

This year, we had another retreat to discuss our differences. However, this time, the focus was not so much on our personal problems, but on education.

Since we have been "retreating," our working relationship has been great. It is good to have someone on the board who can give praise and a pat on the back for a job well done. There is also great pleasure in being able to disagree without being disagreeable.

A Code of Conduct Can Also Help


Another school board decided during a retreat to spell out a contract for board members that would emphasize how they had agreed to work together. In a written contract, the board members said, "We do publicly commit ourselves collectively and individually" to the following items:

1. To abide by the code of ethics of the state school boards association
2. To strive sincerely to build better relationships with one another and with the superintendent
3. To vote our individual convictions and do what we can to destroy factionalism on the board
4. To refuse to become involved with micromanagement
5. To emphasize planning, policymaking, and public relations rather than becoming involved in management of schools
6. To prepare ourselves carefully before each meeting, so that when we have the floor, we can make comments that are concise, organized, and clear
7. To listen carefully and with courtesy when other people have the floor and are speaking during board meetings
8. To set clear goals for the superintendent
9. To support the superintendent and to help him/her be as effective as possible as long as he/she is the superintendent
10. To establish goals for our school district and to make sure the community is aware of these goals

Board members who feel their colleagues have violated any portion of the agreement committed themselves to talking personally with the member in question. If they could not reach consensus, the issue was to be brought before the entire board. So far,

that hasn't happened. "After privately discussing their disagreement in light of the school board members' contract," another board member reported, "they found a resolution. Then the board moved on, with the air cleared."

Many state school boards associations have adopted model codes of conduct for school board members. If your board has not adopted such a code, you may want to ask your state association for a model.

START Reading Here Please
**HOW TO HANDLE
 EDUCATION JARGON** 

Can you define the following?

Performance standards
Cognitive style
Executive session
Distance learning
Due process
Block scheduling
Tangible property
IDEA

How well did you do? Check your answers in the glossary in the back of this book to find out.

These are just a few of the many words, abbreviations, and acronyms that confront board members daily. If you are a new board member and defined half of these terms correctly, give yourself a pat on the back. On the other hand, if you have several years of board service under your belt and you were unable to define most of them, some of your colleagues might think you have been asleep in the boardroom and neglecting your homework.

Although you're not expected to know many educational terms when you first come aboard, you are expected to learn them. And, ironically, once you understand this arcane language, you'll need to use it sparingly—if at all. School board veterans say they learn education jargon and then avoid using it.

Why Learn These Terms?

To put it simply, you will want to learn the jargon of education so you won't feel at a loss when an administrator tells you that the district is "implement-

ing a middle school concept, with interdisciplinary teams and cross-age tutoring to better enhance affective as well as cognitive learning." Learning such shoptalk will make it easier for you to discuss the most common concerns of your board.

It's worth noting, too, that this task is not limited to new board members. To communicate effectively about today's fast-changing issues, all board members need to tune in constantly to new words. Old words often are inadequate to explain complicated new activities and concepts. Here are some clues for mastering the basics of this second language.

Study and learn the terms. It is likely that you will see and hear new education terms again. Study them and become familiar with their meanings. But take note: These terms listed in the glossary in this book are not the only words, phrases, and acronyms to which you will be exposed. Each state has special laws that contain numerous terms that are important to your schools. There are also a number of federal laws that have particular meaning to many districts. Ask the superintendent or board president to get you a glossary of terms most frequently used in your area. Such glossaries often are published by your state school boards association or your state department of education. Many topical publications—such as those covering legislation, public relations, and labor relations—contain glossaries of significant terms. Regular reading of journals published by education organizations will help you master and keep up with the jargon of education.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Polysyllabic descriptions of simple concepts are as common to schools of education as four-letter words are to a Marine boot camp. Often teachers and administrators use these words and phrases without knowing they are confusing anyone. When the language and meaning are not transparent, you have every right to clear the air. Ask, "What exactly do you mean by multiage groupings?" Or ask: "Can you give me an example of what a 4-by-4 schedule is supposed to accomplish?" If you are still in the dark, simply ask: "Could you say that in plain English?"

