

PROTOCOLS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETINGS

An Annotated Review of Samples of Personal Norms,
Statements of Principles and Beliefs, and Meeting Best Practices

MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL COMMITTEES

2012-2013

A WORD ABOUT “NORMS AND BELIEFS”

School Committee members are elected public officials, selected by their fellow citizens to act in their interests and empowered to act as they see their duty to work for the children of their community. Although rules of order are essential to an effective public meeting, personal norms and protocols to guide individual or group behaviors are neither established in law nor subject to imposition by anyone outside the board itself. Many people think it is demeaning and condescending to attempt to prescribe behaviors on those whom the people have chosen to represent them, especially adults who are perfectly capable of managing themselves. MASC has encouraged effective School Committees to find their own balance and to encourage collegiality, diligence and diligence in their work. We respectfully offer these recommendations, based on the work of several Massachusetts School Committees, as voluntary guidelines to help make their meetings productive and effective. We have annotated most of these model norms, beliefs and protocols to put in perspective recommendations for model practices, noting that one person’s norms and protocols may be another person’s unwillingly imposed standards. Democracy demands the individual use one’s best judgment as one perceives it rather than succumbing to the will of another, whether it is resolving a matter of policy, fulfilling your fiduciary responsibilities, or providing leadership.

SAMPLE NORMS AND BELIEFS

How We Govern

1. We acknowledge that a School Committee meeting is a meeting of the School Committee that is held in public – not a public meeting, and we will make every effort to ensure that **Committee meetings are effective and efficient.**¹
2. School Committee members agree to thoughtfully seek and support solutions that will provide the greatest benefit to students. Once the School Committee has taken action, **Committee members will support the official position of the School Committee.**²
3. It is the responsibility of the Superintendent to oversee the hiring, evaluation and handling of personnel issues; it is the responsibility of the School Committee to **evaluate the Superintendent’s effectiveness** in these matters.
4. We acknowledge the **importance of subcommittees**, and the Superintendent agrees to utilize them to focus on a specific topic in-depth and to prepare for presentation, deliberation and possible action by the full School Committee.
5. School Committee members agree to recognize and respect that their **authority exists when a quorum of the Committee meets and not as individual Committee members.**

¹ This is an important distinction because the public does not have an inherent right to speak or participate without recognition by the chair or entitlement through your municipal charter.

² Some individuals object to this provision because it stifles dissent and disagreement. It is important to note that “supporting the official position of the school committee” does not preclude principled disagreement or future attempts to change policy, but simply not to undermine the work of the majority’s policy of the district.

How We Communicate

1. It is our responsibility to set the tone for the entire school system, and we will make every effort to promote a positive image for our school system. The Superintendent will be visible in the community, and **we will operate transparently and respectfully, maintain confidentiality, and respect the Open Meeting laws.**
2. The Superintendent and the School Committee recognize the importance of proactive communication and agree that **there will be no surprises.**³ If School Committee members have questions or concerns, they agree to contact the Superintendent well in advance of a meeting.
3. We agree that discussion will be limited to the agenda, and **items will not be added to the agenda** unless it is determined by the Superintendent and the School Committee Chairperson that it would be detrimental to delay the issue until a subsequent meeting.⁴
4. The Superintendent will share an annual planning calendar with School Committee members. If a member wishes to add an item to a future agenda, he or she should make a request to the Superintendent or the School Committee Chairperson.⁵ In turn, they will consult other members, as well as the **annual planning calendar to gauge interest and alignment.**
5. School Committee members agree to **refer important questions and concerns** they receive from members of the school community to the Superintendent. The Superintendent will investigate and provide all Committee members with the information needed to respond to an issue.⁶
6. School Committee members will **channel requests for information**, reports and data through the Superintendent and the School Committee Chair rather than directly to staff. The Superintendent will ensure that each member has equal access to this information.⁷
7. The Superintendent intends to seek comprehensive solutions to problems and will create **clear structures for decision-making.** In the spirit of continuous improvement, these structures may be revisited at any time.
8. The Superintendent and School Committee recognize the importance of **working collaboratively with City officials** to improve our schools, and we will actively seek ways to enlist their support in our efforts.

