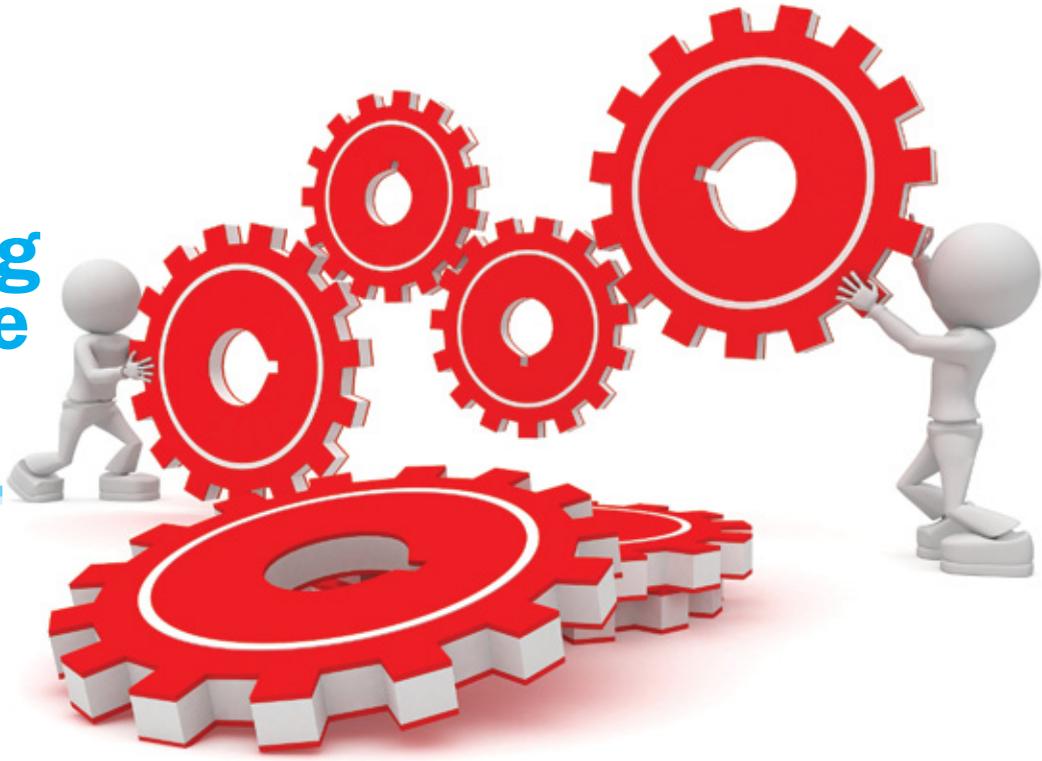


Building Knowledge and Trust



Welcoming new school board members in the Oconto Unified School District

SHELBY ANDERSON

When Sara Croney started as superintendent of the Oconto Unified School District, she noticed new school board members were having a hard time adjusting to the demands of serving on the board.

“We would have a new school board member and they wouldn’t last a year,” Croney remembers.

Since then, Croney and the school board president have worked hard to welcome and educate new board members. They have been developing and fine-tuning an orientation process that includes face-to-face meetings, information sharing, and even some homework for their new board members.

Through the face-to-face meetings, new school board members are educated on the district’s policies, abbreviations and acronyms, district strategic plan, district budgets, state

statutes, and much more. New board members also meet school principals and visit schools in the district. One of the most important outcomes of the orientation process, Croney says, is establishing a relationship with the new board member.

“It’s really about building trust,” Croney said. “It’s developing a relationship.”

Starting Out

In the first meeting with a new board member, Croney covers a wide variety of topics such as district policy and shares a number of resources covering board governance

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Handouts and worksheets used by Oconto Unified School District are at wasb.org. Select “Convention” then “Download Presenter Handouts” select “Get that New Board Member on Board - Fast.”

Additional materials for new board members can be found at wasb.org. Select “About WASB” and then “Basic Resources for School Board Members.”

topics, the revenue cap process, and common mistakes of new board members. Faced with all of this information, Croney says, new board members quickly realize, if they haven’t already, that serving on a school board is not easy.

In addition to covering a variety of topics, Croney leaves the new board member with homework for

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— **Sara Croney**, superintendent,
Oconto Unified School District

their next meeting. The homework is a packet of resources, including articles written by the board president, and other pieces such as “10 Things that Superintendents do that Drive Board Members Crazy” and the alternative “10 Things that School Board Members Do that Drive Superintendents Crazy.”

But before she covers this information, Croney says she takes the time to listen to the new board member.

“I start by asking what is his or her vision and goals for the school board,” Croney says. “Listening to them first is critical.”

