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Effective School Board Meetings

A. Establishing Goals of the Board Meeting:

Effective and productive meetings do 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 board members will need to receive prior to the meeting, and the proper wording of motions or resolutions to be considered by the board. Meeting goals and agenda items should relate to one or more of a school board's responsibilities or functions.

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.

B2. Desired Outcomes.

What are the board's desired outcomes for the meeting? Generally there will be more than one desired outcome for a meeting, but frequently there is an urgent item that takes priority over all others. In those instances, the agenda should be prepared to assure that ample time is left for the required business, with non-essential items left to another day.

What are the desired outcomes for each For each agenda item? For example, if the desired outcome on an agenda item is to adopt a recommendation, the meeting should be designed so there is a proposal, followed by discussion and a vote.

B3. Agenda Categories.

Agenda categories help identify the objective for each agenda item. Sample agenda categories include:

- a. **Action items** on which the board is expected to reach a decision during the meeting;

- b. **Consent items** addressing the routine matters, such as minutes and monthly expenses, which can be approved together without discussion;
- c. **Discussion items** that require comment but do not require action; and
- d. **Information items** that require no action or discussion.

When setting the agenda, identify what category each agenda item falls within. Consider whether to include notations for each item. Examples:

- a. Finance Committee report. Discussion item. No action needed.
- b. Volunteer recruitment and philosophy: Anticipated Action: form committee of 3-4 board members.
- c. Public Policy Committee: Anticipated Action: approve organizational statement to city council on zone changes.
- d. Second reading of policies ABC & XYZ. Anticipated action: Review and adopt.
- e. Presentation by 5th grade social studies class. Information item. No action required.

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.

For further information re Consent Agendas, see article "Dos and Don'ts of Consent Agendas" at pp. 9-10, below.

B3. 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.

- a. 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.
- b. 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.

- c. Preempt inefficient 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.
- d. 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. *Some boards will include notations on the agenda for allotted time for an item. E.g., “Second reading of policies ABC & XYZ. Anticipated action: Review and adopt. 15 minutes.*
- e. 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, when possible, limited in number for each meeting.

C. Public Comments:

It is a long standing and important tradition in New Hampshire that local governments allow some form of public comment at regular school board meetings. Unlike a district's annual meeting, or a required public hearing, which is a meeting of the public, a school board meeting is just that, a meeting of the school board. While it is a meeting at which the public has a right under the State Constitution and RSA 91-A to attend, it is not a meeting at which the public has an absolute right to speak. Rather, it is generally a matter of local board policy as to the bounds and parameters that the public's opportunity to speak are established. The scope of such policies is broad: ranging from allowance for free and unfettered comment, to well defined public comment rules, to boards that do not allow public comment at all.

NHSBA believes that the best practice is in the middle. Extremely flexible or absence of rules can lead to significant problems for a school board. Most importantly, a lack of any standards or rules can arguably create a designated "public forum" for First Amendment purposes. This could result in a situation where a single member of the public takes over a meeting. Without any standing rules regarding subject matter, length of time, etc., the board could create a situation where it is risky to try to stop the person from speaking lest a claim arise that the board was intervening because of the content of the speech. On the other hand, extremely restrictive rules could be so inflexible that the public might have little or no input, resulting in discontent voters, and claims that the board is non-responsive to its constituents. NHSBA typically recommends allowing public comment on agenda items, and a formal policy clearly establishing the guidelines and parameters of the public comment period.

C1. Public comment standards to consider:

- a. A rule limiting comment to matters on the agenda. The public comment policy should clearly identify the other avenues that members of the public have to communicate with the board and or the administration.
- b. A specific portion of the meeting agenda, not to exceed [___] minutes is set aside to allow comments by members of the public. As needs change meeting to meeting, a board may choose to set aside more or less than the standing policy states, but it should only do so before speakers begin, and not in mid-meeting. If there is a volatile issue,

more time may be required or the board may choose to have an additional meeting on the topic.

- c. A set amount of time for each speaker (on all issues, or on each issue). Such an objective provision taken with the preceding suggestion, together allow a board to most safely manage the board's meetings without fear of inadvertently impinging upon First Amendment rights. Guidelines should encourage individuals to be as brief as possible, and that groups assign a single spokesperson.
- d. Create a sign-up protocol such that persons wishing to speak sign-up before the meeting starts. Some boards adopt policies requiring individuals to sign up several days before, while others have a sign-in sheet available some set amount of time on the night of the meeting. Boards may also consider whether the sign-in sheet requires identification of the issue (agenda or not) upon which the person desires to speak.
- e. Non-agenda comments about specific personnel or students will not be heard. Under the First Amendment, a board is absolutely prohibited from engaging in "viewpoint discrimination". Accordingly, should a board allow comments commending or praising an individual employee or student, it may be difficult to then limit someone's negative comments or complaints. This would not prohibit such things as agenda items under which a school employee or board member recognizes accomplishments of individual students or employees. *The board should have ready access to the board policies addressing complaints or complaints about individuals. NHSBA's sample policies are KE and KED respectively.* Should a member of the public begin to discuss such a complaint, the board chair should redirect any such comments to the superintendent, members of the administrative staff or local administrators to explore/investigate the background and secure a satisfactory solution to any concern.
- f. Board members refrain from responding contemporaneously, if at all, directly to comments or questions posed by citizens during their presentation. While this guideline should not totally prohibit board responses, premature or impromptu responses can suggest official action or position before the full board or administration have addressed an issue. Remember that no single board member can speak on behalf of the board, and while individual board members do not lose their right to speak publicly as individuals, while sitting at the board table, they are not acting as individuals. The recommended practice is for the board to take comments or questions under advisement, with appropriate referral to personnel in attendance (e.g., ask the superintendent to look into an issue raised).

