



Community Member Tries to Control Board Meetings

Historically, your school board meetings have been routine events. Board members generally get along. Funding has been a challenge, but not a source of major controversy. Few other issues have brought out large crowds. Consequently, board meeting processes have been informal and flexible. However, over the past few months things have changed. A disgruntled community member has begun to show up at every meeting. At first, he asked to speak whenever a finance-related item appeared on the agenda. The board president allowed him to do so almost at will. Now, he expects to speak on almost every agenda item, often accusing the board of ignorance and incompetence. As a result, board meetings have deteriorated into unpleasant and prolonged events. Now the board has turned to you for advice on how to bring the situation back under control. What guidance can you provide?

Key Considerations:

- Periods of relative calm can result in boards becoming overly casual and ignoring their own operating procedures.
- Board meetings are held in public, but they are not necessarily public meetings at which members of the audience are free to engage directly with the board.
- Start by structuring the board meeting agenda to include opportunities for audience members to speak at specifically designated times and under specific conditions.
- Separate input on agenda and non-agenda items and structure response processes accordingly.
- If a significant number of people want to address a specific item or issue, consider delaying action on the item and scheduling a separate listening session or hearing.
- Once procedures are in place, encourage the board to follow them regardless of the issue, size of the audience, or who wants to speak.

Response:

Your school board is far from being alone in this dilemma. Most governing bodies have a tendency to become informal and even complacent with meeting procedures during extended periods of relative calm and low controversy. In pursuit of being friendly and welcoming to meeting attendees, members bend or even ignore formal processes without consequence. The reality that board meetings are meetings of the board held in public becomes blurred with the perception that they are public meetings at which members of the audience have a right to engage directly with the school board.

Unfortunately, when someone who is motivated to take over or disrupt the work of the board emerges, regaining control can be a challenge. The return to more formal and adhered-to procedures is likely to be met with accusations of "high handedness" and lack of openness to the interests of citizens, especially from those who want to influence the school board's work. Yet, the dissenting voices almost without exception are those who have been abusing the situation as it has existed in the past.

A good place to begin your advice to the school board is the meeting agenda. The agenda represents the "game plan" for the meeting and signals to attendees what matters are to be considered and decided at the meeting. The agenda can also signal when and under what conditions members of the audience are allowed to speak directly with the school board. For example, early on the agenda might be an opportunity for members of the public to address items that will be considered later on the agenda. This time allows those who are interested to share their thoughts, offer recommendations, and present their questions. The information and questions collected at this point can later be taken into consideration and addressed when specific items are considered. Many school boards limit comments and questions during this period to three to five minutes to avoid "filibustering" and allow time for everyone to speak. However, it is not a time to engage in dialogue and attempt to respond to every question. Responses, as appropriate, can be offered when agenda items are considered. The key is to be consistent regardless of which and how many people are speaking. Failure to follow the procedures at one meeting or with one person often creates controversy and leads to accusations of unfair treatment the next time limitations are placed on how long people can speak.

A second, separate opportunity to speak to the school board might be offered for members of the audience to address items not on the meeting agenda. Similar time parameters can be placed on this opportunity. However, in many states, the school board cannot take up items and issues presented by the public that are not on the published meeting agenda. Consequently, comments and questions can be accepted but not formally addressed during the meeting. Consult your state's open meetings statutes to determine what flexibility and parameters your board faces before deciding your advice in this area. Regardless, speakers will have an expectation that they receive a response to their issues. The options for handling these situations are several. The board might decide to place the item on a future agenda or note when the item will be considered in another forum. The board might request that you or a member of the administrative team respond in writing or in person to the question or issue presented. In some cases, the speaker might be directed to another body such as the legislature or local municipal governing body who is in a better position to provide the information sought.

When members of the audience attempt to engage the board during the meeting outside of these opportunities, they might be offered an additional opportunity at the end of the meeting agenda to offer further comment on the board's discussion and work. This option allows the board to avoid cutting off input while also managing its responsibility to consider, decide, and otherwise accomplish its work as part of a formal meeting.

If a significant number of audience members are concerned about and want to address a specific issue, consider recommending that the board delay action on the item and schedule a special hearing to accept comments and recommendations from the public. This approach can diffuse some of the frustration surrounding the matter and signal commitment from the board to listen and consider perspectives from members of the public. It also positions the board to have the best information available before making a decision on emotional items.

In the end, people who are committed to controlling and disrupting public meetings will still be a challenge, but you and the school board can reposition the person to have a marginal impact on the board's ability to conduct the meeting and assure that others have an opportunity to be heard also.