

# Speaking to your constituents and messaging

After being elected to a school board, many newly elected school board members get a bounty of “advice.” This advice should be viewed with a skeptic’s eye.

What you may hear:

“You speak with one voice.”

“If a community member, staff or student reaches out to you, send the message to your superintendent or treasurer.”

“Even if you disagree with a vote, you must support it after the vote is taken.”

“Don’t air dirty laundry.”

“Remember: you are there to be a cheerleader for your district.”

“Do what the superintendent and treasurer tell you; you hired them, now you have to trust them.”

“You can ask your questions prior to a meeting so the meeting goes smoothly.”

Your life will be easier if you just show up and say yes to everything on the agenda and ask no questions. However, you must act with your principles and your conscience in mind.

## Priorities:

Why were you elected?

- To bring oversight to the district to which you were elected
- To communicate with your community all issues related to your district
- To ensure district academic and financial accountability, and transparency with all stakeholders
- Understand and respect the proper roles of the parents, community, and district personnel
- To insist on corrections of the academic and financial failures found inside your district, and report the deficiencies as well as the action plans to correct or improve the problems inside your district
- Protect the students from political ideologies, while insisting they get the best academic experience
- Protect students’ rights to privacy, fairness and safety
- Protect parental rights

## **Messaging**

When offering information, be aware of the way the message will be received, used and abused. You will want to message in ways that it is impossible to disagree.

Example: the district is making the case that more staff is needed.

You found out (see our videos on finding district financials) that enrollment has been declining for a few years so the rationale for more staff does not make sense to you. Perhaps, an enrollment study is in order.

Message to the rest of the board and superintendent:

“I need more information about what these new staff members would do, that is not already being done”.

“Perhaps, this administration can consider rolling other tasks onto current positions.”

“Consolidations may be in order.”

“Please explain in detail why we need more staff.”

“Perhaps, we should consider reducing staff that are more directly related to the declining enrollment so we can free up positions.”

“Since we have increased administrative staff while we have had declining enrollment, we should look into a staffing audit done by an independent organization.”

### **Use facts with emotions - Examples**

“Our community is suffering with the enormous increase in gas prices, inflation and chaos in our government. I think we should be mindful of the sacrifices they make to keep us so generously funded now and hope they see it to keep us funded to this magnitude in the future.”

“So many families are struggling to feed their family, to pay their mortgage and to keep their transportation running, it is important that we keep in mind the sacrifices they make to keep this district generously funded. We need to respect our communities' sacrifices by being as streamlined and efficient as they have had to be in their home budgets.”

## **Message to community**

Give them the facts, enrollment, increasing admin staff while experiencing declining enrollment or an increased % rate of admin versus a % change in enrollment. In the consideration of being the fiduciary agent, you're tasked with further analysis and investigations.

***Remember, your job is to be honest, clear and factual and to stop the district use of school speak to hide the facts.***

Your narrative must use common words.

*Step raises - automatic annual raises that exceed the rate of inflation.*

*Base raises- are added to this automatic step raise and bumps the whole step schedule by a percentage.*

*In Ohio, when a district says we agreed to a 2% raise they omit the fact that this 2% is added to the automatic step raises that average 4% per year.*

You must message that the district gave 6% raises in the last contract while the community household incomes increased \_\_\_\_\_% on average over the last \_\_\_\_\_ years. All while the community households were not able to keep up with inflation (2.5%/yr) – actually losing the ability to sustain their lifestyle. **Ask if that is fair.**

You can go on to ask for community benefits packages and to compare them to the district funded benefits. **Ask if that is fair.**

“How can the community be told to fund lifestyles they cannot afford for themselves.”

“We have a community with households struggling to survive yet we have been generously funded with their property taxes and income taxes at the state and federal level; it is time to say thank you and we understand the pain you are going through.”

“Perhaps we should put the union contract on the ballot next time since 85% of our budget is for the faculty and staff pay and benefits. Whereas, only 15% of our budget is used for materials and supplies, transportation, buildings, utilities, books, food, maintenance and so on.”

During negotiations, we were offering less raises than the union wanted, so the union president wrote us a letter. This letter used the emotional ploy they are very practiced at. The letter said, “what am I going to tell the single mom with four children who lives in a one-bedroom apartment”?

**You see, emotional think is effective for many.**

My thoughts were, “tell her congratulations, this community is able to fund her salary and benefits at the current level without the reductions they saw in their own household incomes.”

## **Where to Message**

Your school district will provide you with an email address.

*Remember, that your written messages may be a public record if they discuss district business.*

*Remember, that your district can and does review your emails, can filter incoming messages, and will, without warning, send your private emails to others in fulfillment of a public records request.*

The searches of your emails by the district to answer public records requests can send the requester emails that do not meet the public request, they will claim, in an effort to be “helpful.”

We suggest that you start an email address of your own district contacts where people can contact you without being screened or filtered out. This school email is also subject to the open records act and you must find and submit any records of your discussions of district business to the requester.

You will need to determine if the request for your emails is for a valid, specific and time framed subject. If you find personal, private or protected information contained in an email for either a student or community member be sure to consult with a legal authority to see if you need to redact that private information before you send the record to the requester.