NOTE: It is imperative that a board enforce its rules fairly and without regard to a speaker's message. While strict adherence to a time limit might not be necessary, trying to impose it on a member of the public who speaks in opposition of a board policy, while allowing a member of the public 10 minutes to speak in favor of it could lead to charges of viewpoint discrimination.

C2. Additional Tips for Managing Public Comment:

- a. Have copies of your “public comments” policy to distribute (some boards print them on the back/as part of each agenda);
- b. Place controversial issues early on the agenda;
- c. Have sufficient copies of the agenda, summary of reports;
- d. Use language the audience can understand – avoid jargon;
- e. Never argue or engage members of the public in debate;
- f. Read or summarize the policy at the start of the meeting, or 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 has 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 should know beforehand what they will be discussing.
8. Public meeting does not mean 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 the board has adopted, and to guide the flow of agenda items, discussions on the same and formal board votes:

1. As the moderator of debate, the chair should consider withholding his/her position until after others have spoken.
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, including future 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; Public Complaints About School Personnel, Employees, Students or Administration

NHSBA Sample Rules of Order: Policy Manual BEDD-R

1. The chair will use the following general rules of order. The intent of these rules of order is to keep the meeting efficient, understandable, and free of procedural quagmires. The chair **will not** follow the formal Robert’s Rules of Order.

2. By majority vote, the school board can overrule any decision that the chair makes, including any rule that the chair establishes. A board member can raise such a request by a “Point of Order.”
3. The Moderator will take the agenda in the order that it was presented, unless the school board, by majority vote, chooses to take agenda items in a different order.
4. Everyone who speaks must do so in a manner in which he or she can be heard.
5. No one may speak unless he or she has been recognized by the chair. A board member may interrupt only to state a “Point of Order.” The chair will then recognize the member for the limited purpose of stating the point of order.
6. Individuals speaking during a public comments portion of a meeting are asked to state their name and address. All public comments should be directed to the chair.
7. The chair will allow only one motion and only one proposed amendment to the main motion on the floor at a time. Exceptions may be made for the limited purpose of resolving a “Point of Order.”
8. The chair will not accept negative motions, which are motions that require a “no” vote to cast a vote in the affirmative such as: “I move that we not adopt the budget.”
9. All speakers must be courteous and must speak to the issues, not the individuals raising them. All comments and questions will be directed only to the chair. The chair will decide whether to recognize another board member or staff member to respond. The chair will not allow personal attacks or inappropriate language.
10. If any person disrupts the orderly conduct of a meeting, behaves in a disorderly manner, makes unlawful threats, in any other way disturbs the meeting, or willfully violates any rule of order, and after notice from the chair to cease, persists in such behavior, the chair may have a police officer remove such person from the meeting.
11. Each board member may only speak once until every board member has had an opportunity to speak once.
12. Recorded roll call votes will be taken when required by law, upon the request of two or more board members, and when called for by the chair.

THE DOs AND DON'Ts OF CONSENT AGENDAS

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Highly functional boards know that board time is a precious commodity that shouldn't be squandered. A tool that many boards utilize to make their meetings more efficient and productive is a consent agenda—also called a consent calendar.

The consent agenda groups perfunctory, but nonetheless important, items into one agenda item, speeding up the meeting and creating time for more critical issues and previously undiscussed matters. It can either be included as part of the regular agenda or as its own separate agenda. Either way, it is approved in one action and by one vote by the board, rather than requiring motions to be filed on each individual item.

What goes on a consent agenda? The items are typically routine and non-controversial, or matters the board has achieved consensus on after previous discussion. Generally, topics that have not been discussed by the board in the past should not be put on the consent agenda. The board chair prepares the consent agenda, usually in consultation with the executive director. Consent agenda items typically include:

- Committee and previous board meeting minutes;
- Office or committee reports;
- Routine correspondence that require no action;
- Minor changes in a policy or procedure (e.g., for purposes of clarity or to update without changing intent or meaning);
- ...*
- Updating documents, such as minutes, reports or role descriptions;
- Standard contracts that are used regularly (e.g., confirmation of using the traditional in-house contract with a new vendor);
- ...*
- Final approval of proposals or reports that have been fully discussed and vetted at past meetings;
- Reports provided for information only.

At the meeting, the board chair should first ask members if they wish to move any consent agenda items to the regular agenda for further discussion. This is essential as members should be able to make such a request for any reason. If requested, the board chair would move the item and open it up for discussion during the regular agenda, or make it a “parking lot” item for future debate. Ideally, board members should ask for such a move before the meeting so it can be placed on the regular agenda before the meeting starts. After any items have been moved and the consent agenda is set, the board chair recites the items on the consent agenda and moves to adopt it.

Transparency and accountability are the foundations of successfully employing consent agendas. Even though they are routine and non-controversial items, it is imperative that all supporting documents be provided and that board members fully review them in advance. Failing to provide

them can lead to mistrust. It's also worth noting that items on the consent agenda are still important and deserve board members' full attention—otherwise, they shouldn't be on the agenda at all.

Boards that effectively use a consent agenda will find that meetings are more productive, members are more engaged, and more time is available for strategic issues that require more debate and deliberation.

**Deleted as not pertinent to New Hampshire School Boards*