

BULLETIN BOARD

Board Members as Bargainers: Should They Sit at the Table?

For years, when it came to school governance, conventional wisdom dictated that school board members should largely avoid becoming part of the labor negotiation process. Traditionally, the board's role was seen as that of a gatekeeper—providing an objective, level-headed review concerning the merits of the proposals while always keeping the best interests of the entire district in mind. Many also believe that a certain amount of separation should always exist between board members and district employees in order to reduce the chances that the board's decision making ability might be compromised by things that occur at the bargaining table. This opinion, however, is not shared by everyone and there are more than a few examples of districts where board members play an active role in the negotiation process.

It goes without saying that every school district has its own unique set of challenges, concerns and political dynamics. As such, there are situations where having a board member at the bargaining table is not only helpful, but almost necessary. Trust between negotiation teams is an extremely important factor with respect to establishing an amicable process and ultimately reaching an agreement that is as reasonable, and balanced as possible. If a particular school board member has the desire to become involved, as well as the political capital to not only be listened to, but heard by the other side, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibility; especially if no other member of the bargaining team can fill the same role as effectively.

While some negotiators are becoming more comfortable with the idea of having a board member sit at the bargaining table, there is still a fairly universal consensus that the entire board should not be involved. Naturally, it is up to each district to determine for itself whether or not direct board involvement in labor negotiations would be a net benefit, but it should always be limited to a number that will never constitute a quorum. Arguably, tentative agreements passed by a quorum of board members are in fact ratified agreements binding the district to the agreement immediately. Moreover, adding perhaps as many as seven additional individuals to a process that may already involve anywhere from five to 10 people is usually counterproductive, for obvious reasons.

Ultimately, every school district must assemble a bargaining team that not only understands the goals of the district, but is effective at negotiating responsible labor agreements that incorporate those goals. The idea of involving board members in the negotiation process remains uncomfortable for many; however, the notion need not be dismissed out-of-hand. Sometimes the right board member, in the right situation, can make a lot of difference at the bargaining table.

