

David Moscinski

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Unity among board members and administrators is important and can strengthen student performance. But when you search for how to achieve this harmony, look to yourself first



Is there strength in unity among school board members? Is unity important? Is it even possible? Can't there be honest differences of opinion?

Of course board members can differ in their beliefs and opinions. That is only natural. However, the key to board unity is that, once members have aired their differences, they are able to defer to others rather than defend their point of view to the death. One of my colleagues had a board member become so enraged during a meeting that he suffered a heart attack, put his head on the table, and died.

Of course, we all can think of less extreme examples, but there's no doubt that anger and other emotions can surface at board meetings. Emotion is fine as long as cooler heads prevail in governing the district.

As someone who looks at this from the administrative side as a superintendent, unity on the school board is important because of what I call the "top down, trickle down" effect. Board unity sets the tone for the district that can radiate throughout the school system. The media love

nothing better than to report a split decision on a crucial vote, with both sides insisting they are correct. ("Mr. Smith, what do you think of the members who supported closing the John Foster Dulles School?")

Most importantly, however, board unity is significant because of the positive impact it can have on student learning. The results of research conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards and NSBA's Center for Public Education have shown that school boards that consistently express the belief that all students can learn see higher student achievement.

What is the key to unity on the school board? What is the magical component that promotes unity? The answer is not what, but rather who. That who is you.

How we interact

Several years ago I attended a seminar focusing on how to deal with difficult people. The presenter set the tone in his opening comments. "Thank you for having the courage to attend this seminar. Right now, your staff members back

home are probably saying, "Thank goodness he's out of here today. That seminar may be just what he needs."

To me this observation was surprising, but I decided it was possible I had not learned to play well with others. Could others possibly see me as being the difficult person? I had to admit that one-half of a social interaction is determined by me, whether or not the interaction is seen as being difficult.

During my 40 years in education, I have observed that a meeting's outcome often is determined before the meeting even starts. Meetings require interaction with others. How we anticipate that interaction can lead to an expectation that certain behaviors will take place. This expectation can result in behavior on our part that unwittingly reinforces our expectation. We are nurturing our own self-fulfilling prophecy.

For example, we usually look forward to interacting with an infant, child, or grandchild. Our positive expectation is evidenced in our smile, our words, our vocal tone—and it permeates our total physical demeanor. Our expectations are reflected through our behavior.

Now let's switch to meeting someone, a fellow board member or administrator perhaps, with whom you have found it difficult to interact. What expectations do you have about the next meeting? You might think to yourself, "Well, here we go again. It's going to be another night spent just short of hell." If you fail to review your expectations prior to the next time you interact with this person, your behavior will reinforce your expectation that the meeting will be troublesome.

Why should you consider your expectations? Because a divided board yields diminished results from the top—that's you and your fellow board members—all the way down through the system, and the students' learning suffers. Remember, what's on top of the pile tends to trickle on down through the rest.

Qualities and expectations

I once was employed in a rural district where a successful and respected farmer was president of the board. When presiding at meetings, he would open discussion on agenda items requiring a vote before a motion brought the item to the floor. After each member had the opportunity to comment, discuss, and comment again, a lull in the process usually would occur. The board president then would ask, "Well, are all the ducks in a row?"

This question was his method of ascertaining if the board members were ready for a unanimous vote. His respect for his fellow board members was so great that he did not want to force anyone to cast a contrary vote. Each member realized he or she had the power to prevent a vote, but seldom was it exercised. Respect for others permeated that district.

How is it possible to review one's expectations? The framework from which you begin is very important because

it sets the tone for your actions. Let me suggest starting with the following exercise. It moves your review from the macro to the micro level, or from the big picture to the boardroom.

Begin by asking yourself the following questions. Remember to review the answers from time to time, as they may change.

- What are the qualities you admire about your community?
- What are the qualities you admire about your schools?
- What are the qualities you admire about your teachers?
- What are the qualities you admire about your students?
- What are the qualities you admire about your superintendent?

And now, admittedly the most difficult, but really the most important:

- What are the qualities you admire about your fellow board members—each and every one?

After completing this segment of the exercise, repeat the process, but replace the words "admire about" with the words "expect from."

- What do you expect from your community?
- What do you expect from your schools?
- What do you expect from your teachers?
- What do you expect from your students?
- What do you expect from your superintendent?

And, most importantly:

- What do you expect from each of your fellow board members?

Now comes the tough part. Ask yourself this question:

- "Based on the qualities I admire and my expectations arising from them, what behaviors will I engage in to reinforce what I admire and expect?"

Be sure to write down these behaviors and follow-through on them.

When your expectations are based on qualities you admire in your community, your schools, your teachers, your students, your superintendent, and each of your fellow board members, your actions will build upon and reinforce these expectations. Under these conditions, it's good to get what you expect.

You have the best self-fulfilling prophecy of all. Unity on the school board begins with you and ends with better outcomes for students. After all, what did you expect? ■

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