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Highly Effective Meetings

Agendas and Board Packets

Overview

Common sense suggests that charter school board meetings must be organized in ways that forward the work of the board toward successfully implementing its key goals. Yet we've all sat through board meetings that veer off course, last for what feels like days, or do not actually accomplish anything. Many ingredients go into a successful meeting—great facilitation, conversation aligned with long-term goals, and a focus on results. But one of the simplest components to a great meeting is creating a strong agenda and materials.

Charter school board meeting materials should include two key components:

Strategic agenda that drives the conversation toward achieving annual and long-term goals, outlines the flow of the conversation, and sets expectations for participation and outcomes

Board packet that typically includes

- School leader report updating the board on key school activities, upcoming events, or other topics the leader wants to relay to the board (See Charter Board Partners' School Leader Report Tool)
- Committee reports
 - Minutes updating the full board on the activities of the individual committees
 - Preparation materials for committee-led discussions at the board meeting
- All background information relevant to the agenda

Strategic Agenda

Building a strategic agenda takes time and thought. Do not just look at the agenda from the previous meeting and change the date at the top of the page. School leaders and board chairs should jointly build the agenda that achieves the following goals:

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Further the board work toward the school's annual goals and strategic plan.

- Boards should approve annual calendars with agenda items at *the beginning of each fiscal year*. When creating each agenda, include these approved calendar agenda items accordingly. Use CBP's Annual Charter School Board Calendar Tool to guide your board.

Sequences the discussion so that the most strategic and critical topics are tackled first.

- Many boards include significant reporting and ordinary board business as their first agenda items; yet board members are the most fresh, engaged, and focused at the beginning of the meetings. Engage them in the most important conversations first, so if they grow tired later in the meeting, it is when less critical issues arise (such as approving the minutes).

Outline the agenda using the same format throughout the year that clearly states how the meeting will proceed and points to how a board member should prepare. Many boards use simple tables to organize their agendas. Regardless of format, include the following:

Item: Identifies the key topic for each part of the discussion. Make sure to number each agenda item and use the same numbering when labeling the background materials so board members may easily link their preparation to the agenda items.

Lead: Identifies who will lead this part of the conversation. It is important that the board chair confirm this member's participation before sending out the agenda.

Action: Describes what action the board needs to take regarding this item.

Options could include "Vote," "Discussion," or "For Your Information (FYI)."

Relevant Background Materials: Highlight key documents that board members should review prior to the board meeting in order to participate fully. Make sure to number each document according to its relevant agenda item and include it in the board packet.

Time: Note the amount of time the board will spend on each item. Be thoughtful about time allocation so the agenda is accurate and can be successfully completed within the given amount of time.

Board Packets

Effective and efficient board packets prepare board members to fully participate at meetings. Make sure your board packets:

Are well-organized, concise, and easy to follow. Remember to number all materials with their relevant agenda item numbers when possible.

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Include all regularly reported information¹:

- Written school leader report that updates boards on key activities, responsibilities, and results²
- Board meeting minutes from the prior meeting
- Committee meeting minutes³

Briefing Sheets

Help board members make the link between each agenda item and the strategic goals of the school by providing concise, clear background materials for each item. If possible, identify how this fits into the critical work of the board for the year and long term. Many boards include briefing sheets for each agenda item to help guide board members through the materials and prepare them for relevant board meeting conversation. Whether or not your board uses briefing sheets, all background materials should include information on the item and recommendations for the board's consideration. For example, if the board needs to vote to approve the strategic plan, the final draft of this plan should be included with a briefing sheet reminding members of the history of the planning process and the specific action that the board needs to take at the upcoming meeting.

Briefing sheets often include recommended motions as a starting point for board members, however, some experts suggest providing two alternative motions for the board to consider. Board consultant Michael Vanderpool believes that "recommended motions are passion killers for board members⁴," suggesting that it leads to groupthink and absolves members of carefully considering the item themselves. Charter Board Partners encourages you to try the alternative motions approach.

Roles & Timing

School leaders and board chairs must agree on and communicate roles for creating agendas and sharing materials at the beginning of each year. Typically, tasks are completed

¹ Boards may use a consent agenda for routine items that do not require discussion, but instead may be voted on as a package all at once. A board may request that an agenda item be pulled out of the consent agenda for discussion prior to the motion to approve. This could save precious board time if you find that your board gets stuck on routine items and approvals.

