roles.

Within administration, legitimate peripheral participation is evident whenever a sitting administrator gives the opportunity for a teacher to step into a quasi-administrative role. These opportunities are most often given as the teacher is pursuing an advanced degree in administration.

Internships are the epitome of legitimate peripheral participation, as the intern is regularly given the opportunity to participate in insider conversations with the administrator and gain insight into the thinking and logic that surrounds much of the administrator's daily life.

As superintendent, I participate in the school board tribe in a different role, and I have noticed that some boards find opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation and others miss the opportunity or leave it to chance.

Those boards that are successful in searching out future board members do so systematically and with purpose. They are open and transparent in their efforts. Sometimes this happens within a tangential organization like the PTA, PTO, or an education foundation board. These boards often are set up like a school board (with a formal chair, positions, and governance structure) and share mutual goals with the board.

School boards that make these organizations "part of the fold," so to speak, often have school board members as liaisons not only to keep the peripheral boards informed but also to inform potential board members of the district culture and what it means to have an insider's knowledge.

Another effective option is the board's committee structure. Board committees are a means to engage others in legitimate peripheral participation in a cultural and anthropological sense. These high-functioning boards and respective committees are regularly affording opportunities to those with an outsider's knowledge to participate in a meaningful way in board work.

This participation comes with the advice and insight of the board member who brings historical and cultural knowledge to the committee work. The net effect is a deeper understanding of the issues to which the committee is assigned and also the opportunities to grow new board members long before some have decided to run for the board. This is akin to the tribe that is actively looking for new elders.

Every organization needs new members to replace those who leave. A board that actively engages in searching out new members and providing them with opportunities to grow into this role will ease the transition from outsider to insider.

If you were lucky enough to gain an insider's perspective through some legitimate peripheral participation before taking on your official responsibilities, did it happen by chance or was it purposeful? What role does your board currently take?

The best type of leadership is purposeful. Being purposeful in this instance is having a plan and knowing the "why" behind it. ■

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