



Patron Comments During Board Meeting

Question:

Our Board would like some guidance on how to limit patron comments during board meetings. Do you have some guidelines we could use to help with this?

Answer:

It is important to remember that school board meetings are “meetings open to the public”; not “open meetings”.

Open meetings require that time be set aside for the public to comment.

Meetings open to the public mean only that whatever business is conducted must be done in a public setting so the public can watch. As such, there is NO requirement that school boards allow for any patron comments. You or the Board Chair may wish to take a minute at the beginning of the next meeting to explain this. We realize that not allowing for any comment is not conducive to community relationships so you may want to consider the following:

When you post the agenda, allow a certain amount of time at the beginning of the meeting for public comment. Note: We always recommend doing this at the beginning of the meeting before patrons have had an opportunity to sit for a length of time. The feelings/emotions tend to be calmer at the beginning of the meeting and prior to any Board discussion.

As an example you could allow 30 minutes. Require folks to sign up when they come in the door. The sign in sheet should ask for the name and contact information of the presenter as well as the topic they wish to discuss. By requiring sign in, the Chair will have an idea of how many people wish to comment. Depending on the number who wish to testify, the Chair can limit their testimony. Example: 10 people X 3 minutes = 30 minutes.

The Chair can explain that in order to keep the meeting on time, he/she will be limiting testimony. Ask that those presenting only speak if they have something new or different to say than any of the previous presenters. (The Board does not need to hear the same testimony repeated over and over again. If the testimony seems to be the same, the chair can ask the presenter if he/she has any new information and if not, he can ask the presenter to close the comments.

Another option may be to allow a certain amount of time for comment before each topic on the agenda. This will likely take more time and may make the agenda/time a little harder to manage. The Chair can require each presenter to focus on the topic at hand. If the presenter’s testimony begins to move in another direction from the topic currently being discussed, the chair can ask that he/she keep his/her comments focused on the single topic. If

the presenter wishes to discuss another topic on the agenda, they will have to wait until that topic is up for discussion.

If your district has not done this before, we would recommend that you take some time at the beginning of the first meeting to explain the new protocol. I will tell you that in school districts where they have taken this step, the patrons/public are not all that excited about it. They will most likely grouse around about it some. It will be imperative that the Chair remain strong and continue to explain that he/she is simply trying to better manage a very busy agenda. That the Board is not trying to prevent the public from testifying but rather ensuring that everyone have the same chance and opportunity.

contact us with your question:



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