

Running an effective charter school governing board meeting can be a challenge, even when many talented people occupy the room, according to Marci Cornell-Feist, the author of the *Charter School Trustees Guide* and founder and CEO of The High Bar. But the process can be improved with techniques designed to aid preparation, time management and outcomes.

Cornell-Feist, who has been helping train charter school board members for 16 years and worked in most states, was the featured presenter for the Resource Center's February 2013 webinar, [*Board Governance: Strengthen Your Board by Fixing Your Board Meetings*](#).

Key issues covered included the importance of setting the context for board service. Even though they are volunteers who are busy with their regular work, charter board members still must perform in their school governance role and not lose sight of their legal responsibility as custodians of the charter contract, Cornell-Feist said.

The idea is for board members to have a manageable amount of work that is clearly defined. Too often board members "show up and react to things that the leader puts in front of them," Cornell-Feist said. Planning meetings to address strategic issues and viewing the process as a joint effort of the school leader and the board allows for better results.

Founding charter school boards may be faced with a greater percentage of their work devoted to immediate concerns, but as the school matures their work should become more focused on strategic development.

An often overlooked aspect of a school leader's job is to help develop the effectiveness of the governing board. Not all school leaders necessarily are familiar with working with a board and how to harness its support, according to Cornell-Feist, who suggested that it can be helpful to make the task part of the leader's job description.

Meeting materials ideally should be sent out to board members a week in advance of a meeting, but at least two or three days should be allowed so that board members can be prepared. Cornell-Feist said that advance packets should clearly state what should be done with the materials and whether documents are only for information or whether they will be subject to votes at the meeting. That allows for greater focus and efficiency during the meeting.

Board members should be expected to be prepared for the meeting by reading the advance packet. The agenda items should contain summaries to save time during the meeting. For example, if one of the topics is discussion of acceptance of a new board member, then it is useful to describe in the summary what has occurred in terms of vetting of the candidate to avoid taking time to cover it in the meeting, Cornell-Feist said. It also might be useful to include with an agenda item the estimated time allotted for the discussion and keep a stopwatch to stay on track. A critical skill for the chair of the board is to be adept at facilitating group discussion and action.

A good agenda setting practice should include the board chair and the school leader working together in advance of the meeting to target key issues for discussion. The most strategic issues should receive the most emphasis.

Cornell-Feist suggested that the chair and the school leader should take time after a board meeting to pencil in carryover issues for the next month's meeting and then send a draft agenda to the board or committee chairs.

The school leader should focus reports to the board on measurable goals, such as the status of meeting specific enrollment targets. The same is true for objectives for board members, according to Cornell-Feist. For example, it helps to have specific goals for board member recruiting, such as when it is expected that they will fill positions and what specific skills are being sought. Linking agenda items to goals helps keep board members focused and thinking strategically.

Effective meetings also include board members understanding the requirements and spirit of the law governing open meetings. Cornell-Feist said that advantages of open discussions include making the public aware of the "tough choices that are being addressed." Laws around the country differ about such issues as the extent of public input that is required. It helps to provide reminders about the law as board membership changes so that the board stays current. Meeting minutes can be concise, covering action taken, rather than everything that was said.

Cornell-Feist recommends that board meet at least 10 times a year, although more frequent meetings might be necessary for a new school. Prospective board members should understand clearly the time commitment needed to serve.

The Resource Center's April 2013 newsletter topic was [Charter School Boards and Meeting the Governance Challenge](#).