
Who Will Censure This Board Member?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Owens (1991) points out that administration is typically studied in the department, school, or college that houses the academic discipline to which it is to be applied. In most instances, an individual is expected to possess knowledge and skills in that discipline; however, the degree to which these expectations exist varies from one discipline to another. For instance, school administrators are usually required to exhibit competency in teaching (e.g., holding a teacher's license) whereas hospital administrators are rarely medical practitioners.

In addition to discipline-specific expectations, studies conducted in different types of organizations have identified three general areas of knowledge and skill that are critical to all administrators. The first and most readily recognized entails management responsibilities. For example, a school superintendent is expected to know how to build and manage a budget. The second category includes analytical tasks such as problem solving, policy development, and long-range planning. The third includes the spectrum of human relations tasks such as communication, interpersonal relationships, and conflict resolution. Despite growing evidence that practitioners encounter serious problems in the human relations aspects of their work, this category of knowledge and skills often receives the least amount of attention in both preservice and in-service education.

School superintendents are expected to maintain positive relationships with many publics and groups, but perhaps none is more critical than the rapport they have with members of the school board. Many individuals who are elected and appointed to school boards are not professional educators, and even today, a good number are not even college graduates. Their judgments about the

superintendent are often influenced largely by their impression stemming from personal contact. Is the superintendent honest? Caring? Considerate? Fair?

This case reveals a situation in which a school board member reacts to a personal situation by trying to create problems for the school district. His behavior is deemed unethical by the board president; however, he wants the superintendent to be the one who reprimands him. In this respect, the case also focuses on ethical, legal, social, and political dimensions of school board membership.

In determining how to respond in this case, the superintendent needs to assess human relations issues. How can the conflict be resolved with a minimum of damage to (1) the school district, (2) the school board, and (3) the personal relationship between the superintendent and this particular board member?

KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION

1. Relationships between school boards and superintendents
2. Ethical, legal, social, and political dimensions of board membership
3. Conflict resolution
4. Scope of superintendent responsibilities
5. Knowledge and skills in interpersonal relationships

THE CASE

The School District and School Board

The Richmond County School District covers 420 square miles of predominantly rural land. There are 7,800 pupils enrolled in two high schools, five middle schools, and ten elementary schools. The area has been experiencing modest growth in the past decade largely because of the county's proximity to the state capital, which is only 35 miles away. Land costs and taxes in Richmond County have made it an attractive site for small manufacturing companies. Although there have been nearly 500 new homes built here in the last ten years, most have been in a rural subdivision. The county seat, Collins, with a stable population of about 20,000, is the only city or town of any size in the county.

The school board has seven members who are elected from designated geographic areas to assure balanced representation among the 12 townships. At one time, virtually all members of the school board resided on farms, but in the last 20 years, that condition has changed. The current board members are as follows:

John Mosure (president), a farmer

Iris Dembica, a housewife

Elizabeth Highland, a real estate broker

Elmer Hodson, a farmer

Norman Salliter, an accountant and state employee

Martin Schultz, an attorney
Alicia Waddell, a pharmacist

Mr. Hodson is serving his third three-year term in office; Mr. Mosure and Ms. Highland are serving their second three-year terms; and the remaining board members are serving their first terms.

Politically, the board really does not have factions; however, Mr. Hodson has often disagreed with the others on policy issues. Socially, the board members seem to have positive relationships with each other, but again Mr. Hodson is often the exception, preferring to keep to himself.

The Superintendent

Matthew Karman became superintendent in Richmond County three years ago. His prior job was as superintendent of a smaller district in the same state. He is a friendly, somewhat reserved person. Unlike his predecessor in Richmond County who had been dismissed largely because of poor relations with the school board, Mr. Karman worked well with school boards and employees.

Mr. Karman's efforts to create a positive relationship with individual school board members were planned. Among his initiatives for achieving this goal were the following:

1. He had lunch with the school board president twice each month.
2. He had at least two social events involving the school board at his house each year.
3. He tried to have lunch with each of the board members at least once each year.
4. He always made himself accessible to board members, and he instructed his staff to always put board member phone calls directly through to him.
5. He personally delivered materials for school board meetings to their homes or places of business.

