Most people have little idea — or a mistaken idea — of how to think about the job of a board of education. How a school board works is hardly general knowledge.

Imagine what you would have learned at your mother's knee, had she been serving on a school board? What is conventional board wisdom? Is it true? (I consider good governance somewhat counter-intuitive. Conventional wisdom often is truer when turned on its head.)

On examination, the work of a school board is inherently complex. School boards function in a large, multifaceted, intricate system that extends to the state and federal level and touches the passions of many people. Plus, the law requires the work of school boards to be transparent to the community and the product depends on eight individuals — working together.

It's not surprising that a collection of "truths" — the way board members and superintendents typically talk about boards of education — have developed to make something so complex a little simpler.

1. "No surprises." Many consider this to be the cardinal rule. It means no one (superintendent, board member) gets surprised at any time — in the meeting or between meetings. Some people resist because they don't want the whole thing to appear scripted. Others love to play "got-cha." The truth of "no surprises" is respect. Each board member and superintendent must respect all the other participants and the processes the board team shares. Jump outside of respect for either people or processes, and someone will get surprised — and end up looking or feeling bad — and the work will suffer.

2. Trust is the foundation of good governance. Good governance is about roles and relationships. All members need to respect the various roles and live within good relationships. Both require effort and trust — trust that others will perform their own roles appropriately and trust that others are not out to get you or the system. Trust is earned by a system (and individually by participants) when integrity and quality outcomes are ensured. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, Patrick Lencioni identifies trust as the foundational basis of all teamwork efforts.

3. It's a meeting in public, not a meeting of the public. Many people, especially parents and community members, misunderstand the nature of a school board meeting. School boards provide leadership for what are typically multi-million dollar corporations. The board has important work to accomplish. And, to do that work, the board needs to be fully engaged around the table. The Illinois Open Meetings Act requires that public business be done in public, and that citizens have opportunity to observe, and comment, at every meeting. Wise school boards understand the difference between public comment and the rest of the meeting. They also create appropriate venues (coffees, forums, surveys) to engage the public, knowing that a formal school board meeting is limited in achieving this purpose.
4. **The most important thing a school board does is hire a superintendent.** No doubt, having a good superintendent will make board service easier and more satisfying. But a school board cannot make a wise hiring decision without clarity about the direction and purpose and needs of the district. Decisions (agreements) about direction and purpose are primary. With clarity in these areas, the board and the person they hire to serve as superintendent can forge a mutually interdependent partnership to the benefit of the whole district and its students.

5. **The board has one employee.** School boards instinctively know how important it is to have good staff, which is why they want to make sure staff decisions are done right. The counter-intuitive truth is that the board ensures quality by staying out of specific personnel decisions. The board does two things: 1) clarify expectations for the system, and thus for all staff, and 2) hire a good superintendent and insist that everyone else in the system works for that person. This keeps the lines of accountability clear. The superintendent is responsible for all aspects of the district, and the board empowers the superintendent so that it can be managed well. The board also nurtures a good relationship with the superintendent and thus models quality communication, collaboration and accountability.

6. **Individual board members have no power away from board meetings.** The school board is empowered by the state to perform a number of critical functions. Individual school board members have official power only at the board table. In practice, individual school board members can exercise all kinds of power. Wise and effective board members make sure they, and their colleagues, only exercise legitimate power and refrain from assuming authority in areas where none has been given.

7. **The essential board skill: being able to count to five.** Yes, the reality is board members only have power when they act with a majority of the board. It takes a majority (typically five votes) to accomplish anything. But the real power of the board is finding common ground on behalf of the whole community. Common ground can only emerge when all the voices are attended to. A board that runs rough shod over the minority (minority board members or minority citizen voices) is headed for trouble. A superintendent who attends to only the majority does a disservice to the system.

8. **School board members run for election as individuals, but must govern as part of a group (the board).** Many board members are ill prepared to work cooperatively with their board colleagues. Teamwork is a skill that must be nurtured. Board candidates make promises in the election and then come to understand their only power is the ability of the board to act as a whole. Likewise, many superintendents have not had much experience working in a collaborative setting. Part of the task of each board member and superintendent is to help build a team that is equal to the work.

9. **The board speaks with one voice (or it doesn't speak at all).** Essentially, in their actions, the board speaks to the superintendent, setting direction for the district: "Here's what the community expects us to achieve." Until the board reaches an agreement, no individual board member has a right to expect a particular action from the district. Unresolved conflicts are the board's work, and the board should stay at the question until a consensus can be reached. Only then can the board expect a district response. The key question: "Does the superintendent hear one voice, or does he/she hear multiple expectations, creating a no-win situation?"
10. **Roberts Rules guarantees you get your "say" but not necessarily your "way."** Every group needs some parliamentary procedures. Roberts Rules is about balancing the "rights of the individual" and "will of the majority." The question is whether any particular board has found the right balance. On some boards, it's expected everyone will quickly join ranks with the majority; a dissenting voice is rarely encouraged. Other boards have a culture where dissent is so prevalent there is no effort to find common ground. Good governance is a balance that values the individual voice and the ability of the board to act (speak). If a majority vote does not enable a clear way forward, it's time for the board to review its ability to work together.

11. **A wise superintendent knows he/she cannot get involved with board discipline.** Board members often look to the superintendent to fix a board member who is out of line. This is a misplaced thought. The superintendent works for the board, and the board cannot expect the superintendent to intervene in board disputes, or to take responsibility for keeping the board on the "straight and narrow." A local board of education must take responsibility for itself. Such responsibility is at the heart of quality board function.

12. **What gets measured gets done.** Effective boards know "what the board cares about will soon be what the district cares about." There is incredible power in providing a focus and direction for the organization. One way the board exercises leadership is in deciding what to monitor (measure). As it measures, wise boards assure the data gets used to learn how to do better, not to blame.

Most of us didn't learn about boards growing up. So, when did we learn? Or, how can we learn? For me, the key learning is that boards will do well to talk about these governance matters together.

What school boards really need is an agreement around the table going forward … and that local agreement needs to be reconstituted every time someone new shows up.

**References**