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School board member, important role!

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The dust is settling now that another election season is over. With 45 school districts in DuPage County, there are dozens of both new and incumbent board members elected to multi-year terms. Soon, newly elected board members will take their oath of office and settle into their important role of serving their school district and community. Working as a team, knowing your role, thinking strategically, prioritizing agendas, supporting staff, etc. is not easy work. Let's look at some key principles and suggestions for board members that result in successful board governance:

1. Pay Attention to Feedback

There are always themes and trends from surveys, informal conversations and public input. Take time to be thoughtful, ask questions and filter one individual or group's request with that of the larger constituents.

2. Be Wary of Factions

Board slates typically add to conflict and dissension and do not result in a unified team approach and good governance. Also know that, with only 15% of DuPage voters participating in the most recent election, a slate, advocating for their specific issue or agenda, likely will not be representative of all residents.

3. Swear Off Hidden Agendas

Individual board members need to be clear and articulate what is important to them and where they stand. This is critical as the full board needs to work together as a team.

4. Don't Do Business in the Parking Lot

Work to avoid "the meeting" before the meeting or "the meeting" after the meeting.

These offline discussions will not contribute to a democratic spirit and will undermine the team approach.

5. Hold Opinions About Issues, Not People

If possible, work to stay focused on issues and programs and not a specific person's intelligence, character or performance.

6. Financial Scare Tactics May Be Misleading

In some DuPage communities, 90% of the tax base is residential. This results in a greater tax burden on homeowners to fund quality schools. Before making assumptions, take the time to understand the broader and complex school funding landscape in Illinois.

7. Remember, Decisions are Made by a Majority of the Board

Effective board service means being able to hold the minority viewpoint when voting on a given issue and then openly supporting the majority vote of the board in your community.

8. Adhere to the Practice of "No Surprises"

Work to ask questions, share information and resolve misunderstandings at the appropriate time and place.

9. Support the Administration

Recognize the difference between setting policy (the board's job) and administering schools (the superintendent's job).

10. Strive to Work as a Team

Fostering relationships, valuing others' opinions, building consensus and staying informed about emerging and ongoing issues are all important to being a team player.

Board governance on a local school board is important "ground level" democracy in action. Serving on a local school board also is hard, tedious, time consuming and sometimes stressful work. But a healthy functioning board that follows these principles will provide leadership that ensures a shared vision of public education, set high expectations for the education of all students and ensure fiscal stewardship.