

COMMUNICATIONS

Nora Carr

For Your Use to Share Your Conference Experience with Your Community:
Sample Op-Ed (page 3)
Sample Hometown Press Release (page 5)

Investing in Board Leadership

Board members need professional development as much as teachers and administrators do, but you can avoid political landmines by informing your community

In today's tough economy, every dollar counts, and public entities—including school boards—are under intense scrutiny. That's why it's vital to leverage your investment in your own professional development by sharing what you have learned with your local community.

Workshops, conferences, roundtables, publications, exhibits, and other forms of professional development serve as valuable sources for proven strategies, groundbreaking work, and data-informed solutions to public education's most pressing challenges. As leaders of organizations focused on learning, school board members have an obligation and a responsibility to invest in their individual and collective growth.

By staying in touch with what's working—and what's not—in districts nationwide, school board members can ensure local taxpayers a better return on their investment while improving the quality of education provided to their community's children. Better informed leaders make better decisions, and safeguard students, teachers, support staff, principals, parents, and community members by avoiding wasteful spending.

Educational leadership is difficult, complex work. By sharing research, information, and resources gleaned at

state and national conferences, school board leaders help shape the public agenda for public schools.

Set the stage before you leave

School board members are a district's top learners. To demonstrate accountability and set the tone for how the district will benefit from its investment in board member development, address it in policy, set annual goals, and make conference attendance and reports board agenda items.

Before traveling to a state or national conference, review the program agenda and materials publicly, including registration costs and travel fees, and then highlight which sessions board representatives plan to attend and why.

If you are attending the National School Boards Association's annual conference, note the opportunity to learn from thousands of school leaders, exhibitors, and speakers. Take the time to highlight speaker credentials and topics that relate to local issues and concerns.

School board members also may demonstrate fiscal accountability by announcing plans to secure hotel and travel arrangements well in advance to get the best rates, sharing rooms and cab fares, and taking other cost-saving measures.

By rotating board member representation at professional development opportunities, as well as by referencing policies and statutory requirements for continuing education and certification for school officials, you underscore your commitment to learning.

Don't assume that parents, teachers, and the public understand why local control matters. Instead, cite research that shows how strong board leadership and good governance contribute to higher-performing schools and better student outcomes.

For example, research shows that effective boards and high-performing school districts support extensive professional development for administrators and teachers, even when the economy falters and budgets are cut.

"The most valuable thing gained from attending the conference is getting to meet, and visit with, other board members," says Mike Lautenschlager, a board member with North Dakota's Lewis and Clark School District No. 161. "It's very important to be aware of other issues across the country. They may not affect your district at the moment, but could in the future. I think it's important to keep up on national issues as well."

Working as a united team with the superintendent, effective boards invest in their own development and training. Savvy leaders recognize that building a shared vision, knowledge, values, and commitments will help move the organization forward.

High-achieving school districts also have "formal, deliberate training" for new board members, gather together to focus on specific topics, and focus more on teaching, learning, and academic

issues than on operational concerns.

Publish data regarding annual individual and collective board member contributions to the community in terms of time. Place an estimated monetary value on board members' public service. Use the conference agenda item as a bully pulpit to reinforce the idea that school boards work—and work hard—to create effective public schools that serve all children well.

It's important to remind constituents that your board gives the community a voice in how their schools are run, and that public schools serve as the cornerstone of a free and democratic society.

Stay in touch while learning

The combination of smart phones and social media sites like Twitter and Facebook make it easy to stay in touch with constituents while symbolically positioning your board members as the district's top learners.

Thanks to these new digital technologies, school board members, superintendents, and other school officials can blog, tweet, tumble, and post a series of conference updates and news quickly and for free.

Easy to use, social media sites require minimal technical skills. If you can type, you can tweet. Since these "feeds" allow only a limited number of characters or words, crafting a message takes just a few seconds, although it's always wise to have someone else proof your content before clicking on "send" or "post."

