Using Action Sheets to focus decision making

Board members rarely come to the board table with all the information they need to make a sound decision, and depend on administrative staff to fill in the gaps, help them frame the issues, and guide the board through recommendations.

This background and context can be addressed on the fly (the superintendent or designee responds as questions are raised) or through the inclusion in the agenda packet of information where questions are anticipated. Many school districts have found that including in the agenda packet Action Sheets—routinely developed for each item upon which the board is expected to make a decision—significantly focuses the work of the board, makes meetings substantially more efficient, and improves the quality of the decision making. Many districts have chosen to develop Information Sheets for reports and other items upon which the board is not expected to make a decision; such sheets essentially provide a highly summarized introduction to the report or other item that follows.

What makes a good Action Sheet? Practice varies widely. Some are simply letters to the board from the superintendent expressing his or her recommendation and providing some essential background information; others may be bulleted outlines by which each topic is analyzed (cost, relationship to strategic plan, implications for student achievement, alternatives considered, etc.)

A bit of time spent on Action Sheets can save a lot of time in decision making

Anticipating what the board members will need to know to make a sound decision and addressing that need with Action Sheets—of whatever form—efficiently conveys essential information that can speed the decision, keep the board focused on the point at hand, and minimize having to suspend action on an item pending further information. The form and scope of Action Sheets should be determined by the board and superintendent together. This determination can ensure the superintendent is prepared to answer questions most often asked by board members and assure board members that staff will know in advance what information the board needs for decision making.

Although this may seem like more information than the administration currently provides for agenda items, a closer look will show that most of these issues are addressed at one time or another on agenda items. When they are not, staff usually has to do additional work to find the answers before a meeting, or decisions may be delayed while the information is gathered. Using a form like the one recommended will likely save time in the long run, as common questions are answered in summary form for each agenda item in advance.

Why these questions?

The items in the sample have been included for important reasons.

- They focus on questions the board should ask in its governance and oversight role.
- They ensure that the focus of discussion is on district goals and expected results.
- They address questions frequently asked by board members and those that—if not answered—can create tension between the board and the superintendent or expose the board to making decisions without adequate information about possible consequences.
**Purpose of agenda item**

When board members are not clear what they are being asked to do, valuable time can be wasted discussing issues on which the board has no authority to act. Adding this item ensures that board members are clear from the beginning whether they are going to have to make a decision (which is a signal to study and prepare to deliberate), or whether the board is simply hearing a report about something that is within the superintendent's authority to handle. The latter circumstance, while allowing the board to ask questions and stay informed, is a signal that time need not be spent debating an issue since there is no decision to be made. In fact, when background information is included in advance about the “information only” items, the items may require very little time in the meeting at all.

**Authority for this action**

For boards anxious to find more time to discuss significant issues such as student achievement and district accountability, including this item can be a way to “weed out” items of an administrative nature in which the board has no direct authority. It can also help the board to distinguish between "action" items and “information only” items and allot appropriate time for those items. For example, if there is no district policy that indicates a requirement that the board take action on a particular issue, or that the board “ensures” that a particular action is happening (performing its oversight role), then the item is probably an “information only item.” On the other hand, a reference in a legal or local policy gives the board a clear picture of its authority to consider and/or act on a particular issue. Even a discussion about the possible need to initiate or revise a district policy, goal, or reordering of priorities would have a clear directive in laws that give the board authority to create policy, approve goals, and set direction for the district.

**Strategic objective, goal, or need addressed**

If no other question is answered about agenda items, this one should be. Although not every agenda item will have a direct correlation to a district goal or student performance objective, failing to ask the question could cause a board to take action on something that would ultimately divert efforts and resources away from a goal previously agreed on as a district priority. In order to ensure this doesn’t happen, each agenda item should have a statement that indicates whether the item has an effect on priority goals, and if so, whether that is a positive effect or a negative one. This does not preclude the board from taking action that may be detrimental to an established goal in the short run, but it enables the board to do so in a deliberate manner, carefully considering whether the issue under consideration has risen to a level that is higher in priority than a long-term goal.

