

BULLETIN BOARD

The Value of Board Retreats

MASB recommends every school governance team (the board and superintendent) hold a retreat at least once a year. It is relatively easy to come up with reasons why you shouldn't have a board retreat, ranging from finding mutual dates to resistance among some board members. But a small investment of time in targeted board development can pay big dividends.

Board retreats are one of the most important leadership efforts a governance team participates in. Research shows high-performing school boards have a positive impact on student achievement and superintendent relations. Few other activities offer boards the opportunity to think, focus and plan the way a retreat can. They also provide a setting for a wide range of matters that do not fit neatly in the regular board or committee agendas. To be effective, the retreat must be carefully planned, coordinated and executed, otherwise it's simply another long meeting.

Planning With Purpose

Who should plan? Defining the purpose and setting the agenda generally is the responsibility of the board president and superintendent. However, most successful retreats incorporate the thoughts and ideas of other trustees.

Who should come? Retreats are designed to bring out the best thinking of the group, so you want the best group possible! Think about who would add value to the conversation, as well as who would gain value from being there.

How long should the retreat last? Most retreats are somewhere between three to six hours, depending on the topics to be covered. They may be on a weekday evening or a Saturday.

Where should you have your retreat? The location of a retreat can help determine its success. Getting out of your typical environment helps you escape daily work. A good retreat space is comfortable, with room to move around.

How should you prepare participants? Everyone should come to a retreat with an understanding of its purpose, agenda and desired outcomes. Board members should be prepared to engage in robust, productive dialogue.

Building the Agenda

What's your focus? While a retreat provides a break from the narrow lens of everyday life, it does need to be fully connected to your organizational work. A retreat is a great tool when a group has something important to work on together.

With a clear focus, a retreat can be an opportunity to innovate, see new possibilities and envision the work of the district in new and refreshing ways. A retreat can be an opportunity for taking stock, reflecting together, assessing and refining practice, and reinvigorating specific aspects of your work.



What about teambuilding? A retreat can be highly effective for supporting team building with a purposeful connection to the work. Retreats can also be helpful for attending to issues that are impeding working relationships. When people make a commitment to spend time together, it can change the way they relate to each other and their work together. A retreat affirms that your shared work is important enough for the investment of significant time and energy.

Other Considerations

Facilitation

Using an outside facilitator frees all participants to explore and engage fully in the process, rather than worrying about leading it. Ideally, the facilitator should be part of the planning process, so they can familiarize themselves with the context and relevant issues. Facilitators make sure that all conversations are productive and help the group stay connected to its larger purpose. They do this by: helping people stay on task; creating space for people to express themselves and helping them hear each other; managing time; tracking the energy of the group; managing a record of the proceedings; connecting conversations, ideas and perspectives; and using different ways of communicating and considering information.

Evaluating the Retreat

Conducting an evaluation following the retreat encourages participants to share their opinions about the effectiveness of the meeting, and provides valuable feedback essential to improving subsequent retreats.

Building on the Discussion

Successful retreats don't end when everyone returns home. Recommendations and decisions must be addressed. It is the administration's responsibility to create an action plan with timelines and indicators for tracking progress and accomplishments. Only then can board members truly consider the retreat a valuable use of their time.

In a growing era of increased scrutiny and accountability it is important for the school board to be on top of their game. While it is natural for us to measure our success on the board by individual contributions, the real measure is how the team operates as a whole. If the governance team is not continually growing and learning together then they are truly falling behind. Expanding your leadership capacity through training should remain a top priority for you and your governance team.

Most Commonly Requested Retreat Topics:

- *Roles and Responsibilities*
- *District Goal Setting*
- *Superintendent Evaluation*
- *Improving Communication Skills*
- *Conflict Resolution*
- *Board Operating Procedures*
- *Trust and Team Work*
- *Board Self-Evaluation*
- *Managing Effective Meetings*
- *New Superintendent Transition*
- *Policy Overview*