Social media is designed for mobile, on-the-go communications. As such, the rules of engagement are a bit different than for more traditional forms of communication, including traditional websites, e-mail, and electronic newsletters.

The idea is to communicate frequently, often several times a day, using short bursts of information. Unlike memos, letters, and more formal communications, the tone is more relaxed, comfortable, and conversational.

This doesn't mean that board member social media communications shouldn't have substance, however. Stay on topic and focus on educational issues and concerns, such as how another district is closing the achievement gap, why a speaker was particularly compelling, or how a new piece of software could improve operational efficiency and save the district money.

Extend the learning even further by writing brief, bulleted summaries of sessions you attend, and by posting or linking to session handouts (give appropriate credit and cite permissions).

Even something as simple as posting your daily (and evening) meeting schedule helps illustrate that conference attendance is work, not play or a form of political junket at taxpayer expense.

Sharing back at home

When you return from attending state and national conferences and other professional development opportunities, take the time to share what you've learned with your fellow board members, the superintendent, other administrators, and the general public.

One of the simplest ways to accomplish this is to require each board member who attends a conference to submit and lead a brief public discussion about the sessions they attended, and the implications of what they've seen, heard, and experienced for improving district operations.

Broadcast or cablecast on television, the district website, YouTube, and social media sites—and captured in the official minutes—these reports demonstrate a deep commitment to learning and organizational development.

The information presented by board members then can be packaged and distributed by district administration as a press release to local reporters and as electronic news items to parents and employees.

"I always write a report to share with

the other board members," says Barbara Somogyi, a school board member and NSBA conference attendee from Community Consolidated School District 59 in Elk Grove Village, Ill.

A word of caution, however: If you or the board have slashed teacher, principal, and administrator staff development and conference travel to the bone, this strategy likely will backfire. When it comes to professional development, school officials have to "walk the talk" and show they value it for all levels of the organization, and not just for the top.

Professional development opportunities allow school board members and leaders to explore education issues and concerns on a national level. As they learn from peers all over the country, board members identify new strategies and gain a broader perspective on local issues.

Decisions school board members make about policy, personnel, student assignment, finance, curriculum, and communications impact organizational effectiveness. Yet too often school board members make important decisions without being fully informed. Mistakes and missteps cost time, dollars, and political capital—resources districts can't afford to squander.

By investing in professional development, school board members benefit students and the entire community. If reporters or pundits chide officials about wasting taxpayer dollars on "junkets," school board members should set the record straight.

"As a 21-year school board member," says Pamela Oselka, a board member with Michigan's New Buffalo Area Schools, "I always return from these conferences energized and with renewed commitment to doing the very best for our most precious resource, the children." ■

Nora Carr (ncarr@carolina.rr.com) is chief of staff for North Carolina's Guilford County Schools and an *ASBJ* contributing editor.

■ SAMPLE OPINION ARTICLE

Here are some talking points to develop an opinion piece:

- As local school board members it is our responsibility to provide the best education possible for our students. One of the best ways we can work toward that end is by educating ourselves.
- The management strategies learned through quality professional development and conferences should save our district money and lead to academic success.
- We expect our doctors, lawyers, and teachers to continue learning about the latest innovations, solutions, and research in their fields. It is absolutely critical for school leaders to do the same.
- During these tough economic times, when we are faced with tough choices in our spending, a school leaders' professional development conference may not appear to be a budget priority. But our children benefit from board members attending and then using their knowledge to make well-informed decisions about school policy, finance, personnel, or curriculum.
- The National School Boards Association's Annual Conference and state school boards associations' conferences present new strategies to managing school district finances and operations, showcase the latest technologies that aid student learning, demonstrate best practices gleaned from real-life experiences at other school districts, and allow board members to network with experts and peers. The exhibits also introduce many new products and services.

Sample:
**Professional Development Leads to Success
for School Districts**

By [School Board Member or School Leader]

Edit and send to the Opinion Editor of your local newspaper or online publication or post this on your school district's/school board's newsletter, website or blog.

