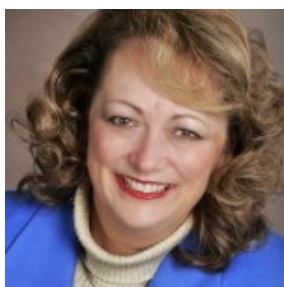


Opinion: School board work – a challenging job

By Vicki Barber

A friend said to me recently, “I didn’t know being on a school board would be so difficult. I thought I would just try to help out. This is work.”

I imagine most people have similar thoughts. It’s a school board. How hard can that be? These days, with the kinds of decisions facing board members, I would suggest that it is extremely hard! My friend was concerned about the necessity of lay-offs in her district. California’s declining budget is forcing the board she’s on to look at a change in structure. Unfortunately, the need for this change in structure will most likely lead to severe changes in staffing and, potentially, in student achievement.



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Yes, she can make a decision to balance the budget, but she also knows what that will mean to programs and services. After she votes for something that must be done, she will go home to the same neighborhood that also houses the families her vote will affect. Yet, if she chooses not to vote for the layoff, she will have to decide what else can be cut in order to balance the budget.

We have historically looked at the decisions school boards

make as falling into one of three categories – busing, budgets, and buildings. How do we get students to and from school? How do we adequately staff our schools? Do we build a new science wing or tear down the old gym? Even in good times, those challenges were the cause of much debate and planning. Now the questions are more intense. Do we even run a bus service? If we approve a budget, will we actually get the funds to meet it? What programs can we cut or modify? What cuts are least likely to negatively impact the students? Yes, we know the building is old, but closing it this year is not an option, so what, if any, improvements to it can we make?

Those are only a few of the questions board members are facing. And, they are not just facing them at one meeting, but at every meeting they attend. They are not just facing the questions at board meetings. They are being asked by neighbors, staff members, and administrators, “What are we going to do?”

This is truly uncharted territory. Those of us who have been in education for a few years are familiar with the ups and downs of school budgets. We learn to prepare for the cycles. This circumstance, however, is unprecedented. We have never before seen shortfalls this severe. Board members and educators alike are trying to find good solutions for the current situation.

Our dedicated school board members deserve a great deal of credit for the amount of effort they are putting into their work. Not all of the decisions are popular. Few of the decisions are easy. But board members in every school district in El Dorado County are doing the hard work of determining how to navigate this difficult time. As my friend said, “This is work.” Yes it is, and thank you for being willing to do that work.

Vicki Barber is superintendent of El Dorado County Office of Education.