

# The Ethics of School Board Service

2017





# In the News

**New Jersey:** Two members of Holmdel Township's Board of Education, including the board's vice president, violated state ethics rules when they wrongly implicated the superintendent and another school official in alleged criminal wrongdoing ...

**New York:** Do schools have an ethics problem?...

**Pennsylvania:** ...School Board member was found to have violated Pennsylvania's ethics act for her actions in directing the school district to pay her husband for web design work that was never even completed.

**Georgia:** Some members of the Glynn County Board of Education are concerned that one of their fellow board members has breached the board's code of ethics by taking part in a Republican party automated phone call to members calling for a stop to the fundraising measure.



# Ethics

Rules of behavior based on ideas about what is morally good and bad



# School Board Member Ethics

What does  
“school board member ethics”  
mean to you?



# Ethical Practices

- ❖ **Honest** exchange of views among board members
- ❖ **Honest** exchange of views between board members and the superintendent
- ❖ **Respect** for input from staff, parents, tax payers
- ❖ Integrity of the process for board action
- ❖ **Fair, just and impartial** consideration for ideas, proposals, sources



# Unethical Practices

- ❖ Saying you will do one thing, but doing another
- ❖ Favoring one group of constituents over all others
- ❖ Continuing to oppose a majority decision
- ❖ Unwillingness to separate issues from personalities



# Ethical or Unethical?

- Choices that involve a personal connection
- Potential conflicts of interest
- Responsibilities outside the board meeting
- Differences in perceptions

# Ethical Behavior?

Video # 1

Coffee Break

Your thoughts?



# Legal/Illegal ≠ Ethical/Unethical

What is legal is not necessarily considered ethical. School board members may be authorized to do a host of things that their publics believe demonstrate the existence of unethical behavior on the part of board members.”

*Jay Worona  
General Counsel  
New York State School Boards Association*



# Legal/Illegal $\neq$ Ethical/Unethical

- Don't confuse legality and ethicality in decision making
- Legal issues are based on laws
- Local board attorney - consult first, act later
- Decisions based on law carry the greatest potential impact

# Board Effectiveness

- Cost of resources
- Morale issues
- Perceptions matter
- Legal expenses

# Scenario A

In the last election, you accepted a \$500 campaign donation from a woman who owns a local hardware store. On this month's board agenda is an item that calls for awarding a contract to supply paint to the district maintenance department for the coming year, not to exceed \$20,000. There are two bidders, including the owner who made the campaign contribution. Her bid is the low bid. The other members favor her bid. Do you....?

- a) Abstain from voting, announcing the reason
- b) Abstain from voting, giving no reason
- c) Vote for the low bid with no additional comment
- d) Vote for the low bid, explaining that her contribution has no impact on your vote

# Ethical Behavior?

Video # 2

My Supporters

Your thoughts?



# Avoid Conflicts of Interest

- ❖ Personal
- ❖ Personnel
- ❖ Purchases or contracts
- ❖ Voting
- ❖ Appearance or reality



## Scenario B

Your board is looking for land for a new school. Two sites are under consideration. You are approached by a very good friend who owns one of the parcels, asking you to support the purchase of his land. A few days later, the other landowner, with whom you are not acquainted, contacts you with the same request. You made no promises to either landowner. At the meeting, the administration breaks down the purchase options and both sites are equal in terms of location benefits and cost. Do you...?

- a) Announce contacts by “some owners,” state that it will not affect your vote, and vote
- b) Announce you have been contacted by some of the owners, and abstain from voting
- c) Vote, but make no comments about the contacts
- d) Vote for your friend’s site because you think it’s the best deal



# Ethical Relationships

- At Meetings
- Outside Meetings
- Board Members
- Superintendent
- District Staff
- Constituents
- Vendors
- Media



# At Meetings

- Rules of member conduct
- No surprises
- No personal attacks
- Understand and observe different roles
- Share information
- Accept the will of the majority

# Ethical Behavior?

Video # 3

Grocery Shopping

Your thoughts?



# Outside Meetings

- Avoid discussions by majority of board
- Do not disparage others actions as personal
- Do not disclose **confidential** information
- Do not attempt to build opposition
- **Do not make promises** only the full board can accommodate

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# Board Members

- Respect
- Avoid forming cliques
- Strive for understanding



# With the Superintendent

- Advisor, colleague, employee
- Understand and respect different roles and responsibilities
- Board governs, Superintendent administers



## With Staff

- Resource for information or personal worker?
- Refer issues to the appropriate authority
- Chain of command



## Scenario C

The daughter of a good friend has just graduated from college with a degree in elementary education, and has applied for a job in your district. She worked for your business for several years, and was an outstanding employee. Without asking you, she lists you as a reference on the application form under previous employers. When she makes the interview stage at one of your schools, the principal contacts you about her work experience and personal character. The principal is interviewing several applicants for the job. Do you...?

- a) Offer your endorsement of the young woman based on her work history with your company
- b) Decline to give a recommendation but confirm that she worked for your company
- c) Ask the principal to hire your friend's daughter because she will be a wonderful teacher
- d) Decline to give a recommendation because board members are barred from involvement in hiring



# With Constituents

- Contact information
- Communicate
- **Listen** to concerns and requests
- Follow chain of command
- “Whose job is it anyway?”



# With Vendors

- Personal
- Professional
- Board business
- Asking versus advocating
- Contractors

# Ethical Behavior?

Video # 4

Bribes

Your thoughts?



# With the Media

- Speaking for yourself
- Speaking for the board
- Speaking for the district



# On Social Media

- Good reasons to use Social Media
  - *Promotional*
  - *Informational*
  - *Instructional*
- Negative effects of Social Media
  - *Inappropriate interactions*
  - *Critical rumors*
  - *Negative commentary*



# KSBA Code of Ethics

<http://www.ksba.org/SchoolBoardMemberCodeofEthicalConduct.aspx>

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# Board Effectiveness

- Ethics
- Trust
- Communications
- Positive Board & District Culture

# Questions





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