

## Addressing Incivility in a Civil Manner

**IN MY FIVE YEARS** as a principal and 23 years as a superintendent, I experienced plenty of conflict. School board members disagreed with each other or me. Parents got angry at teachers, principals or the whole school board. Teachers sometimes squabbled with each other. Union leaders were combative as they asserted positions in conflict with the interests of the school district. Taxpayer groups pushed for lower taxes and aggressively challenged spending decisions.

Sitting smack dab in the middle of that cauldron of conflict is the superintendent. Is it possible for that individual to navigate in a civil, respectful way that addresses the concerns of

constituents while protecting the interests of the school district? I do believe our actions can prevent conflict or deal with it effectively. We can maintain and promote civility.

### Acting Principally

I offer the following principles for addressing uncivil behavior based on my experience:

✱ Treat offensive people with dignity and respect, even if you think they don't deserve it. Remember these two key thoughts: First, by virtue of your role as a superintendent, you are a role model at all times. Second, the only person whose actions you control are your own.

I often documented in writing employees and students for egregious behavior, only to have them thank me at the conclusion of our conversation. As incongruous as that sounds, it came about because I treated them respectfully, even though their actions were inappropriate.

✱ Respond to anger gently. Students or staff (and sometimes board members) who have done something wrong often are angry and frustrated. Rather than responding to their anger with anger, which only will inflame the situation and produce acrimony, it is much wiser to practice the wisdom from Proverbs 15:1 — “a gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.” This axiom has been defusing volatile situations for centuries.

✱ Resist the urge to put the offenders in their place. Instead, actively listen, take notes if appropriate and summarize their thoughts by restating them. Doing so will clearly communicate that you understand their viewpoint on the issue. Only then respond.

In such cases, I focused on their actions that I considered inappropriate, calmly explaining that actions have consequences and that their actions merited discipline.

✱ Use data to support your point of view. Data, when available, depersonalizes the situation. It prevents people from thinking your actions are based on your positional authority or because you don't like them. In fact, by clearly explaining the empirical reasoning behind your decisions, you can generate support for those decisions.

✱ Use a soft, monotone voice when redirecting the offender. Don't talk down to people or communicate anger or disrespect. Disagree without being disagreeable. It will be harder for someone to be uncivil toward you if you treat them respectfully.

✱ Maintain a working relationship with the person who committed the inappropriate act. Keep your eye on building the relationship. Your goal is to continuously improve your school district while creating support for the mission and for leadership. Therefore, when addressing angry behavior in a civil manner, you must communicate that you're not out to win a battle.

✱ Encourage the offenders to put their bad behavior behind them and move forward. Acknowledge the past contributions of your staff or board members to improving your school and express your belief and expectation they can continue to do so despite their recent misstep. In the case of students, express your confidence that, although they erred, they are not the first nor will they be the last to turn themselves around.

An atmosphere of mutual respect does not occur naturally, but it can be created by forward-thinking school administrators who realize the importance of treating people with respect and dignity, despite occasional inappropriate behavior.

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It was a dark and stormy board meeting...



# SchoolAdministrator

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS

**“When board members take on the role of THE TRUTH POLICE during public comment periods to correct factual errors, they NEGLECT THEIR ROLE as respectful listeners.”**



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## Dealing With a Bully in Public Session

**THE SCHOOL BOARD** meeting is off to its usual start: roll call, pledge of allegiance and announcements. The agenda then calls for public comment — a period when anyone in the audience can fill out a card and come forward when called by the board president to talk for up to three minutes on any issue not on the agenda. Today, there is just one card.

The president reads the name on the card: “Betty Burlmore.” Everyone knows from past experience that Burlmore tends to engage in nasty tirades. She begins: “I come before you to ask why you waste the taxpayers’ money on a top-heavy administration. Look at everyone sitting up there. Why do we need so many assistant superintendents? Can’t the superintendent handle the job?”

She asks the board to get rid of the assistant superintendent for special education and let the assistant superintendent for instruction handle her duties.

One board member has had enough. He interrupts to educate Burlmore about the role of administration. “May I just point out, Betty, that our district has a much lower administrator ratio than other districts our size. According to statistics from the state school board association, we should have two additional administrators. Our current administrative staff is working very hard and doing a fine job for us but they are stretched thin already,” he says.

The explanation only makes Burlmore angrier. “I can see we have a board that wishes to continue wasting the taxpayers’ money on unneeded administrators. Reducing central-office administrators is just the start. We also should fire some principals. Can’t two schools share one principal?”

“Betty, your time is up,” the board president quietly chimes in.

Betty’s reply is sharp and loud. “Oh no it’s not. I was interrupted, and I should have a chance to respond. That makes me think of lots of other ways to cut the administrative fat.”

### \* Listening Time

This episode has the potential of spinning out of control. By challenging the speaker, the board member not only provoked the speaker

to make even more outrageous comments, but also prolonged the meeting, increased the chances that the board president will lose control of the meeting and violated the board’s procedural rules.

What the board member said was factually correct and relevant, but the public comment portion is a time for the board to listen to community members. Board members have plenty of chances to express their views. When board members take on the role of the truth police during public comment periods to correct factual errors, they neglect their role as respectful listeners.

The superintendent also has a role in preventing poor boardsmanship. The superintendent could exercise a little emergency First Aid at the instant the board member started challenging the speaker by saying, “I will be glad to make that information available on our district website.” Or the superintendent may need a more direct comment: “I’m sorry to interrupt, but the board can’t discuss this issue because it is not on the agenda.”

### Exercising Restraint

Dealing with a bully during public board meetings can be unpleasant, such as when a speaker uses a public meeting to make inflammatory statements. However, rather than engaging in conversation with the speaker, board members should be reminded they will get a chance to talk later. The only exception to using such restraint is when the speaker slanders an employee or endangers the privacy of a child or the like. In this case, the superintendent or board president must interrupt and get the speaker back on track.

A long-term solution is to ensure the board has an adopted procedure and in-service training on the conduct of board meetings. Through board workshops or individual discussions with board members, the superintendent can help the board develop a tradition of exercising respectful tones at meetings.

Of course, the superintendent and cabinet also can model this at meetings. An unlisted part of the superintendent’s job description is to help prevent members from behaving badly at board meetings.

## WORKSHOP GROUND RULES\*

Practice active listening, be fully present.

Complete each agenda topic before moving to the next topic.

Stay on the topic being discussed. Use the parking lot tool for issues/ideas that need another forum/time.

Model the professional behavior you expect and want to see from others.

Everyone contributes and no one dominates.

Speak of others as if they are present.

\*A true facilitator does not determine the outcome; they guide the process.