³ "Surprises" is a relative term, but it is appropriate to make sure that superintendents are aware of important issues or challenging questions that will be posed at a meeting. This does not preclude a member from asking a question or raising a point that arises during the course of a discussion or debate that, despite the most noble of intentions, could not be anticipated. This is often linked to "full disclosure" noted below.

⁴ Massachusetts law precludes the school committee from raising an issue that could not have been reasonably anticipated by the chair. This protocol as stated on the list imposes an additional responsibility upon members not to push for discussions for which the superintendent or staff may be unprepared. While it is a good idea to allow the superintendent and chair to have the discretion to make a determination, a principled school committee member who feels genuinely that a late-breaking issue is important should not be discouraged from asking colleagues to take up a matter that is critical to some but not to others.

⁵ The agenda is the property of the school committee. Developing the agenda is often delegated to the chair or to the superintendent and chair.

⁶ This is a best practice to follow. However, citizens have an unrestricted right to contact their elected officials and this right may not be abridged by the superintendent or chair. Once you have listened respectfully to your constituents and asked if they have approached the appropriate administrator, you should quickly make the referral to the superintendent.

⁷ Requests for information, reports or tasks to be performed have taken on the title of "vanity projects." They are problematic because they require the time and attention of the superintendent or staff and may not be of interest to the rest of the school committee. For that reason, it is often a policy that these requests are channeled through the school committee as a body or through the chair. However, as is stated, it is critical to the longevity of the superintendent that information be shared with everyone.

How We Improve

1. School Committee members and the Superintendent recognize the **importance of professional growth and development**, and they agree to participate in experiences designed to further their knowledge and understanding and to advance the work of our public schools.
2. In addition, School Committee members will **participate in formal training** organized by the Superintendent and the School Committee Chairperson and conducted by organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and/or Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS).
3. All new School Committee members will **participate in an orientation session**, and if desired, a School Committee mentor will be assigned.
4. The Superintendent and the School Committee agree to set aside time on an annual basis for **self-evaluation and to review our progress** toward adhering to agreed upon norms and beliefs.
5. We recognize the importance of **honoring our agreed upon norms and beliefs**, and we agree to take responsibility for reminding one another when we get off track.

[These norms and protocols were adapted from original work by the Taunton School Committee in 2012. MASC notes that reasonable individuals will have rational disagreements about meanings or appropriateness of terms from time to time.]

OTHER NORMS, BELIEFS AND PROTOCOLS THAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS MAY CONSIDER

- Come to Meetings Prepared⁸
- Creating an Environment for Full and Free Debate, or “Civil Discourse” in a Safe Environment⁹
- Addressing Issues and Avoiding the Ad Hominem Attack¹⁰
- Obligation to Represent All Students
- Obligation to Utilize Vision, Planning, and Policy Making in Decision¹¹
- Full Disclosure¹²
- Blogging and Social Media¹³
- Expectations for the Chair and Other Officers¹⁴
- Set Appropriate Examples for the Employees in the School District¹⁵

⁸ Nothing slows down a meeting more than taking time to explain that information which is in the pre-meeting packet for review.

⁹ This targets intellectual bullies or others who would intimidate colleagues from raising or addressing important questions. It also speaks to those who would demand “civil discourse” as a vehicle to silence principled critics who may become passionate. Nothing should prevent a member from raising one’s voice in passionate argument as opposed to shouting down someone else’s point of view.

¹⁰ While it can be tempting to attack the individual making an argument as a way of refuting that perspective, members are encouraged to focus on the issue and the facts rather than on personalities.

¹¹ This generally is expressed with a specific intent of avoiding intrusion into administrative decision making or general school district day-to-day operations. It is a help in defining the criteria a school committee will use in determining whether an important matter falls under the legal authority, policy responsibility or fiduciary obligation of the school committee, or administrative duties of the superintendent.

