



# PICKING A LANE

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**A**ccomplishing anything worthwhile must be intentional.

Reaching goals, meeting expectations, or finding fulfillment in any avenue of life is rarely a result of chance, or a coincidental combination of events. Obviously, good fortune does no harm, and I am not suggesting that the

possibilities credited to chance or as a result of faith be ignored. However, diligence and perseverance deserve most of the credit

for sustained success, along with a healthy dose of common sense reflected in the implementation of an overarching strategy that has proactively led you from where you were to where you are presently and that will ultimately lead you to where you will be in a foreseeable future.

But not everyone has arrived at a successful destination or met every goal they have set either personally or professionally. Following last fall's election and the seating of new board members this past January, the successful governance structure of some boards require conscious thought and regrouping as part of a process to sustain their district's momentum or to anticipate ever greater achievements. It is that continual remolding and recasting of members, who are the viable components of the local oversight

structure, that sustains life in local governance. Providing a good start, through professional development and practical application exemplifies the value in starting with purpose; however, running well requires planning and an overall strategy for success.

Too many new members begin their terms sprinting towards a laundry list of items they want to accomplish, but being a school board member is not about sprinting, it is more like running a marathon. The most meaningful accomplishments are the result of careful planning and a dogged determination to see them to fruition, not the result of a short dash to the finish line. Sometimes the best route to the finish line depends on choosing the correct path, picking a lane to run in.

Choosing your path is an integral part of a plan to succeed. In the beginning, as the new person who is just learning the nuances of governance oversight and working within established boundaries, it is important to gain knowledge and understanding. After all, by the time you read this article, you will be a fourth of the way through your two-year apprenticeship, which according to NSBA is the amount of time most board members require to gain a comfort level with roles and responsibilities. Now, with six months of service in the rear-view mirror, many of you are likely beginning to feel a little more comfortable with the routine components of your regular board meetings and with interactions between fellow board members and your superintendent. The rest of you are still navigating these waters, but that is not unusual at this stage. The environment of every school board is different, depending on personalities of the board and superintendent, as well as the particular circumstances within each school corporation and their communities.

Runners competing on an oval track often start the race utilizing a staggered start. This assures that those running on the outside of the track run the same distance as those on the inner side of the track, at least through the second turn. As they leave the second turn and enter the back straightaway, the distances resulting from the staggered starting position has disappeared and the pack is predominantly together, but if the race is longer than a dash, remaining in the same lane as where they began the race will mean sure defeat for those running in the outermost lanes. Consequently, all runners begin to migrate towards the innermost lanes of the track, finding their place in the pack. As they

maneuver inwards they are careful not to step on those in front or intentionally slow those who are following because stumbling or falling means disaster, often for more than just the person who causes the interference. Minimally, there is lost momentum and position; maximally, there is a pile-up with potential injuries.

It is important to stop the analogy at this point because I do not want to remotely infer that members of the same board should be competing with each other. The important lesson is that, while all board members begin at different levels of understanding regarding their governance oversight responsibilities, at the end of their second year (the second turn) the entire board should be operating much closer together. Remaining close together means

intentionally maneuvering closer together, finding the right lane with the shortest and best route to the finish, and staying on pace with each other. Although you each have your own distinctive running style, you can still run together, and that synchronicity ensures you reach the finish line together.

It is not difficult to understand the outcome when members intentionally choose to run in different lanes. I see those results too frequently and I am always perplexed by those who obviously do not understand that no one wins with that strategy. The board does not win;

the superintendent does not win; administrators, teachers, and support staff do not win, the community does not win; and, most importantly, the kids do not win.

I have often used the expression, "School boards are always two years away from dysfunction." That ominous declaration is a direct reference to the two-year election cycle that observation suggests that every elected school board may fall prey to a rogue member. I am not suggesting that the election cycle is at fault or should be changed. But logic dictates that the more often elections occur to choose members of a board, the greater the opportunity is that someone will be elected who is not a team player. Certainly, most elected members are not rogue, even if seated members and their superintendents initially harbor suspicions that the new member has an ulterior motive for seeking a board seat. A little time typically allays those suspicions, and everything operates smoothly. But there are those few instances every election where someone's motives for becoming a school board member are not to represent their constituency's best interest in public education or to make

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decisions that are best for all children in their district.

Even in those circumstances where a rogue is seated, the board can still survive and thrive, but not if remaining members choose to run their race separately. When the board picks its lane, remains united, and ensures they are running at pace, not stumbling and not veering off the selected path, they can withstand the effects of rogue influence. Plus, having that united front in place before an election helps to ensure the rogue's opportunity to disrupt are minimized.

Just to be clear, the expectation is not that board members walk, talk, think, and act identically. You are all different people with different skill sets and life experiences and diversity is what makes boards effective. It ensures that decisions are viewed from multiple perspectives before deciding the best course of action. But picking a lane, and more importantly, the right, best lane is about sharing common objectives and being united in purpose. When you have members aligned together in purpose, they are able to

weather internal disagreements, while continuing to do their best to represent the best interests of public education through governance oversight.

It is not realistic to romanticize running a race. For anyone that has competed, the training is hard work, and you get tired, discouraged, and winded. But when you are running and have chosen the best lane, it is not as much about winning as it is about running well and contributing your efforts to the success of the team. It is not up to anyone individually, but each board member has their own brick to add to the wall of accomplishment in their school district. Standing at a distance, the additions each board member makes should appear as a seamless contribution to effective school board governance, although your individual contributions are exclusively your own. Aligning in thought and purpose and working closely together to achieve common goals and objectives are the best legacy any board member can hope to leave. 🎓



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