

HOW TO COPE WITH PRESSURE GROUPS

Call them what you will—activists, special-interest groups, single-issue groups, public-interest groups—but know them for what they are: pressure groups.

As a school board member, you need to know who is actively bringing pressure against the schools and who is likely to do so under various circumstances. Furthermore, it's important to realize that many special-interest groups are exceedingly well organized (often on a national basis) and well funded.

If your board doesn't have a plan for dealing with them, pressure groups can make board life miserable. These groups tend usually to polarize around a unifying issue, and they know how to get the attention of the media. While thoughtfully considering the issues raised by pressure groups, your board needs to keep in mind the overall affect on education if the groups' requests were implemented. Here's what you and your board can do to cope successfully with pressure groups.

Have written policy on public participation.

The board's policy governing the participation of the public in board meetings can help you keep control of meetings while giving pressure groups a suitable avenue for expression. Setting time limits for speak-

ers from the audience is important, as is paying courteous attention to what they say.

Have fair policies and procedures. Fair policies and procedures that are implemented fairly can deflate some of the pressure some groups can build. They can also counter accusations of poor planning or the use of "hip-pocket policy." When fair policies guide board and administrative actions over a period of time, those actions are less likely to be subject to sudden emotional pressures applied by narrowly defined special interests. Of particular importance are policies and procedures for:

- Public use of facilities
- Distribution of pamphlets and brochures
- Textbook selection
- Challenges to library books and materials
- General school operations
- Handling relationships the board has with other community groups or agencies
- Due process proceedings
- Employee hiring, transfer, promotion, and dismissal
- Handling complaints or requests for changes in the curriculum

It's important to note that a written grievance procedure should allow public appeal to the board only when a conflict cannot be resolved by putting the complaint through the normal chain of command. Also, it is not enough to have these policies and procedures in writing. They should be well publicized through school publications and other avenues.

Give advance public notice on controversial agenda items. If your board knows an item is going to be controversial, let the community know in advance when it will appear on the agenda. Invite public comment within a specific time frame, and allow for longer comments to be submitted in writ-

ing. Let the public know the item is on the agenda for a first consideration and fact finding. Announce when the board will put the item back on the agenda (after a review of the public comments) for a full review of the board's findings and final actions.

Provide for citizen involvement. If your special-interest groups are easily identified (such as booster clubs, the parents of special education students, chambers of commerce, citizen action groups), head off trouble by involving them in district advisory committees and opinion leader groups. They will be less likely to confront the board if they have had an opportunity to express their views or can submit a minority report on a committee's recommendations.

The real trick in dealing successfully with pressure groups is to stop always thinking of them as adversaries. You and your colleagues must listen to many views and try to understand them in order to communicate rationally when your actions go against what a pressure group is seeking. Once your board really knows what a pressure group wants, then it can clearly explain why board actions must suit the larger universe of the district.

Try to remember that pressure groups exist for legitimate reasons. As a board member from Massachusetts says, "Pressure groups are better organized than ever before. They know how to use the media. They have learned how to come forward with a show of strength. Underneath it all, however, is something good. They are saying that they want to be involved in public education."