² Use CBP's Tool School Leader Reports for guidance on this component.

³ Including committee minutes in the packet complies with open meeting laws and helps all board members understand the work happening across the entire board. These may or may not relate to an agenda item. If they do not need to be discussed, simply include them in the consent agenda or at the end of the packet with a Briefing indicating that they are an FYI.

⁴ Vanderpool, Michael. "Beyond the Dashboard-Designing a New System to Tame the Information Monster." BoardSource Leadership Forum. DC, Washington. 10 Oct. 2014. Speech.

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as follows:

Creating agenda: Board chair and school leader agree on the agenda for each meeting. To build that agenda they

- use the charter school board's annual calendar (See CBP's Annual Calendar Tool)
- ask all committee chairs if they have items that need board level discussion
- reflect on board discussions needed based on evolving or unanticipated events

Creating and disseminating board packets: School staff is responsible for pulling together and disseminating all board materials. However, the board chair and school leader should set expectations for board members about what should be included in those reports and when they should be sent to staff.

- Board packets should be disseminated to board members at least 72 hours in advance of the meeting. Many boards leverage online document storage systems (e.g., Google Docs) to house these materials.

Please find samples and templates below for preparing board meeting agendas and board packets.

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Templates and Samples

Sample Charter School Board Meeting Agenda

Apex Public Charter School Board of Trustees Meeting Agenda

January 28, 2014

6:45–8:45 p.m.

Agenda Item	Lead	Action	Relevant Materials	Time
1. Mission Moment	School Leader	N/A	N/A	6:45–6:55
2. Board member nominations	Governance Committee Chair	Vote	Governance Committee Briefing Sheet, Resumes for John Smith and Jacqueline Lane	6:55–7:10
3. Discuss Board Dashboard tracking progress on FY 14 goals/benchmarks per strategic plan and identify any mid-course corrections	Committee Chairs	For Discussion	Board Dashboard Briefing Sheet, Board Dashboard	7:10–8:25
4. Approve Minutes	Secretary	Vote	December Minutes	8:25–8:30
5. Executive Session	Chair		N/A	8:30–8:45

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Sample Board of Trustees Agenda Item Briefing Sheet

Agenda Item #3:	Board Dashboard
Background	Track board and school's progress toward FY 14 goals articulated in Strategic Plan and identify mid-course corrections
Action	For Discussion
Link to applicable strategic goals	Determine progress toward goals
Submitted by	Board Chair

Background

In June 2013 the Apex Public Charter School board and leadership completed a strategic plan that articulates our school's vision and goals for the next five years. As part of that plan, the board approved annual benchmarks that measure progress toward those long-term goals.

Attached you will find the mid-year check in on progress toward our FY 14 goals. This is the first iteration of a dashboard to help monitor against our goals. It is broken out by committee and includes both five-year and FY14 goals. Each committee chair completed their section, and included comments articulating next steps, help needed, and plans for moving forward.

At the meeting, each committee chair will discuss overall progress briefly and share areas where they need support. Board members will also be asked to provide overall feedback on the tool itself—what was helpful, not helpful, etc.—to maintain or improve upon the tool so it guides our work effectively.

The objective is to keep our eyes on the long-term goals by tracking incremental progress. It is our job as board members to hold ourselves accountable for playing our part in the school's important work. This board is working hard, and I am confident we will hit our year-end targets. Thanks for all of your important efforts!

Action:

- No action required on tool
- At the board meeting, we will discuss progress toward goals and any adjustments needed to meet our annual goals

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- Individual board members should use data to focus their committee work over the next six months

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Board of Trustees Meeting Agenda Template

DATE:

TIME:

Agenda Item	Lead	Action	Relevant Materials	Time
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

Board of Trustees Agenda Item Briefing Sheet Template

Agenda Item #:
Background:
Action:
Link to applicable strategic goals:
Submitted by/Committee:

Background on Agenda Item (Should be brief, bullets, big ideas):

- Why is this information important?
- How does this information relate to previous discussions or why do we need to know this for future conversations?
- What historical context is needed?
- How does this relate to [School Name]'s Strategic Plan (i.e., is it tied to a board goal?)

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Action:

- Recommendation for action based on this information and clarity about where it will fall in the upcoming board meeting.
- Draft motions may be included.
- It's okay if this is just an "FYI" item. Note it here.