¹² Full disclosure includes not only providing all information necessary for administrators to respond as well as that which is of interest to the rest of the school committee. There are also implications for disclosing conflicts of interest and other matters under the state ethics law.

¹³ Blogs are unrestricted devices for constitutionally protected free speech. In some cases, they can have the status of legitimate media to exercise freedom of the press as well. However, they can also be vehicles to upstage or undermine colleagues or school administrators. No one can force an elected official to restrict the use of them, but it is a good idea for school committee members to exercise discretion and good judgment in maintaining a web site, social media page, or blog.

¹⁴ The chair is the servant of the school committee, not the master. As such, the chair must represent both school committee members and citizens, present or absent, to ensure that the meetings are fair and that all members are treated equally and fairly. Other than presiding and the duties inherent in that role, the chair takes one’s authority from the membership. The chair recognizes that the agenda is the property of the membership, not the chair or the superintendent.

¹⁵ Everyone watches the school committee: Do you entertain calls from citizens, staff or other elected officials? Do you intervene in personnel matters? Are you focusing on student achievement or political advancement? Staff take their cues from the board. If school committee members engage in practices that may undermine the administrative leadership, faculty and parents will often encourage those inappropriate practices for personal advantage.



Protocols Worksheet - How do we do Business?

| Issues ¹⁶ | Do We have a concern in this area? | How will we handle this? | Do we need a written protocol? | Do we need a policy? |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Committee Room Layout</i> | | | | |
| <i>Seating arrangement at Committee table</i> | | | | |
| <i>Placement of the Superintendent and staff in the Committee room</i> | | | | |
| <i>Developing the Committee meeting agenda</i> | | | | |
| <i>Structure of the Committee agenda</i> | | | | |
| <i>Placing something on the Committee agenda</i> | | | | |
| <i>Getting questions answered about items on the agenda before a meeting</i> | | | | |
| <i>Public input at Committee meetings</i> | | | | |
| <i>Deliberation at Committee meetings</i> | | | | |
| <i>Informal Committee reports at Committee meetings</i> | | | | |
| <i>Allowing the majority vote to set direction for the school district</i> | | | | |
| <i>Reaction when not in the majority</i> | | | | |
| <i>Bringing agenda items back for further discussion</i> | | | | |
| <i>Explaining “no” votes</i> | | | | |
| <i>Length of meetings</i> | | | | |
| <i>Sharing expertise on issues</i> | | | | |
| <i>Bringing up new ideas</i> | | | | |
| <i>Requesting information from staff</i> | | | | |

¹⁶ Issues often relate to the following areas – Effective Meetings, Board/Member relations, Board/Superintendent relations, Board/Staff relations, Board/Community relations.

SAMPLE –AND BELIEFS



| Issues ¹⁶ | Do We have a concern in this area? | How will we handle this? | Do we need a written protocol? | Do we need a policy? |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Individual Committee member requests for information</i> | | | | |
| <i>Individual Committee member requests for action</i> | | | | |
| <i>Handling complaints from the community</i> | | | | |
| <i>Handling complaints from staff</i> | | | | |
| <i>Handling complaints from Committee members</i> | | | | |
| <i>Addressing concerns of the community</i> | | | | |
| <i>Use of subcommittees</i> | | | | |
| <i>Use of work sessions</i> | | | | |
| <i>Confidentiality</i> | | | | |
| <i>Committee member role in public</i> | | | | |
| <i>Committee/member communications</i> | | | | |
| <i>Committee/Superintendent communications</i> | | | | |
| <i>Committee Staff communications</i> | | | | |
| <i>Visiting Schools</i> | | | | |
| <i>Self-evaluation of governance team effectiveness</i> | | | | |
| <i>Handling of email</i> | | | | |
| <i>Superintendent Evaluation</i> | | | | |
| <i>Goal setting and planning</i> | | | | |