Attend meetings and conventions. Once you have looked over the glossary and have some idea of how these words and phrases are used, your next step is to go where education jargon is the native tongue. Attend conferences sponsored by school administrators or the state or national school boards

association. In these settings, even casual conversations will give you new insights into the meanings of these terms. During the workshops, listen and take notes. Take your glossary along, and write down the words or phrases that confuse you. You might be surprised how quickly you can pick it all up.

Try it out. It's one thing to sit and read a newspaper in Spanish, and quite another to ask a waiter for a cup of coffee in that language. Once you've been exposed to the technical language of education for some time, try using it. But remember, these terms often mean different things to different people. For example, you might find that a media resource center can be an elaborate room filled with electric gadgets, a library, or a pile of books on a table in the back of a third-grade classroom.

Pitfalls to Avoid

After becoming acquainted with education terminology, it's a great temptation to weave it into your conversation to demonstrate that you are no longer a novice. As one board member explained: "After a while, you find yourself slipping into the habit of using education terms. It becomes easier to talk in this kind of shorthand because you can say what you mean with less effort. You start thinking in these terms, and you forget that others don't quite understand."

Another caution: Too often, educators, board members, and others adopt education jargon as a way to sound intelligent or to hide the fact that they don't know exactly what they are talking about. As one school public information director in Texas put it: "Jargon does nothing but confuse people or put them off. I've seen people make presentations to the board, using a bunch of words, and everybody would sit and nod their heads wisely when nobody knew what was being said." When someone uses a term for the first time, don't assume everyone is on the same track. Ask them to explain the term as they are using it. Rephrase what they said, and ask them if you have understood them correctly. Or, ask them to rephrase what they have said.

Avoiding confusing language is easier than it might sound. After a direct hint from the school board, one superintendent issued a statement to all school employees that read: "It is the responsibility of the board, the superintendent, and the rest of the

staff to make sure plain language is spoken here.”

That's good advice for everyone. After all, the majority of people you represent don't know (and may not care) about the difference between a norm-referenced and a criterion-referenced test. As one Mississippi board member noted, “It's inevitable that you'll pick up and actually feel comfortable with some educationese. But if you do, you run the risk of sounding like an educator—not a public representative.” By insisting on plain language, you'll also be making it possible for more citizens to understand and play an active role in your school district's governance.

Suggestion:

Once you've mastered relevant and useful terms, take action to curb the use of arcane education language in your district—especially in all communications with the public. See that the minutes of your school board meetings and school system newsletters are purged of all unnecessary education terms. There is no reason that the records of your meetings must contain words and phrases that are going to confuse your constituents. When technical language is appropriate, include explanations, definitions, examples, or other clarifying wording. Second, as a board, instruct the superintendent that all background papers prepared by the administration for board meetings be cleansed of unnecessary education jargon. Clear speech and thought run parallel courses, and you should be spared the task of wading through ambiguous words and phrases in order to understand what a proposal is all about.

Organizations to Note

In addition to specialized language and concepts, new board members generally encounter the names and acronyms of many unfamiliar education groups, organizations, and agencies. The following list is certainly not exhaustive, but it does provide a sample of the varied education-related organizations, professional associations, advocacy groups, and research and information centers that exist. Such groups may

be valuable sources of information and assistance on a range of issues.

- AASA** American Association of School Administrators, www.aasa.org
- AFT** American Federation of Teachers, www.aft.org
- ALA** American Library Association, www.ala.org
- ASBO** Association of School Business Officials International, www.asbointl.org
- ASCD** Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, www.ascd.org
- CCSSO** Council of Chief State School Officers, www.ccsso.org
- ECS** Education Commission of the States, www.ecs.org
- ERIC** Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov
- ERS** Educational Research Service, www.ers.org
- IEL** Institute for Educational Leadership, www.iel.org
- NAESP** National Association of Elementary School Principals, www.naesp.org
- NASBE** National Association of State Boards of Education, www.nasbe.org
- NASSP** National Association of Secondary School Principals, www.nassp.org
- NBPTS** National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, www.nbpts.org
- NCATE** National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, www.ncate.org
- NEA** National Education Association, www.nea.org