Ten myths of school board service
by Sandi Barry and Terry McCabe

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Each election year, citizens decide to run for their local school board and some approach the job with preconceived ideas of what the job will be and what they want to accomplish on the board. Among those ideas are some persistent myths that veteran board members have learned are just not true.

Myth #1: I can speak and write as a private citizen about school issues. Be very careful if you think you can continue to speak or write as a private citizen on school issues once you are a board member. Even if you just sign a letter to the editor or an opinion piece with your name and town address (usually required for publication) the news media will pick up on who you are.

Your district may have a policy that outlines who may speak for the board. Usually that is the board president, but it can be a board member who has been designated because of expertise in a certain area. If you are saying anything that borders on slander of a staff member, you may be liable.

Myth #2: I can stay involved with school related groups. You may think you’ll be a great reference for them, but it may inhibit interaction in the group. You’re not just one of them anymore: you’re a board member. Let them know you’ll advocate for them, but you don’t want to do the work of staff.

This also can become an issue of intimidation. Check with your board president regarding any potential issues of conflict.

When you’re a board member and a parent, however, your parent hat always should come first. There’s no reason you can’t volunteer in your third-grade student’s classroom if you’ve always been the one to help with cutouts and copying for the teacher. Just be sensitive to larger issues and let someone else “carry the water.”

Myth #3: No more 7-0 votes! I am here to “rock the boat!” As long as they are reached independently, is there really anything wrong with a 7-0 vote? Of course not. Look at the process by which you reach a unanimous vote. Many boards have two or three readings on policies before adoption, which is plenty of time to make suggestions and changes.

So how do you convey your reasoning behind 7-0 votes? You can recap the process by which you reached your decision: “This item was vetted in committee and this was the recommendation.” Try to engage the vocal minority voices in your community to diffuse the possibility of an issue “going viral” with misinformation.

Also remember, even if the vote is split, the board should stand together on the decisions that are made for the district.

Myth #4: I have a mandate from the voters! We hear this often. A board member had support from a group to gain election and then six months down the road a call comes from the leader of that group asking why the board member “hasn’t done anything” regarding a specific issue.
It's easy to be vocal during a contested campaign and often said that candidates campaign in poetry but govern in prose.

Learn how to count. One member on a seven-person board is not a majority. Always do the math regarding the number of calls received versus the number of students affected by the issue. Your real mandate is to do what is best for all the children in the district.

**Myth #5: As a former teacher (or other role) I know exactly how the school system operates.** The learning curve for being a school board member is more like a steep grade, especially when it comes to understanding laws and finance.

Yes, you do bring an expertise to the board that has value, but you need to understand what your new role is. We knew a teacher/union president who ran for the board in order to get the superintendent fired. That person finally let go of the issues that came with being a union representative when she realized what the board was doing for children.

If you have difficulty understanding your new role as a board member, talk with your board president, superintendent or someone from your state school board association to gain clarity.

**Myth #6: I don’t need to read or attend training to understand the issues.** Continuous learning is important. At one of our trainings, we met a woman who had been on a school board for eight to 10 years — she was the epitome of experience. She relinquished her seat on the board for a few years but missed it, so she got re-elected. We saw her at a new board member training session, and she said she knew she had more to learn and that things can change quickly, especially with laws and finance.

Find out what your association has to offer in terms of professional development. If others on your board are the ones resistant to training, report out what you have learned and lead by example. Ask someone to go with you the next time and tell them: We need to model continuous improvement for our teachers and staff.

Your board meeting packets are another area that needs to be read and understood. If you're not doing your homework, it slows things down at the meeting.

**Myth #7: I have all the new ideas!** New board members do provide fresh blood and a new sense of purpose for district work. But, please, be respectful of experience that your veteran board members provide. School districts have a collective history just as do communities. An orientation program that includes a component of district history (facilities, redistricting, busing, etc.) can help inform new board members so they can get up to speed.

**Myth #8: School staff can say “No” to my requests.** Often staff members are intimidated by board members. Be sure to use the chain of command for any requests, or you risk putting staff in an awkward position. They may think they could lose their job if they don’t comply with your request.

Remember, it’s not your job to direct day-to-day operations. The authority conferred on you by being a board member rests with the board as seven members sit to deliberate and vote. As an individual, outside of the meeting room, a board member does not have authority.

**Myth #9: School board service is my full-time job.** It may seem like that sometimes — especially at budget time. But you need to find that often delicate balance between your board/district life and your personal/family/professional life.

If you find yourself operating at helicopter level with policies that direct administration, you need to step back and start working at the board level. Revisit information you might have received regarding your role as a school board member!
Myth #10: I’m the only one “in it” for the kids. Give your fellow board members the benefit of the doubt. In their way, they are “in it” for the kids, too. Each of us may express that in a different way.

When we ask board members, they have plenty of “myths” of their own, including:

• We can do whatever we want regardless of the law.

• Being on the board will give me the power to change … .

• Best of intentions aren’t always visible.

• It’s gonna be easy!

• I can advocate for my child.

• The community is going to support the board.

• Coming to a training conference is a vacation!