



New Hampshire School Boards Association
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Effective School Board Meetings

A. Establishing Goals of the Board Meeting:

A1. General Concepts.

Effective meetings will not simply happen. They require forethought about the order in which issues should be discussed, the amount of time that will be needed to adequately discuss an issue, the information that the board members will need to receive prior to the meeting, and the proper wording of motions or resolutions that are being considered by the board.

New Hampshire law defines the primary functions and responsibilities for school boards. Generally, they include:

1. Establishing policy (Ed 302; Ed 306; bullying; truancy; etc.)
2. Setting a district budget and related fiscal oversight (Ed 303; RSA 32)
3. Hiring and evaluating the superintendent (Ed 303; RSA 194-C)
4. Occasional hearings (discipline, non-renewal, grievance, etc.)
5. Collective bargaining (RSA 273-A)
6. Strategic planning and establishing long-term and short-term goals (Ed 303.01(g))

Have the agenda relate to these board functions; and if the agenda relates to these items, it follows that the goal of each meeting should relate to these functions, as well.

A2. Desired Outcomes:

What are the board's desired outcomes for each meeting?

What are the administration's desired outcomes for each meeting?

For example, if the desired outcome is to adopt a recommendation, the meeting should be designed so there is a proposal, followed by discussion and a vote. To plan an effective agenda, it's essential that the board and administration know their respective desired outcomes.

B. Agenda-setting:

B1. Initial Planning.

The agenda and pre-meeting planning are keys to successful meetings. Set the order in which items will be handled during the board meeting. Create a pace for the board to do business. Allow board members time to study and think about complex or controversial matters before the meeting.

Agenda may include:

1. **Action items** on which the board is expected to reach a decision during the meeting;
2. **Consent items** addressing the routine matters, such as minutes and monthly expenses, which can be approved together without discussion;
3. **Discussion items** that require comment but do not require action; and
4. **Information items** that require no action or discussion.

B2. Consent Agenda.

The consent agenda should include only non-controversial items, such as adoption of the minutes, receipt of reports, general information and items that don't require any specific board discussion or board action. The consent agenda allows for all the reports to be received with one motion.

Any member can request that an item be removed from the consent agenda and placed on the regular agenda for consideration and vote. The remaining consent-agenda items are then unanimously approved as a unit without discussion.

B3. New Business:

Most work in a meeting is accomplished during the time slot devoted to “new business.”

Reminder:

As discussed above, a school board's primary roles and responsibilities are listed above. The “new business” listed on the agenda should relate to these board functions.

Your agenda may want to include an “anticipated action” for each agenda item. Examples:

1. Finance Committee report, brief questions and answers: no action needed.
2. Volunteer recruitment and philosophy: Anticipated Action: form committee of 3-4 board members.
3. Public Policy Committee: Anticipated Action: approve organizational statement to city council on zone changes.
4. Review and adoption of Policies ABC and XYZ.

Reminder:

Keeping with the concept that no surprises should come to light at a board meeting, “new business” is not the place for board members to surprise the rest of the board and administration with previously unannounced agenda items or topics.

B4. Sticking to the Business of the Agenda:

Of course, all the planning in the world will mean nothing if you can't then use that planning to run a smooth, productive meeting.

1. Stick to the agenda. Stay focused on your desired outcomes by using an agenda. If you're using a timed agenda, stay on track by ending each item on time.

2. Have an endpoint. Similarly, to avoid unproductive tangents and circular discussions, establish an end time in advance—and adjourn the meeting when you reach it.

3. Preempt debate. Resolve non-controversial items through “general consent” or “unanimous consent.” The board chair asks if there is any objection closing discussion on a particular topic. If no one objects, debate is closed. If a member objects, the board can resolve the matter with a motion and vote.

4. Start on time and stay on task. District administrators, staff and others asked to attend board meetings should understand when meetings begin and that they will always begin on time. Parliamentary procedure can help as board members move through the agenda. Certain situations and topics will cause meetings to go much longer than normal. This is to be expected, but should be the exception rather than the rule.

5. Organize the meeting to minimize disruption and delay. Issues that will require lengthy debate and discussion should be tackled at the beginning of the meeting, when board members are fresh, and should be limited in number during a single meeting, if possible.

C. Public Comments:

Some boards adopt a highly restrictive policy requiring that individuals wishing to address the board sign up several days before the meeting and be placed on the agenda. Other boards allow members to sign up the night of the meeting. There are some boards that allow the public to speak on any item on the agenda at an appropriate time.

C1. Preparing for Public Input:

It is important to remember that the meeting is a gathering of the board of education that the public has a right to attend, rather than a meeting where everyone is given the same rights as board members regarding participation. Extremely flexible rules could lead to a situation where the public takes over a meeting. Extremely restrictive rules could be so inflexible that the public might have little or no input. Some recommendations include:

1. A specific portion of the meeting agenda, not to exceed 15-30 minutes, shall be set aside to allow comments by members of the public. Boards may choose to set aside more or less than and include a provision that the time may be extended by vote of the board. If there is a volatile issue, more time may be required or the board may choose to have an additional meeting on the topic.
2. Individuals desiring to address the board must sign up prior to the meeting and indicate the subject that they wish to address to the board. Some boards adopt policies requiring individuals to sign up several days before the meeting. Other boards allow members to sign up the night of the meeting. Some boards allow the public to speak on any item, even if it's not on the agenda. Allowing someone to speak without knowing his or her topic is risky and should be discouraged.
3. Complaints about personnel will not be heard. Individuals are expected to contact the superintendent, members of the administrative staff or local administrators to secure a satisfactory solution to any concern.

