



THE JOB OF A BOARD CHAIR

THE POSITION IS ABOUT FACILITATION, NOT POWER

Last issue's piece on the job of the board secretary got such a positive response and so many requests for follow up that in this issue, we will be focusing on the job of the board chair.

The Chair of a charter school's board is important. Without a strong and effective chair, your board will flounder. Board meetings will take hours and hours and accomplish very little in the way of governing the school.

While the chair needs to be "strong," the position should not be "powerful." If that's confusing, allow me to try and explain the difference.

During meetings, the chair must be robust in his or her use of delegated authority to keep things on track. The chair should not be afraid to call other members or the public out for veering off topic or not following the rules for public meetings.

Outside of meetings, the board should be equally vigorous in restraint. Other than the *strength* that the chair needs to exercise in running public meetings, the board chair has no *power* beyond that held by any other board member.

The chair isn't the "leader" of the board in the same way that the principal or director is the "leader" of the school.

In short, the chair's job can be summed up like this: "Ensure the integrity of the board's process, facilitate efficient meetings and board decision-making, and occasionally represent the board and its positions to outside entities." (You can find a sample Job Description for the position [here](#).)

Tip 1: Know the rules

To be strong when conducting meetings, the board chair must know the rules for running them—who can speak, when, how often. How motions are made, how the public can comment. [Robert's Rules of Order](#) has very detailed rules that you can find in [hundreds of pages](#) or [front-and-back](#) formats.

But for a charter board of under a dozen members, you might find that simpler rules do fine most of the time. Your board ought to be able to agree on simple rules about how

many times a member can speak to a motion, how long they can speak, what public comment looks like, and so forth.

As long as those rules are agreed in advance (no matter how complicated or simple they might be) the board chair can and should strongly abide by them.

Tip 2: Bring a buddy

Remember—the board chair has the same "power" as all other board members: a single vote. While the chair has a facilitation role during meetings, outside of meetings, that authority goes away. People outside the board don't always recognize that fact, though, so the chair ought to take steps to reinforce it.

When meeting with the school director, don't meet alone.

Having another board member along emphasizes that the chair isn't acting alone.

Tip 3: Speak only as authorized

The chair occasionally will take on the role of spokesperson for the school or the board, especially if the media is involved. When speaking in that role, the chair should only state positions that have been publicly taken by the board.

Here the chair must be cautious. Statements of personal opinion may be taken as

official policy by those outside the school. When speaking in an official capacity **avoid stating personal opinions**.

Conclusion

One of the issues that a chair will always be working around is the perception that his or her actions are those of the school. Peoples' perception and judgment is something the chair can't control but *can* influence.

Establishing and following clear and simple rules, always acting in concert with others, and carefully avoiding personal statements will help.

Plus, board meetings will be more efficient. The job of the chair (and of all board members) will take a little less time and cause a little less stress.

The chair needs to be "strong" in carrying out delegated authority, but the position holds no more "power" than any other member of the board.

KEY ELEMENTS OF YOUR CHARTER

HAVING A "CHARTER HIGHLIGHTS" DOCUMENT CAN HELP PEOPLE READ, UNDERSTAND, AND FOLLOW YOUR MISSION

Your "charter," which authorizes you to operate a school, can be an unwieldy document. Depending on your state, your charter can run in the hundreds of pages, many of which contain little besides bureaucratic jargon.

In such a doorstop of a volume, the key aspects of your charter can get lost amid the mumbo jumbo that most states require as part of the charter application process.

Each school should ensure that the heart of their charter is available and accessible to all. A hidden charter is about as good as no charter at all.

If you want the principles contained in your charter to be understood and applied with fidelity in the school—with parents, teachers, board members, students—everyone must understand what's in it.

The best way to get your charter to be well-known and understood is to have the key parts of it accessible and understandable.

If you haven't already, your school board should

create an ad-hoc committee or working group to cull the most important and mission-centric sections of your charter in a format that you can distribute widely and that won't scare people away from reading it.

Leave out sections that include job descriptions, state compliance requirements, calendars, schedules, and the other details of things that are in every charter application.

Pull out sections about your mission, philosophy, education programs, and the rationale behind them.

Schools that have done this find that they can get a quality summary of their charter in a dozen to twenty pages (including pictures!) that people *actually read*.

Giving your school community a readable and understandable version of your charter will help infuse the entire school with a better understanding of your mission, vision, and values and give your philosophy long-term life within the school.



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