An excellent education, access to the latest technology, and a passion for learning – this is what all parents want for their children. Yet, parents are not the only ones in the community with a vested interest in their children's education. Community groups and athletic teams want to see their students achieve new heights of success, and the business community honors the role education plays in preparing students for the workforce and strengthening the local economy.

Local school board members across the country care about these same things, and as school board members, it is our responsibility to give students the best education possible. One of the best ways we can work toward that end is by educating ourselves.

Professional development opportunities, like the National School Boards Association's Annual Conference, allow school board members and leaders to explore the education field on a national level by learning from their peers all over the country. Conferences introduce new strategies, but also allow school leaders to look at local education issues from a national perspective.



Professional development opportunities are where leadership begins for school board members. At conferences and workshops, we have the opportunity to learn valuable information and skills that will be shared with the greater community and make our schools stronger. These ideas and strategies help improve our school district and inspire school innovation.

During these tough economic times, when we are faced with tough choices in our budget, a school leaders' professional development conference may not appear to be an educational priority, but our children benefit from board members attending. Too often, boards make decisions about school policy, finance, personnel, or curriculum without being fully informed.

The cost of professional development pays off because what we learn at conferences and workshops has a lasting impact. Conference attendance is a sound investment, allowing school leaders the opportunity to gain knowledge to develop better policies and plans for students, teachers, and school staff. At a conference exhibition hall, a school leader may discover a new software program that could save the district ten times more than the cost of attending the conference, making it an investment for our children's future and a wise budget decision.

Communities place trust in professions that work for their protection and best interests. The public expects doctors, lawyers, and teachers to continue learning about the latest innovations, solutions, and research in their fields. It is absolutely critical for school leaders to do the same. Professional development opportunities allow us to explore the education field on a national level by learning from our peers all over the country. Conferences introduce new strategies, but also allow school leaders to look at local education issues from a national perspective.

Professional development conferences are where we learn about resources needed to make our district better and to strengthen student achievement by working with and learning from our peers in our state and nation. It is our responsibility to keep in mind how we can apply the strategies we learn directly to our schools, save our district money, and lead our district to academic success. Shouldn't school leaders be armed with the best tools possible? Professional development and conferences give us these tools.



SAMPLE: Hometown Post Conference Press Release

[Please edit and customize. Text below was prepared for multiple attendees from your school district.]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: [Contact]
Phone/Email: [Phone/Email]

[School District Name] School Board Members Participate in National Education Conference and Bring Back Innovative Ideas

[HOMETOWN, STATE] [(Month Day, Year)] – [Name 1] and [Name 2] of the [School District Name] School Board joined more than 5,000 school board and state school boards association leaders, administrators, and other education leaders in attending the 2013 National School Boards Association’s (NSBA) Annual Conference that took place April 13-15 in San Diego.

“At NSBA’s Annual Conference, we were provided with a wealth of sessions and experiences to learn about innovations in education that will help us advance academic achievement and better understand the needs of the 21st century student,” said [last name of name 1].

NSBA’s Annual Conference offered leadership development and opportunities for collaboration from a nationwide network of colleagues. With a focus on workable solutions for school districts, the conference featured sessions on current hot topics affecting local school districts including: increasing student achievement; federal legislation and funding; managing schools during tough economic times; education technology; school law issues; school security and safety; school bullying and cyberbullying; curriculum and testing; and school health and nutrition. The conference also served as the host of one of the largest expositions of education products, technologies, and services in the country.

“It was a great experience to learn from experts and our school board member peers about how we can be better equipped with less federal and state funding to address the challenges our schools are facing,” said [last name of name 2]. “From what we learned at the conference, we will be exploring new initiatives to lead our district to academic success while saving money including... (give examples).”

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit organization representing state associations of school boards and their more than 90,000 local school board members throughout the U.S. Working with and through our state associations, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership.

More information on the conference can found at www.nsba.org/conference.

#

[Information about your school district]



This handout was produced by the Communications Office of the National School Boards Association, lembrey@nsba.org, (703) 838-6737
This information is online at www.nsba.org/conference