**Summary**

When a generic “background information” section is included, some important information may be included and some may not. To ensure that all critical questions are addressed, the more detailed headings in this form are recommended. If the issue has been before the board in the past, and if future action is expected, such as action required by a certain date or when information will be brought back to the board after public hearings or committee work, a brief overview of previous history is useful before getting into details. This is also a useful place to identify requirements of law.
Alternatives considered

While the board doesn’t necessarily need to hear about every alternative a superintendent explored before coming up with a recommendation for action, presenting a summary that identifies the number of other alternatives considered, or a comparison of the top three programs or contractors considered, can help the board understand why the final recommendation was made. It also builds trust for the board to hear the superintendent’s rationale for rejecting other alternatives in favor of his or her final recommendation. The important thing is for the superintendent to have an opportunity to demonstrate to the board the scope of alternatives considered, and the careful consideration and logic that led to the final recommendation.

Comments received

To most boards, the opinions of staff, parents, students, and community members are very important to any decision or action. Although ultimately the board may not be able to decide according to the wishes of a small, vocal group, or even a silent majority for legal, economic, or other reasons, it is important to understand what the effect of various actions is on people in the district. Understanding those reactions can help the board and administration craft a more suitable option or at least better craft a response that explains why the action was taken and how it will ultimately benefit the students and community. Including this question on each agenda item ensures that staff remember to pass along any comments received from individuals or advisory groups consulted about the issue.

Administrative recommendation

This question is usually the “meat” of the agenda item. But simply making a recommendation doesn’t guarantee that the board will understand why it is important to carry it out. This item should include the reasons the recommendation should be approved, that is, its advantages and benefits, especially for student achievement. All other beneficiaries (teachers, parents, community) should be second in consideration to students. And although many superintendents may be reluctant to admit it, there are usually downsides to any recommendation. Sometimes, boards are mistrustful of recommendations that only tout the positives. Pointing out the possible problems to the board demonstrates that the superintendent is indeed aware of and has considered contingency plans to overcome them if they materialize. It also gives the superintendent an opportunity to explain why this action is recommended despite possible problems that might occur. Telling “the whole” story behind a recommendation promotes trust with the board, but that includes being honest about what might happen if the board elects not to approve the superintendent’s recommendation. If a board chooses to take a different action from the one initially recommended, it needs to be aware of the possible consequences.

Fiscal impact and cost

This is probably the most frequently asked question by board members when action is required on any issue. Not all actions will have a fiscal impact, but including this question on the Action Sheet ensures that the question is considered before staff brings a recommendation forward. Be sure that this item considers not only the immediate cost to the current year’s budget, but also possible future costs to implement a program on a long-term basis. Approving a grant may be very attractive when the money allows a district to implement a new program and sustain it for two or three years, but the board must also consider whether the benefit will be great enough to continue paying salaries and other costs associated with the program when the grant funds run out.
**Monitoring and reporting time line**

A frequent complaint of board members is that a decision is made and then they never hear what became of it. Was the program successful? Did the contractor perform as expected? Did the policy accomplish what was desired without too much difficulty implementing it? Addressing monitoring and reporting responsibilities on the Action Sheet ensures that the board and superintendent are clear on who is responsible for evaluating the result of a decision, how and when it will be assessed, and when (if necessary for oversight purposes) the board will receive any follow-up reports.

**Creating an appropriate Action Sheet template for your district**

TASB has developed a sample Action Sheet to assist districts in building a template that addresses the informational needs, interests, and priorities of board members. This tool can be used by the board superintendent team to determine the form and scope of a district’s Action Sheets:

- Which items would the board like included on every agenda item?
- Which are important to include especially for action or decision items?
- Which would help your board meetings to be more effective in making effective decisions and accomplishing results?

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