



Every New Board Member Needs a Joe

WASB president urges school board members to serve as mentors

This month, new school board members will be taking the oath of office and starting terms on their local school boards. For veteran board members, election season can be a challenging time as new members may take seats once occupied by friends and allies.

However, new board members need to be accepted as equals if your district is to move forward. You may not agree with their opinions but you do need to treat them with respect. You must give them a chance to express their opinions and if they do not understand their role as a school board member, you need to become their mentors.

I know because I was lucky enough to have a mentor when I first came onto my board.

Stepping Forward

In December 1990, I heard that a school board member in my small K-8 school district was not going to run for re-election. Having been involved in some school task forces and been raised in a family that believed in community service – four generations of my family had served on their local boards of education dating back to 1868 – I felt it was my turn to step forward and serve my community.

Then, shortly after I filed my paperwork, the school board non-

renewed the district administrator and tried to demote a beloved principal. The February and March board meetings had to be held in the school gym because of the crowd of people wanting to know what was going on. Those of you that know me know I'm not shy about expressing my opinions and I did so at these meetings. There was a groundswell to bring in new school board members. Myself and another new candidate were elected in a landslide.

At my first board meeting, I was elected president not because of any leadership ability I had but rather in the hope that I would fail. I started my school board career as president of a very dysfunctional board with a bitter district administrator. Both professional staff and support staff contacts were in mediation and headed to arbitration (this was before the QEO law was passed). We were interviewing candidates to be our new district administrator and a teacher was arrested for improper contact with students – school morale was at an all-time low.

Considering these early challenges, you may be wondering how I am still a board member with this district 21 years later. The answer is one word – Joe.

Importance of a Mentor

Joe was a longtime member of the board and when he saw I had no

hidden agenda, he became my mentor. Joe had not always agreed with all that had gone on before the election and truly wanted the district to move forward and provide a quality education for our community's children.

He was one person I could trust to talk to about the direction the district was heading and how I could provide leadership in ensuring that the board of education was enhancing student achievement and not hindering it.

Those new school board members taking the oath of office for the first time this month all need someone like Joe. Better still, they need a full board of Joes.

In your district, you may have had an election as bitter as mine and a new member may have replaced someone you respected. But you must give the new member a chance. And if they do not understand their role as a school board member, you need to become their mentors. This, of course, will not be an easy task at times but if your wish is to raise student achievement and ensure every child in your district is successful, the full board must be rowing in the same direction. ■

Sherman, the 2012 WASB president, is vice-president of the Genoa City Joint 2 School Board and president of the Lake Geneva-Genoa City Union High School Board.

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