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Recognizing School Board Members: A Path to Collaboration and Understanding

By Peg Pennepacker, CAA, and Dan Schlafer

In general, people are paying more attention to school boards these days as families and communities realize how many policies and decisions school boards make. In most cases, school boards are elected local officials who are community members committed to improving schools. They contribute many volunteer hours fulfilling their school-related responsibilities and duties. These professionals are committed individuals who serve their school district and seek out the best for their students, parents, stakeholders and communities.

Building relationships with these decision-makers in the school district can only contribute to the success of the district in all areas including interscholastic athletics. A good relationship takes time to build. Along the way trust is formed, collaboration grows and the collective thrives.

Recognizing the efforts of school board members and including them as important allies in the mission of education-based athletic programs will facilitate awareness of the value a school's athletics program has in building a positive school community. This is the first step to developing the collaboration and understanding necessary to fulfill the mission of education-based athletics in a school. Another by-product of this key collaborative process for athletic directors is a deeper understanding of the policy, planning and promotion roles that are inherent to being an effective school board member, which is a win for both sides of this equation.

School board members may not have the foundational background of a school's athletic program and may not be aware of the time, energy and emotional commitment invested by athletic administrators and coaches in the lives of the student-athletes entrusted in their care. Some, in fact, may have never played interscholastic sports.

Education in American schools goes far beyond the traditional classroom. Education-based athletics is a term often used to describe the United States' model of incorporating sports within the middle school and high school settings. The education-based athletics experience as a part of a student's overall educational experience is unique to American schooling and provides learning opportunities

in a "non-traditional" classroom setting occurring after the regular school day has concluded. This concept is well-known to high school and middle school athletic directors and school administrators but may not be realized by the school district's school board members.

Listed are some examples in which athletic administrators and school administrators can recognize school board members to develop a collegial and professional relationship to create a positive and supportive school athletics program.

- Send written congratulations to newly elected school board members.
- Recognize and welcome their election on the school's social media platforms.
- Regularly attend monthly school board meetings. Be present at those meetings – sit in the front row, make eye contact, take notes and converse with board members when the meeting ends.
- Request to share presentations at school board meetings. This is an opportunity for athletic administrators to celebrate the good things happening in education-based athletics and to acknowledge student-athletes and coaches' efforts.
- Personally invite school board members to attend athletic events. Some school board members may never have attended an athletic event; therefore, those members may need additional support or education regarding attending an event.
- Ask school board members to act as an "honorary captain" at sporting events. Invite them to sit on the bench or walk the sidelines, and be present at practice, at the pregame meal and in the locker room before and after games.
- If the school board has an Extracurricular Committee, attend those meetings regularly and encourage student-athletes and coaches to attend as well.
- Have student-athletes write thank-you notes to school board members; use this opportunity to develop relationships with student-athletes and school board members.



- Invite school board members to attend pre-season coaches' meetings. This can give school board members a true sense of the dynamics of the athletic department operation.
- Send monthly newsletters to your school board which share schedules, results, human-interest stories of student-athletes, coaches and volunteers. Include a genuine "thank you" message to board members, not only for their financial support, but for the mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual boost they provide.
- Include school board members on committees such as a school district athletic committee, gender equity committee or strategic planning committee. School board members should be included as important stakeholders in the community and decision-makers in the school district.
- Invite and recognize school board members at parent meetings and end-of-the-year celebration banquets. The more they know, the more they will feel connected to the interscholastic athletics program.
- Solicit the state athletic director's association to recognize school board members at the conference banquet. Invite school board members to attend the conference.
- Include school board members in sports team programs. Post a photo of the board and a summary of the importance of a school board.
- Utilize scoreboards and video boards at sports event facilities to include a "thank you" message for school board members.
- Profile board members on the school's athletics page of the school's website and include information about their careers, hobbies, volunteer activities and other interesting facts.
- Invite school board members to attend student-athlete leadership council meetings or gatherings. Allow for the opportunity for school board members to interact with student-athlete leaders.
- Speak positively about school board members in private and publicly.

Recognizing and welcoming school board members into the world of education-based athletics will ultimately lead to an under-

standing of a school's athletics program and the valuable part that it plays in the educational life of the students who participate in the program. Many school board members may not be able to spend time in their schools on a regular basis due to their work schedule. Athletic directors can offer school board members a look into the real needs, experiences and celebrations of a school's student-athletes and the athletics program. This can provide a perspective that will inform about the decisions they make.

As citizens who serve students and represent their communities, school board members face complex and demanding challenges. School board members are ordinary people who demonstrate extraordinary dedication to the school districts they serve. While they all come from different backgrounds and live different lives, these individuals come together with the common goal of helping students learn, grow and enjoy their educational experiences including education-based athletics. Because high school athletic programs and leaders play an important role in the culture of the community, it is incumbent upon them to build bridges with all community stakeholders including school board members. It is only by first recognizing the important role that school board members play in a school-community that collaboration and understanding can occur. Trust and support can then be obtained to produce positive student outcomes in all school programs including education-based athletics. **HST**

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Peg Pennepacker, CAA, served 36 years in public education including 26 years as a high school athletic director. She is an NIAAA national faculty member and instructor for the four legal issues in athletics courses. She is a member of the High School Today Publications Committee and currently a school board member in the Upper Perkiomen School District, Pennsburg, PA. She can be contacted at pegpenpacker@gmail.com.

Dan Schlafer dedicated 42 years to students in public and private, parochial schools as a teacher, department chair, coach, athletic director, and central office supervisor. He was elected to four terms on the Cumberland County Tennessee School Board, served as chairman, was elected to the Tennessee School Boards Association Board of Directors and was TSBA's 2009 School Board Member of the Year. He is TSBA's ex-officio member of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association's Board of Control and Legislative Council and has been enshrined in the TSSAA Hall of Fame. Schlafer can be reached at danschlafer@comcast.net and on his website at dansplan.com.