Just a few months ago when his contract was renewed for another three years, all seven board members supported the action. Several board members commented in the public meeting that they were extremely pleased that Mr. Karman had kept them informed and that he had exhibited a sincere interest in their opinions on school matters. He felt he had succeeded in establishing a trusting and cooperative relationship with his board.

The Problem

Superintendent Karman was driving down a lonely country road as the winds swirled across barren cornfields partially covered by snow. He was completing his monthly task of personally delivering school board packets three days before

a meeting. The packets included recommendations and background information for items on the agenda. Although it was only mid-November, the chilling temperatures made it feel more like January. The fields were dotted with corn stalks cut about two inches above the ground that looked like wooden spikes someone had arranged to discourage trespassers.

After about 20 minutes of driving, Mr. Karman pulled into the driveway beside a large three-story farmhouse. He was greeted by a German shepherd barking alongside his car. The dog's barking summoned John Mosure from his barn where he was working on one of his tractors. He emerged with oil and grease all over his bib-overalls and hands.

"Greetings, John. I brought your board packet for our next meeting," Mr. Karman said as the farmer walked toward him wiping his hands on a soiled rag.

"Come on in the house and we'll have a cup of coffee," Mr. Mosure said as he waved his hand indicating that the superintendent follow him.

Although John Mosure has been on the board for nearly five years, this was his first experience as president. The two men had become good friends in the last three years, and they worked well together. Their wives also had become friends, and about every two months, the four of them went out to dinner together.

"John, I hope you've got some time today. I want to discuss a sticky issue with you, and it may take a little while."

The board member responded, "Well, we'll just make time. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to fix that tractor anyway. There is something wrong with the transmission, and I may have to take it into the dealer."

The two sat back enjoying the warmth of the kitchen and their coffee as Mr. Karman began telling him about the special problem.

"Two days ago, one of our high school principals, Bob Dailey at North Richmond High, received a telephone call from a friend who is the assistant commissioner of the state high school athletic association. This friend asked Bob if he knew a person named Elmer Hodson."

There was a moment of silence as John looked at the superintendent. Then he said, "Oh, no!"

Although Mr. Karman got along with Mr. Hodson, he knew that other board members generally left him alone. And despite the fact that John Mosure and Elmer Hodson are both farmers, they rarely take the same position on important matters. John, who has three children still enrolled in the schools, has been supportive of program expansion and has voted for two building-related referenda since being on the board. By contrast, Elmer opposes almost any effort to raise taxes. He has become the darling of the county taxpayers' association.

The superintendent continued with his story. "So, Bob tells his friend that he knows Elmer and he tells him that Elmer's on our school board. This guy with the athletic association then tells Bob that Elmer's sitting in his outer office waiting to file a complaint against Bob and the football coach at North Richmond High."

"A complaint about what?" asked the board president.

"Well, Bob's friend didn't know at the time because he had not talked to Elmer yet. He just knew he was there to lodge a complaint against Bob and Coach

Yates [the head football coach at North Richmond High School]. So he told Bob he was going to talk to Elmer and then call back before he did anything. About an hour later, Bob got another call. His friend said Elmer was all upset about the fact that the quarterback at North Richmond no longer lived with his parents. It seems that this student, Jeb Boswell, is now living with Coach Yates's family. So Elmer wants the athletic association to take action against North Richmond High School because they are playing this student even though Elmer claims he is no longer a legal resident of our school system. At the very least, he wants the athletic association to ban the student from playing in any further games."

"Is there any merit to his charges?" John Mosure asked.

"First," the superintendent answered, "there is no question that the student is living at the coach's house. It seems that the boy's parents moved to Colorado this past June. The boy and Coach Yates are pretty close, so Jeb asked his parents if it was okay to stay with Coach Yates to finish his senior year. He wants to graduate from North Richmond, and besides, Coach Yates is trying to get him a college scholarship to play football. Coach Yates and his wife agreed to work something out with the boy's parents to cover his room and board. So, since about late June, Jeb has indeed been living in the Yates home."

"Can a student do that and still be eligible for athletics?"

"Apparently so," the superintendent answered. "Before the final decision was made to have the student stay here, Coach Yates asked the athletic director at North Richmond to write a letter to the athletic association asking if this would be a violation. He was told that students whose parents moved out of a district could remain to finish their senior year without jeopardizing their eligibility so long as the parents and the school officials agreed to the arrangement. Bob Dailey, the athletic director, and the parents told Coach Yates that they had no objections to the boy staying here and continuing to play football."

