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ECASB

Erie County Association of School Boards

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Darci D'Ercole

ECASB Asks the Experts...

ECASB “Ask the Experts” is a monthly paper that brings ECASB and an expert in the field of education together to provide ECASB Board Members information about a variety of topics of interest to Board Members.

The Importance of a Board of Education Retreat

Darci D'Ercole is the Director of Leadership Development for NYSSBA.

What is the worst thing to happen at school board meetings that you attended? I will tell you one that sticks out in my memory. It was 9:00 p.m., the conversation was robust all evening long, but the board was wary after 3 hours. Suddenly, loud voices were heard over the surface conversation. This really bothered one board member.

“I won’t stand for this,” she said. She gathered up her things and sprang up from her chair. She headed to the door but paused for a moment to give her final “diva speech”. She declared she would be free from the mockery and announced she would quit the board! And then she was gone. Maybe she had planned this moment, but I thought her emotions took her by surprise.

School board service is often filled with intensity. Opinions vary, the stakes are high, and emotions run strong.

Inevitably, there is conflict on a board. When and where do board members get to address their concerns and gain the support needed to deal with the complex dynamics that many boards of education find themselves in?

Board development and especially board retreats are considered a standard of good practice. A retreat is perhaps the only opportunity that board members can step out of the public eye and speak freely to one another about what is working and what isn’t. Despite board members’ frequently cited roadblocks, such as a lack of interest, cost, time concerns, etc., most benefit from the experience. In some cases, we start what might be called a bad marriage, and we end up with what boards ought to be: a team.

Why invest the time and expense to hold a board retreat?

Board members tend to be busy professionals who juggle numerous responsibilities. Setting aside time to engage in a retreat may seem like a burden but investing the time in a retreat can help the board adopt a more collaborative approach to governance.

Having a board retreat with all members present is one of the best ways for board members to get to know each other and explore governance best practices, address group dynamics and team concerns, review and clarify roles and responsibilities, board operations, communication processes, community engagement, establishing expectations in trust and teambuilding, review evaluation procedures, and work towards developing unity. Retreat allow for focused dis-

cussion on these things without the obligation of having to do the business of the district. Here are some questions and answers.

How do I encourage my entire board to participate?

School board professional development is most impactful when the entire board is present. While there is no easy answer to this question, there are strategies that can be employed to help ensure that all board members will attend:

- Create an availability calendar that highlights common times during which all board members are available for a board retreat. Schedule accordingly. Retreats often take place in the evening or on the weekend. If time is still a concern, consider scheduling before or after a board meeting, when the board is already scheduled to be there.

- Invite the entire board and superintendent to participate in the planning process and focus on topics that are appealing and relevant to all.

- Utilize training platforms (virtual, online, recorded...) if not everyone can be there in person to encourage maximum participation.

When should a board hold a retreat?

Some boards schedule an annual retreat, and it is included in the board annual activities calendar. Knowing well in advance when the retreat will be held gives board members an opportunity to plan to participate. It's also important to hold a retreat when there are new members of the governance team. New board member? It's a whole new team. Hiring a new superintendent also means establishing new expectations in the board-superintendent relations. A board retreat can help make those transitions smoother. And investing in an annual board retreat helps even the most experienced veteran board and superintendent make a stronger leadership team.

Sometimes an issue arises that may need immediate intervention. For example, if board dysfunction or community discontent has escalated to a point that it is preventing the board from serving the students, then a board retreat may help to dive deep into the issues and provide an opportunity to bring all of the concerns to the table. All board members should be committed to participating in board development and include the superintendent who is, albeit a non voting member, still an integral part of the governance team.

How do we plan a board retreat?

Begin by speaking with your board president/vice president and superintendent to assess the board's needs and identify possible topics or issues to be addressed. It is likely that your superintendent (or district clerk) will have some suggestions to get started. Reach out to organizations that provide governance training, such as NYSSBA, your local SBA, COLSBA, your BOCES, or even your school attorney, for input on the services they can provide. Articulate the solutions that you are trying to solve and the proposed benefits for conducting a board retreat. Many superintendents will offer to facilitate the board retreat themselves but discuss with your fellow board members if there is a need for an independent third party, then identify the type of facilitator that would be a good fit for the board. The facilitator should work with the board president, superintendent and/or other designee to develop a customized agenda for the retreat. The facilitator may want to survey board members to get their input on board operations, what they hope to gain from the retreat, or conflicts that are inhibiting performance and trust. Except in unusual circumstances the superintendent should offer input into the plan and participate in the retreat as well.

How can I obtain more information about school board retreats and professional development?

NYSSBA's website, www.nyssba.org, is a great place to start. You can also contact Darci D'Ercole, Director of NYSSBA's Leadership Development department, at (518) 783-3764 for more information on all the ways NYSBA can serve your professional development needs.

Serving on a board can be at times quite challenging but most are called because intrinsically they know it is a rewarding experience as well. By engaging in a board retreat that is focused on the specific needs of the governance team, board members can be assured that their motivation is supported by best practices, strong and positive relationships, and sound decision-making processes.