

# Sounding Board

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## *Supporting the School Leader*

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### **Introduction**

Education has always been a challenging, yet rewarding, profession. The demands are high – public charter schools serve other people’s children with other people’s money; and the stakes are high – schools’ jobs are to prepare students for their future. This intersection of pressure points has never had more intensity than now. The education community is grappling with the trajectory of a Covid-19 world, a serious staffing shortage, and the polarization of viewpoints related to curricular content. In short, working in a school can feel like a war zone.



At their best, charter school leaders serve as the force field to protect teachers and staff from these extreme demands. They provide some cover for teachers to focus on making magic and fostering great outcomes in the students they serve. They also serve to elevate the real needs of students upward to the people and systems who have the power to make a difference (the school board, parents, community, authorizer, legislatures, etc.). The job is grueling, and by definition, there is no peer in the school that understands the nuances of the job and the struggles. Since the health of the leader is crucial to school success, it is important that board members effectively support the school leader.

### **What Does Support Look Like?**

Many board members struggle with understanding what support means. As volunteer members, it is hard to fathom the nuances of the job enough to be strategic in offering assistance. Indeed, each school leader is unique in what support will be useful or welcome. Below are some suggestions generated by school leaders in OW authorized schools that may provide a starting place.

- **Transparency.** Charter school leaders need to know where board members stand on issues affecting the school. Be honest and provide balanced feedback. Don’t just praise the good or criticize the failings. Be clear and specific on what is working, what isn’t, and your interest in supporting the work going forward. Instead of telling the school leader that they did a really good job this fall, consider saying, “I really liked the changes you made to the Open House and how you have worked with new families to make the transition easier. Would having a volunteer from the board at the event help next time?” There should be no “gotcha” moments in the board’s interaction with the school leader.
- **Regular Communication & Presence.** Don’t show up only at the board meetings. Check in with the school leader throughout the month, visit the school, and take part in school events. This provides important context for the decisions you make at the board level. How can you make a decision about a place that you don’t know or understand? Cultivate a relationship with your school leader so they know you are interested and available to be a sounding board or an extra set of hands. Your regular communication and your presence can be a source of both verbal and visible support.
- **Prioritize Professional Development.** As odd as it sounds, it can be hard for a school leader to pursue professional development in their own learning organization. The demands of the job must be absorbed when a school leader is off-site and many school leaders feel a sense of guilt when pursuing opportunities

to learn outside of in-house professional development. Boards should expect that their school leader will pursue professional development to grow in their profession, it should be part of the Board's evaluation process of the school leader and the Board should insist that the school leader make time to do so. Boards should expect that the school leader share what they are learning with the board, both so the board can join in the learning and so the board can ensure that the director actually pursues professional development.

- **Encourage Peer Networks.** While there may be only one school leader at your school, there are other charter school leaders in the OW portfolio or across the state that have similar job functions. Encourage your school leader to develop a network. Providing support for that activity can make a big difference in your school leader's longevity and also may provide some fresh insights and strategies for your school. OW hosts a monthly virtual office hours that can be a starting point for connecting with other directors.
- **Support Work/Life Balance.** The school leader's job could easily be 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Parents sometimes expect emails to be answered in hours, no matter when they send a message, and expect that the school leader will be available whenever they show up at the school. Wise boards help their school leader establish reasonable boundaries around when they are working and support those boundaries when they are questioned by the school's constituents. In addition, board members should also have reasonable expectations for what they ask of the school leader in terms of communication, response time, and supporting the board.
- **Assume Responsibility for Board Work.** Boards should take ownership of setting their meeting agenda, distributing the minutes, and preparing for the meetings. In some cases this may involve hiring a staff member to provide administrative support to the board, such as taking minutes, compiling board packets, or uploading documents to Epicenter. The school leader's job is complex enough. Boards should not expect the school leader to take on the administrative functions of the board as well.
- **Know Your Role.** Board members focus on governance, and school leaders focus on management. Board members frequently are the eyes and ears in the school community and may well be approached by individuals requesting the school take a particular action or change its approach. Listen respectfully, gain clarity on the concerns, and discuss the issue with the school leader. Remember that the school leader is given authority to make management decisions and likely has a larger view on the implications across the school. Unless those decisions conflict with approved policy, law, the charter contract, or safety, management decisions are the school leader's to make. Inserting yourself into such decisions undermines the school leader, threatens your and the board's relationship with the school leader, and runs the risk of making the situation worse.
- **Compensate Appropriately.** The school leader performs a key function for the school that no other position can easily fill. It should come with appropriate compensation, both in salary and benefits. Obviously, the salary will vary based on the size of the school and the school's budget. The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) performs a compensation survey every two years that helps the board determine what salary range might be appropriate. Remember also that compensation includes benefits and personal time off. Make sure that your benefits and time off provide some balance to the job duties and expectations of the school leader.
- **Ask How You Can Help, and Follow Through.** Every leader is different, and not every strategy on this list will be helpful. Making sure to communicate often that you want to help, and checking in to see if the school leader has ideas for how you can, will go a long way in communicating to the school leader that you "have their back." But the most crucial step is follow through. Many well-intentioned board members have volunteered to tackle tasks for the school leader or board and then dropped the ball. More often than not, it's the school leader's job to step in and help get things back on track. If you want to help, make sure you and the board can carry out the promise you are making.

School leaders can accomplish amazing things when they have the support of their boards to focus on student achievement, create a positive school culture, engage parents and families, and coach or mentor teachers and staff. The board plays a critical role in ensuring the school leader has the tools they need to succeed. It is only through developing and stewarding a meaningful relationship between the board and the school leader that you can truly provide this support.