4. Individuals should be as brief as possible, limiting their comments to no more than five minutes, unless the board votes to extend. The board may choose to establish a different time limit at each session, depending on the number of people who desire to speak. Groups should be encouraged to select a single spokesperson.

5. Board members will not respond to comments or questions posed by citizens during their presentation but will take any comments or questions under advisement. While this guideline should not totally prohibit responses, it is not a good idea to get into extended discussions with the public until the board and Superintendent have had a chance to gather necessary information.

6. The board chair is responsible for clearly communicating to the public attending the meeting what the board's policy is on public input, that the board cannot vote on comments made to the board during input sessions or that the board won't make comments about the presentations.

C2. Tips on Managing Public Comment:

1. Place controversial issues early on the agenda;
2. Have sufficient copies of the agenda and summary of reports for the public;
3. Use language the audience can understand – avoid jargon;
4. Never argue or engage members of the public in debate;
5. Have copies of your “public comments” policy to distribute; and
6. Read the policy before comments are allowed (or at least summarize it before comments are allowed)

D. Parliamentary Procedure:

Basic provisions of parliamentary procedure may include:

1. Each motion may deal with only one issue or idea.
2. Debate should follow, not precede, a motion.
3. Debate must be limited to the motion at hand.
4. When a motion is on the floor, no new motions may be made.
5. No member can speak twice on the same issue under debate until everyone else wishing to speak as spoken to it once.
6. Formality imposed by strict adherence to rules of order does not necessarily apply to small legislative bodies.
6. Board chairs should vote on every issue.
7. People have a right to know beforehand what they will be discussing.
8. Public meeting does not mean unlimited public participation.

D1. Motions for Reconsideration

NHSBA receives many inquiries about motions for reconsideration and the specifics of Robert's Rules of Order. Robert's Rules of Order provides very specific and very restrictive conditions when a motion for reconsideration is or should be allowed, primarily that such a motion must be made at the same meeting as the original motion and must be made by a board member who voted in the majority on the original motion.

NHSBA advises that school boards do not follow these rigid and restrictive rules. However, at the same time, NHSBA advises that school boards limit their practice of reconsidering issues that the board has already voted on and acted upon.

There may be legitimate times when reconsidering past board action is necessary – a new statute or administrative rule is implemented; a certain program is not effective; unanticipated financial changes occur. In these circumstances, it may be prudent to reconsider previous board actions.

However, reconsideration should not be used as a tool for political gain. A change in board membership may change the board’s priorities – which is fine. But constant doing and undoing can render a school board ineffective and undermine public trust.

D2. Abstaining from Voting on a Motion

Abstentions are not votes. Only the number of votes cast is counted in determining a majority or two-thirds vote. For example, if a school board has five members and a motion receives two yes votes, one no vote, and two board members abstain, the motion passes.

NHSBA advises that school board members do not abstain unless a conflict of interest or bias/prejudice issue is present. If board members feel they do not have enough information, knowledge or resources to support the motion, then they should vote against the motion.

E. Role of the Board Chair

The board chair is responsible for enforcing the procedures that they have adopted.

Guide the flow to discussions at meetings:

1. Do not take sides. You must be impartial while chairing the meeting.
2. Recognize all who have comments or questions.
3. Keep the group on the topic.
4. Clarify questions. Restate them so that everyone understands. Do not make long speeches.
5. Practice the art of summarization. Clarify and restate motions.
6. Keep order in the discussion and be alert to members' reactions.

Manage discussion. Set the discussion time prior to addressing potentially lengthy issues: “Is there a motion to limit total debate to 30 minutes?” And encourage new discussion—and prevent repetition—by asking for speakers who have not spoken.

Alternate pro and con. After hearing from a proponent, ask if there anyone who wishes to speak against the motion. When no one wishes to speak on a particular side, ask for unanimous consent to end debate: “Is there any objection to closing discussion? Hearing no objection, discussion is closed.” If people from both sides do continue to speak, pay attention to the length and quality of their remarks. When the discussion seems to have reached the point of repetition, ask for a motion to end discussion: “Is there a motion to close debate?”

Encourage and equalize participation. A single person may monopolize discussion at meetings. For example, no one should speak a second time while there are members who wish to speak for the first time.

Control interruptions and digressions. A good board chair might acknowledge a tangential issue that has been raised, but note that it's not relevant to the discussion and should be taken up later. If a member attempts to monopolize discussion, you may have to nicely state that because the member has already spoken, other opinions are needed.

Manage conflict. During meetings, members should never get into an argument—or even a direct discussion—with each other. If a confrontation begins between two members, your board chair should remind everyone to address all remarks to the chair.

End on a positive note. Thanking members for their time is not only gracious, but also likely will result in greater enthusiasm for the board's work. And that in turn can lead to even better meetings.

F. Pertinent NHSBA Sample Policies:

- BBAB – Roles and Duties of the Board Chairperson
- BCB – Board Member Conflict of Interest
- BEA – Regular Board Meetings
- BEDB – Agenda Preparation and Dissemination
- BEDD – Rules of Order
- BEDH – Public Participation at Board Meetings
- KE, KEB – Public Complaints; Complaints About School Personnel