

How School Boards Can Collaborate With City Councils to Achieve Goals

9 August, 2018

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Tags:

Education



The Town Council of Winthrop, ME, **gave its school board a vote of “no confidence”** when it did not immediately fire a superintendent accused of misconduct. Hackensack, NJ, couldn't acquire a new building when its high school population had grown by 760 students because rival families controlled the school board and the city council. Alexandria, VA, limped along with one-year capital projects when its school board and city council didn't see eye-to-eye on long-term spending. When school boards and city councils don't work together, students suffer. Strong relationships are entirely possible. Districts where school boards and city councils work together well provide useful tips for creating collaboration.

Steps to Creating Successful Collaboration

1. **Establish linkages.** While the school board and the city council will remain separate entities, there's no reason members of both can't work together on ad hoc committees or occasional projects. The Oregon School Board Association has seen great success from committee and information sharing on areas of mutual concern:

- They created a joint city council/school board committee to explore policy matters that concern them both.
 - The school board sends its board minutes, highlights of meetings, and all of the district's publications to local officials so they are up-to-date.
 - The school board shares its research findings with any other agencies for which they are pertinent.
 - Many municipal entities work together on a "Focus on Students" night. Someone from each organization gives a brief presentation on "how we see the state of youth." It brings together city officials, school representatives, the health department, the police, children's services, the United Way, the YWCA and the YMCA. An audience Q&A follows the presentations, along with a joint session to plan an activity that will address one of the issues raised.
 - Whenever forums, discussions or presentations in town cover issues that affect children, the school board and the city council are both visibly represented at the event.
 - Staff from the school and the town are encouraged to "cross-pollinate" by meeting with their professional counterparts in other agencies. Janitors for the school meet janitors for the town, school tech support staff meet their town counterparts and so on.
 - The school board involves officials from the city council (and other agencies and jurisdictions) in its strategic planning meetings.
 - Many school-based groups (e.g., parent organizations, unions, student representatives, etc.) meet to study and agree on legislative priorities, which they then communicate to their city councilors and legislators.
2. **Form coalitions.** On most issues, the school board and the city council share interests. Both want more municipal funding from the state, both want more services for children and both want enthusiastic community participation. Many school boards and city councils, therefore, work together on shared priorities:

In New Jersey, where a tax cap challenged schools and municipalities alike, the school board asked for help with advocacy at the state level. The school board president of Gloucester County reports: "We have educated our municipal leaders about the underfunding of the School Finance Reform Act and the significant impact that it has on the school district. We have asked them to join us in contacting legislators regarding this issue. There has been some joint participation in meetings with legislators."

On a variety of issues, in various New Jersey municipalities, the school board and the city council work together to construct coalitions that draw in other segments of the population. They identify groups affected by the issue (e.g., parents, staff members or business leaders) and invite people from all the groups to a meeting where they appoint a chair and make a plan. They make sure members of such coalitions have the information they need to grapple with the issue. They then develop a communications network to keep the school board, school and town staff, as well as the broader community, informed of the coalition's actions.

Helping the needy is a common arena for such coalitions. In Ocean County, NJ, the mayor and the superintendent collect school supplies for children in need and orchestrate the use of facilities for charitable projects. They worked together to help residents hit by Hurricane Sandy. In Mercer County, NJ, the school board partners with the county's Human Services Commission to provide food on weekends and during the summer to children who rely on school lunches.

3. **Model teamwork.** The dynamics that strengthen any strong team bolster the joint projects of school boards and city councils. For starters, teams are formed consciously. Successful collaboration starts with an explicit statement of intention. In 2014, the New Jersey School Board Association and the New Jersey League of Municipalities issued a joint letter pledging cooperation at the state level and encouraging it in communities. With the intention clearly established, the two apply the best practices that characterize healthy teams:
 - Good partnerships keep the lines of communication open. In Atlantic County, NJ, the mayor and the head of the city council freely attend school board meetings, and the school board president goes to city council meetings, where he often presents information. The small community also benefits from lots of informal personal communication.
 - Healthy teams work together for a common goal. Collaborations in Oregon stress shared objectives, such as students' education. It wards off attempts to win points in one-sided personal victories.
 - Good teams are considerate. Collaborators in Oregon deliberately follow the policy: “no surprises.” It is agreed that neither the school board nor the city council will spring surprises on each other in public meetings. Even when there is disagreement, advance warning allows all parties to prepare thoughtful responses.
 - On healthy teams, the division of labor is transparent. When city councils and school boards form partnerships in Oregon, they agree on roles, relationships and responsibilities. Sometimes, they even put it in writing.
 - Good team members come prepared. When city council members attend school board meetings, or vice-versa, it is a good idea for them to do their homework. Simply reading the materials attached to the agenda and studying the issues in advance earns respect; it makes the visitor a substantive contributor who doesn't appear to be attending as a mere formality.
4. **Respect boundaries.** Nothing is gained by cooperating committees striving for symbiotic union. A school administrator from Camden County, NJ, attributes their friendly, open relationship with the city council to recognition of their separate spheres: “Both [the] town council and the board stay out of each other’s business while still maintaining an open line of communication.”
5. **If needed, bring in third parties.** Alexandria, VA, developed a creative solution to an impasse between the school board and the city council: They created the Joint Ad Hoc Alexandria Municipal Facilities Plan Steering Committee to synthesize their visions of the future. Only then were they able to undertake 10- to 15-year capital planning with input from both the city and the school board.
6. **Share pride in students.** In Atlantic County, NJ, student art is displayed in municipal buildings, and a student chorus opens the annual holiday tree lighting. Students need

encouragement and attention from as many sources as possible, and everybody enjoys focusing on positive news about children in the community.

The **benefits of collaboration** make it well worth the considerable effort that it requires. A city councilor in Alexandria describes what is possible with shared cooperation: “that sweet spot of joint, collaborative planning and thinking ... without getting to a point that one side or the other feels they have completely ceded control or authority.”

Whereas many schools and towns share basic infrastructure, like intranet services, those that seek deeper collaboration are richly rewarded with more benefits. In New Jersey, the School Board Association and the League of Municipalities have worked together on unfunded mandates, property tax control, and the reform of pension and health benefits. Eighty-seven percent of districts in a 2015 New Jersey survey reported that they share services with their town: including use of recreational facilities, walking-route safety and facilities maintenance. Seventy-three percent of the collaborating communities reported some cost savings; 8.5% have experienced “significant” savings. Over half reported increased quality, too, from sharing services.

The future holds bountiful opportunities for deeper teamwork between school boards and city councils. Firm partnerships set a solid foundation to address growing needs concerning sustainability efforts, grant-writing, school security and shared technology. Other promising areas for collaboration include collective bargaining, energy management and purchasing.

Active collaboration between school boards and city councils may not be their default mode, but it makes them both more fruitful servants of the community that they share. Around the country, concerted efforts to cultivate robust partnerships have generated a cornucopia of creative ideas. Any community can adopt these practices and take their collaboration from “good” to “great.”