"So, Elmer doesn't have any complaint. What's the problem?"

"John, we have to put this in perspective. Here we are one week before the state tournament in football. North Richmond has a 9 and 1 record and is one of the favorites to win the championship in their division. Jeb Boswell, the student in question, is the star of the team—he may even end up being all-state. You know who the backup quarterback on the North Richmond team is?"

The board president said he had no idea. "You have to remember, Matt, that I don't live in the North Richmond area. I'm a South Richmond booster [the other high school in the district]."

"The second string quarterback is a senior named Ron Hodson."

The two looked at each other and John smiled. The superintendent continued, "You got it, John. The second string quarterback is none other than the grandson of Elmer Hodson. Get the picture? Elmer's got an axe to grind because he feels this other kid has deprived his grandson from playing quarterback. At the very least, Elmer selfishly wants to see his grandson play in the state tournament. Mr. Dailey tells me, however, that the grandson doesn't know anything about what Elmer is doing. He's supposedly a pretty good kid, and probably would be embarrassed if he knew."

"You know, I just remembered something," commented John. "You recall last summer when we were approving contracts for employing driver education teachers. Elmer opposed Coach Yates being hired to teach driver education. He said he had heard that he was not a good instructor. Do you think that was linked to his feelings about his grandson as well?"

"Who knows. With Elmer, it's hard to tell. He votes against a lot of things. But what's on my mind is what we do about Elmer. I think his going to the athletic association without informing the board or the administration was unethical and divisive. As a board member, he should have voiced his concerns to either you or me before running to the state athletic association. Had he done so, he would have found out that there is no merit to his complaint. Further, he would not have given the athletic association officials a negative impression of our school district."

"What did the fellow from the athletic association do about Elmer?"

"Nothing really. He explained that there was no violation and even told him that North Richmond's athletic director had asked for a clarification about Job playing football for North Richmond. Elmer responded by suggesting that the official might just be covering up the matter."

"So, why don't we just forget about this. Elmer is Elmer. He'll always be a pain. Why voters keep electing him is beyond me. Sometimes I think they enjoy all the trouble he stirs up."

The superintendent was not willing to let this matter slide. "John, we have to issue some type of reprimand or do something. What he did was unethical. I think you and the entire board should meet with him privately and issue a formal reprimand. Sometimes I think he believes he can get away with this stuff because people are amused by his behavior. Maybe it's time to say enough."

The board president got up to refill the coffee cups. He then returned to his chair. "I don't know. I'm not sure a reprimand will do any good. Elmer's pretty stubborn. We might just give him a lot of publicity, and you know how he loves to get his name in the paper. How about if you talk to him, Matt? You're experienced in dealing with people. I'm not. Maybe the best way to handle this is to have you give him the reprimand. We should get the support of the other board members, though, and then you can tell him you are speaking for all of us. What do you say? Will you do it?"

THE CHALLENGE

Analyze the superintendent's actions in this case. What would you advise him to do at this point?

KEY ISSUES/QUESTIONS

1. If you were the superintendent, would you be concerned that this incident would affect your personal relationship with Elmer or any of the other board members? How about your relationship with the principal and other staff at North Richmond High?

2. Is it common that individual school board members are reprimanded for their behavior?
3. Instead of reprimanding the board member, what other actions might be taken?
4. Do you believe that the superintendent is correct in his judgment that Elmer was acting unethically by going to the state athletic association with his complaint?
5. Who should set standards for school board member behavior?
6. Do you believe that the superintendent was correct in taking this problem directly to the board president? Would it have been better to talk to Elmer first to get his side of the story?
7. Is it ethical or legal for school board members to vote on matters that affect members of their immediate families?
8. If you were considering to accept a superintendency, what social and political behaviors might reveal the way the school board operates?
9. If you were superintendent, would you tell the media about Elmer's behavior? Why or why not?
10. Determine if your state has provisions for removing school board members from office. If so, what are these provisions?
11. What experiences and elements of academic study typically prepare an individual for the interpersonal requirements of educational administration?
12. What is your assessment of the school board president in this case? Is it typical for a board president not to want to shoulder the responsibility of regulating peer behavior?
13. Assess the suggestion made by the school board president that the situation should just be ignored. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

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