INTRODUCTION

Begin with a Commitment

Our schools have a proud and exciting history. No other nation has worked so hard and so unselfishly to provide citizens with the opportunity to secure an education. The effort has been successful. Our people have been able to develop and live successfully in a complex technological civilization. While the success of our schools has been due to many factors, school board members have played a substantial and vital part in that success. And it's been the school boards that have determined the curriculum, allocated the resources, and employed the people to work in our schools.

The success that our schools have enjoyed, however, has not occurred without work, dedication and, of even greater importance, an intense commitment to the essential ideal of the common school. That fundamental ideal is that education must be for everyone and that education has value not only for making a living, but also for living well. The ideal makes clear that no one may be excluded from the opportunity for an education and that the better the education, the better the citizen. Our concept of democratic government is built upon that simple but basic fact.

It has not always been easy. Sometimes, our society has been preoccupied with other concerns that it felt to be much more important than schools and the education of people. There have been recessions, depressions, wars, and other national crises. At these times, our people may have lost sight of the importance of education.

There have been continuing quarrels about who should be educated, when they should be educated, and even where they should be educated. There have been great arguments about what people should be taught. These arguments continue. And, sometimes, we have confused education and training by behaving as if the simple training of young people were sufficient. All of these things have obscured the educational ideal from time to time. It is quite likely that these same concerns, as well as others that we have not yet dreamed of, will face us in future years, just as they have throughout our history.

Yet, through all the trial and turmoil, school boards have, for the most part, maintained the educational dream as part of their vision. While that vision may not have always been as clear as it might have been and while their resolve sometimes wavered, most school boards have provided citizens with the leadership that has promoted education in a continuous, forceful, and effective way.

This is an ideal time to give some thought to your work as a citizen educator. As you do so, perhaps you will want to give some attention to the following guidelines. They should be the basis for your own commitment to the educational dream.

School board members should be advocates of education. They must work to help others understand the purpose and the meaning of education and see the value of education as well. Being

an advocate of education instead of a critic is not easy. Education has many more critics than advocates. But if school board members are not advocates for education, who will be?

Dedicated school board members place the learner foremost in all their decisions, and they seek to have the schools develop the individuality of human beings. They strive to prevent their own personal biases from interfering with teaching and learning. They temper their decisions and actions with the needs of others as well as their own ideas and concerns.

Committed school board members work to achieve excellence in the schools. They have the courage to recognize both the weaknesses and the strengths of the schools, regardless of what others may say and do. They work to change the schools in ways that are based upon research and the priorities and practical experience of others. Committed school board members have pride in the schools. While they know that schools can and must be improved, board members are also aware that the schools already have great strength. They work to help citizens feel the same sense of pride in the schools that board members feel.

Finally, committed school board members exercise their stewardship responsibility by seeking to make efficient and worthwhile use of the human and financial resources that are available for the use of the schools. Successful school board members know that, periodically, they must review their work and recommit themselves to quality schools and educational excellence for young people.

While they know that excellence might be accomplished at any time, they know that the start of a new year of service on the board is an appropriate occasion to recommit themselves to the most basic ideals of the schools. It's the extension of idealism from the past into the future that will help us make education for all a reality, rather than only a dream.

Following are readings selected from The Board, a program of inservice for school board members, published by The MASTER Teacher, Inc. Each reading is accompanied by a Personal Learning Journal, which gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on the information and how it can best be used to improve the education of young people. The School Board Member's Pledge, at the close of this book, provides a formal observance of the responsibility accepted by board members.

The MASTER Teacher congratulates you on your election to the school board and wishes you well as you lead your district. Please feel free to contact us if there is any way in which we can be of service to you.

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CHAPTER 1

Six Guidelines for Responsible Board Service

When we join the board of education, we want to be successful. In truth, however, we may not really understand the full scope of the job. There are six rules adapted from the world of business that are well worth considering by anyone who is interested in further understanding and enhancing his or her role as a board member. These guidelines can serve us well.*

It is a simple but profound truth: A board of education does not manage the schools.

Rule 1: A board exists to give counsel, make judgments, and oversee the commitment and use of the resources available to the school system. Though this rule is broad, it is useful. All of us ought to check every activity in which we are engaged as board members. Does our involvement in the activity comply with this first rule? If it doesn't, we are probably impinging upon the management responsibility of the chief administrator.

Rule 2: A board of education is responsible for assessing and, if necessary, replacing top management. This is perhaps the single most important responsibility of the board. A board's evaluation of the chief administrator should be ongoing. The purpose shouldn't be to find fault, but to offer constructive criticism and support. However, in the infrequent case when dismissal is warranted, board members should act with resolve.

Rule 3: A board does not manage the organization. Sometimes, both the public and we find this rule hard to understand when we

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apply it to a school system. After all, the board of education is shown at the top of the organizational chart—just like the board of directors of a business. But the reality is that a board of education usually does not meet more than a couple times each month. Any governing body that gets together that infrequently cannot manage a school system. The school board governs the schools. It is the policymaker. The chief executive—the superintendent—is responsible for carrying out board policy and managing the schools.

A board must ensure the long-term survival of the school system.

Rule 4: A board is responsible for ensuring the long-term survival of the school system. A board member must be cognizant of the many forces that affect the welfare of the school. These include social, economic, political, and historical forces. The board must identify them and then analyze and evaluate their implications. Administrators and teachers come and go, and changes occur frequently in the system. The board must persevere and remain dedicated to maintaining the validity and renewal of the schools.

Rule 5: A board exists to represent the state and act in the public interest. This rule is often difficult for us to adhere to. We sometimes confuse the public interests of articulate and forceful individuals, special interest groups, or school employees. Too often, we put these forces ahead of public interest. Perhaps we ought to restate the rule in clearer terms: The board acts to maximize the educational value of the school for all students, regardless of race, creed, color, sex, ability, or socioeconomic circumstances.

Rule 6: A board does not set strategy. While a board may, indeed, be instrumental in establishing goals and directions, the strategy for achieving them is the province of management. Once a board becomes bogged down in developing strategy, it has abdicated its responsibility—and power—to evaluate alternatives. Never forget, a board sets policy. However, when it also attempts to set strategy, it takes that responsibility from administrators—the ones responsible for implementation. This is a guarantee of failure, for two reasons. First, administrators who must implement strategy are the ones most qualified to devise it. Second, when a board sets policy and strategy—and a project or plan fails—the board must bear total responsibility for the failure. While a board must see that

strategy is developed, explained, and defined, it must not set strategy unless it wants to build failure into almost every undertaking.

The successful board member knows that the board's function is to govern, not to manage.

A board of education must be careful that it does not lock itself into the business-industrial management style, and for good reason. School board members have responsibilities that go far beyond those of their private sector counterparts. Nevertheless, the six rules listed here, which are guidelines by which the most effective corporate boards function, are well worth our own observance. In truth, they are as valid for education as they are for business and industry.

The experienced and successful school board member knows that for a board to function effectively, it must govern. It cannot govern if it is always involved in the management aspect of running the schools. That is why the successful board member observes the do's and don'ts of acting responsibly while serving on the board of education. And the wise board member helps his or her colleagues understand the importance of abiding by these rules.

*Guidelines adapted from D. L. Whisler.

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