Understanding the Job

In the second meeting, Croney and the new board member dig into the duties and details of serving on a school board. They go over the board packet for the next meeting, cover the district’s strategic plan, examine the district’s budget, and examine the role of the board versus the superintendent.

While there are a number of items school board members need to understand about the job, Croney says, one of the most important aspects is understanding the position.

“The board’s role is to take a bird’s eye of the school district. The nitty-gritty details are the staff’s and superintendent’s responsibility,” Croney said.

Croney has developed a worksheet that poses a number of different scenarios from hiring legal counsel to deciding which courses to cut to meet budget demands. The new board member indicates who has responsibility for each task – the board or the superintendent. Then Croney and the board member go over the different

scenarios. She says this activity has been very helpful in developing board members who understand their roles right out of the gate, “This is a crucial discussion.”

Serving on the Board

In the final orientation meeting, the new board member meets with the board president and covers details related to the meeting agenda, effective board governance, serving on committees and more.

“I try to help new members understand what it means to be a board member and what a good board member looks like,” says Diane Nichols, board president of the Oconto Unified School District.

Nichols says she usually takes the new board member out to lunch and discusses basics such as how to get items on a board agenda. She also provides a few articles on good board practices and gives some background information on current topics and issues the board is addressing.

Nichols says she knows serving on a board can be overwhelming at first.

“I know when I came on the school board it was at least two years before I completely understood things like revenue caps and the state aid formula,” she says.

Nichols says the meeting between the board president and new board member also provides an opportunity to let the new member know he or she can come to you with questions or concerns.

Important Process

Overall, Nichols says the orientation process is crucial to developing and maintaining a good board and is well worth the effort.



Rodell Singert,
Mukwonago
School Board,
30-years

ADVICE FOR NEW BOARD MEMBERS?

“Be interested and concerned about what goes on in your schools. Make visits to classrooms with the support of your principals and see how the school is working. The teachers will appreciate you being there and being interested.”

“I would recommend that you establish a learning and working relationship with every principal in the district.”

“Make a commitment to the school board. Try to make it to at least 90 percent of meetings and committee meetings.”

WHY DO YOU SERVE AS A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER?

“I was given the opportunity to receive an excellent education and I want to make sure our students have those same opportunities. Education is very important.”



Patricia Kerhin,
West Allis-West
Milwaukee School
Board, 20-years

ADVICE FOR NEW BOARD MEMBERS?

“Be a good listener.”

“Get informed. Visit your schools and administrators. Read your school district policy book. Attend WASB seminars.”

“Keep an open mind on issues until you’ve heard all sides of the story. Vote for what’s best for students.”

“Read, read, read!”

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM SERVING ON YOUR SCHOOL BOARD?

“Education is very complex. Changes don’t happen overnight. There are many restrictions that keep good ideas from becoming a reality in education. Board members need to network with other board members, legislators and community members to make meaningful change happen.” □



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“I think it’s one of those invisible needs,” she says. “I think it can be easy for experienced board members to forget how hard serving on the board can be at first.”

Crony estimates the whole orientation process takes about six to nine hours depending on how well versed new board members are on school board processes and issues. While this may sound like a steep time commitment, Crony says the benefits are worth the extra work. For a couple hours, she says, you develop a board member that understands board processes and governance basics.

“It all goes back to caring about your students,” Crony says. “You care enough about the students to want the best possible board members.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

Getting Up to Speed

A look at Oconto Unified School District’s orientation process for new school board members



MEETING ONE with superintendent

- District policies
- Common mistakes
- Honor Thy Board Team
- Open meetings law and walking quorum
- School visits and principals to meet
- Revenue cap worksheet
- Confidentiality
- Abbreviations and acronyms
- Special needs students, parents, and education
- Homework:
 - Identify district policies you’d like to discuss
 - Read articles: “Top 10 Things Superintendents Do that Drive Boards Crazy,” “Top 10 Things that Board Members Do that Drive Superintendents Crazy,” “The first year as a board member”
 - Review index of WI State Statutes applicable to education

MEETING TWO with superintendent

- Review homework from first meeting
- Go over board packet for next meeting
- Review district strategic plan
- Roles of the Board versus the Superintendent (checklist)
- Review district budgets – present and upcoming school years

MEETING THREE with superintendent

- Scenarios (worksheet)
- Whose responsibility is it? (worksheet)

MEETING FOUR with board president

- Discuss being an effective board member, board committees, and legalities
- Cover board meetings: agendas, public comments, public records, closed sessions, special meetings, Robert’s Rules, and evaluations
- Relationships and resources
- Suggested reading

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