

Lessons From the Other Side

A community-activist who is now a school board member offers tips to parents on how to effectively approach their school board.

BY SUSAN NAIMARK

I never really imagined myself as a public official. Through a complicated combination of persistence, commitment, luck and circumstance, I was appointed to the Boston School Committee by Mayor Thomas Menino of Boston in January 1997. I struggled, as many progressive activists do, with an aversion to seizing power when one has the opportunity.

It's an odd sensation, sitting up there in the spotlight at the meetings, after so many years of trying to appeal to those "bad guys" in positions of power.

So now I'm "the bad guy." Here are some lessons I've learned that I hope can be useful to other advocates and activists, particularly parents who might be intimidated and unsure about how to most effectively approach their local school board.

- **Get to know your school board members.**

As a parent who attended school board meetings for 10 years, I always felt the board members were distant. As I've gotten to know my new colleagues, I've been amazed at how, well, human they are. Get to know your board members. Chances are you will find at least a few with whom you share common concerns.

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generally is not.

When I'm at a board meeting getting yelled at by one person after another, I shut down. Getting people emotionally involved in an issue may be important to your group's solidarity-building strategy — and there is no doubt that many of the injustices our children face in school get us very angry. But if your goal is to move your school board, you may want to analyze if yelling is the best tactic. In my experience, it's more effective to organize lots of people on an issue, identify problems, propose solutions, and develop a multi-pronged strategy.

- **Be around for the vote.**

Too often, people who testify on an issue don't wait for the vote or don't show up at the actual board meeting. While this may be unavoidable if you have a night job or kids or a hectic schedule, it's important to make your presence felt. When someone makes a well-reasoned argument, there is a psychological pressure that makes it much harder to vote against them when they are sitting in the room (preferably up front) as the secretary calls the vote.

- **Accept that public education IS political.**

In one of my first organizing efforts as a public school parent, we united with the Boston Teachers Union to protest school budget cuts. I carried one of the picket



Jean-Claude Labrousse

Attending board meetings can help de-mystify how decisions are made.

tion is frequently a complicated combination of public and self interest. If we accept this premise, we can be more realistic and effective in our strategies.

- **Don't assume you understand people's motives.**

Motives are tricky. For example, I can describe from many different angles why I decided to leave my last job: I had personal motives, family issues came into play, and other job opportunities arose. It is important to try to analyze people's motives because that is how you will

they need and deserve — but true system reform is a process, and any attempt to short circuit that process will inevitably cut someone out of the loop. We need as many stakeholders as possible involved to rebuild the political will to adequately support our public school systems.

While shutting down schools or firing all the teachers may sound like a good idea to frustrated parents, our kids will still need someone to go and someone to teach them the next day. We must keep a sense of urgency in our work. But we

In most cases, scheduling a meeting is not as difficult as you might expect. I'm more likely to respond if you lay out your issues up front, and you come with an openness to working with me, not against me.

- **Do your homework.**

When you have your facts mixed up, it's much easier for board members to write you off. Passion, by itself, isn't enough. Also, speak to the issue at hand. Appeals on topics that are tangential to the issue before the board are not as likely to get immediate response as those already on the agenda.

- **Organize.**

I'm more likely to pay attention when a parent or activist represents a group, such as a school parent council or community organization. We have 64,000 students in the Boston Public Schools. A lone parent pleading on an issue for their own child is generally not going to get the priority attention an organized group would. Frequently, all this takes is raising your issue with your local school/parent organization and getting their endorsement. If you can get others to attend meetings with you, that's even better.

- **Understand your state's open meetings and records law.**

Generally speaking, public policy making bodies such as school boards are required by law to hold all meetings in public. In Boston, we can only go into executive (closed) session to discuss litigation and contract negotiations. Public institutions must make most records available to the public. This means that you have a right to request information such as school and district test scores, suspension rates, racial and demographic data, or your own child's school file. You generally do not have the right, however, to look at personnel files, individual student information (other than your own child's) or other information subject to private protection.

- **Numbers generally are effective for applying pressure, shouting insults**

Boston Teachers Union to protest some budget cuts. I carried one of the picket signs that read, "Stop Playing Politics with our Kids." I have since decided that we're kidding ourselves if we think that the public officials charged with making funding and programmatic decisions about our schools are motivated solely by what is in the best interest of the children. There are usually a wide range of constituencies to whom they must answer, as well as a certain ego gratification that goes with wielding such power. Motiva-

is important to try to analyze people's motives, because that is how you will develop a strategy for working with (or against) them. But make sure your analysis is based on real information and conversations directly with the person involved, not your own limited perspective or the rumor mill.

- **Be patient — urgently.**

Our school systems and their shortcomings have evolved over many decades. Too often, our kids do not get what

to teach them the next day. We must keep a sense of urgency in our work. But we must also channel it into a process of reform and accept that the kind of changes we want may take years.

Reconstructing a major public institution must be done carefully, inclusively, and with the support of as many stakeholder groups as possible — especially if we want the end result to be caring, inclusive, supportive of and supported by the broader community. ■