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The Board’s Role in Curriculum

Board members have a critical function to perform in this area

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School board members have an important part to play in directing their district’s curriculum, however it is often one of the more neglected areas of board oversight. Sometimes board members are hesitant to become involved in curriculum matters, assuming that this is an area better left to the district administrators. But curriculum goes to the heart of student achievement – a district’s most important concern.

What is a board’s role? Quite simply it is to approve what is taught, to monitor the process to ensure that what is being “taught” is being learned; and to support the process by making sure resources needed for learning are available and are being used effectively.

As representatives of their communities, board members must ensure that their communities’ educational expectations and desires for their children are realized. This can only happen in the classroom through the curriculum.

To Oversee, Not to Operate But this doesn’t mean that board members should replace the educational expertise of their professional staff with their own judgment and viewpoints. The recommendations of your professional staff, along with the supporting material they provide, and the answers to questions the board may ask about the curriculum recommendations, will allow board members to make informed decisions.

Nine Questions Board Members Should Ask

Smart board members know that a key to exercising effective oversight in a school district is in asking the right questions. Here are some questions every district’s administrators should be able to answer about your schools’ curriculum.
Are curriculum recommendations based on our district’s goals and do they show a direct link to the Common Core Standards? Do they promote achievement for English language learners, students with disabilities and gifted and talented students?

How are we revising curriculum and delivery of instruction based on an analysis of the statewide assessment data and other student achievement data? Are we meeting performance targets for all students in all subgroups? If not, what changes in curriculum will allow us to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP)?

What curriculum development process does the district use?

What is the schedule for curriculum development? Is the schedule flexible enough to allow for emergent issues?

How are the priorities for curriculum development determined?

How does the district introduce and implement changes in the curriculum?

What professional development programs support these changes?

How does the district evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum?

How/who reports on curriculum and student achievement at our board meetings?

Sometimes a small vocal minority in a school district will push for adoption or suppression of particular parts of the curriculum. As with any issue, board members are urged to listen to the viewpoints of their community members, but make their decisions based on what they think is best for all the students in the district. Boards should consider the districts’ overall goals for student learning – what is expected that students will know when they leave a class or grade – and make sure that the information they receive from their superintendents describes how these goals will be met by the books and materials being recommended.

What exactly is curriculum? It’s not just a list of textbooks or a listing of courses available. It includes the philosophy that governs instruction and the practices that occur every day in classrooms. Curriculum is crafted to comply with any national and state standards. It also includes objectives for grade levels, and details assessment practices and benchmarks students should meet, as well as the resources available to educators and students. It is also a continuously evolving process; in most districts it’s wise to have a flexible five-year curriculum plan.
What must be approved? The board must approve all new courses prior to their inclusion in the curriculum. It must also approve alternations in current courses previously approved. While every small wrinkle added to a course will not need approval, any important change or modification must be voted on.

**Course Materials** By law, boards also approve textbooks and course materials used. The law, 18A:34-1, states, “Textbooks shall be selected by the recorded roll call majority vote of the full membership of the board.” In other words, having approved a course, the board must now approve the materials used in it. Here, in effect, the Legislature is saying, “We want boards not only to approve the overall curriculum plan, but the materials that teachers use to carry it out.”

Note that the law only applies to books and materials, even if developed by teachers themselves, that are required reading. It does not apply to library books used for research or free reading. For example, if a teacher assigns *A Tale of Two Cities*, it must have been previously approved by the board for use in that course. If, however, a teacher tells students that they should read three books during the semester and write book reports — leaving the selection of the books to the students — the books chosen do not have to have been approved.

Modern technology has caught up with the law. The lawmakers did not envision digital texts or computer software when the original law was passed in 1968. But the spirit behind the law applies to these media, too. The bottom line: If material of any kind is required by district staff for use by students in a course or class, it must have been previously approved by the board of education.

**Be Informed About Curriculum** While respecting the superintendent’s professional expertise, it is still a given that board members should not rubber stamp recommendations that come before them. This goes for recommendations that come from a board’s curriculum committee also. No one should cast an uninformed vote. All recommendations should come with sufficient information to ensure that those voting understand what they’re voting on and can explain the reasons for their vote to anyone who asks.

The box on the previous page lists some key questions that board members should consider before voting to approve curriculum.
Policies As in all matters, boards should start with a good policy that governs curriculum adoption. NJSBA has sample policies on curriculum adoption that illustrate how policy can clarify what actions and information a board expects from its administrator before it will discuss and vote on curricula. Note that it clearly explains the process and responsibilities of both the board and superintendent. The sample policy sets out specific questions that the board expects will be answered by back-up material accompanying the superintendent’s curriculum recommendations.

These policies provide direction and support for the first role of the board in the curriculum process: To approve what is to be taught. For the second – To make sure that what is supposed to be taught is being learned – boards will need policy addressing the ongoing evaluation of instructional materials. The sample policy titled “Guidelines for Evaluation and Selection of Instructional Materials” addresses this. Every curriculum recommendation should include clearly stated procedures by which the new or revised program will be evaluated, including methods of evaluation, criteria by which it will be evaluated, and evaluation timelines. Boards should not approve curriculum recommendations that do not include such procedures.

A board member’s part in the curriculum process boils down to this: If you as a board member believe that what happens in the classroom is important, then you must be sure to carry out your appropriate role in the process of approving curriculum.

I often tell boards that they should spend more time talking about learning than bricks, buses and budgets. Curriculum is exactly the type of agenda item on which you should lavish your attention.

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