

## Parent Chats let superintendent Reinforce board's role

Who is in a better position to educate the public about what a school board can and cannot do- Betty down at the beauty shop, who has a grudge against the district, or the superintendent?

Superintendent **Paul Vranish** of Tornillo (Texas) Independent School District, takes no chances when it comes to message management. Vranish holds Parent Chats, a social/informational activity for the district's parents, highlighted by a student performance and district –supplied meals. An added benefit: Vranish uses the event to give his board members a platform that polishes their public image.

The Parent Chats take place monthly, two days after a board meeting. The district rotates the site among its schools. The evening features a parent-friendly atmosphere and includes a free dinner, a student performance, an opportunity for the district to discuss issues such as a new student dress code or a new fully staffed health clinic, and written tests where parents compete for monetary gifts. A baby-sitting service is offered to increase participation.

Fewer than a quorum of board members attend each Parent Chat. This allows board members to interact with the parents and answer their questions without creating a legal board meeting. Vranish is on hand to jump in with the technical information if a board member struggles with a parent's question.

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*-Paul Vranish*

The Parent Chats feature a written test each month that takes about 20 minutes. The winner receives a gift card worth up to \$100, depending on the test length. Each year, Vranish includes one test on a school board's proper role.

The test reinforces proper boardsmanship to the people who are most likely to pressure board members to act inappropriately. Vranish said, "There are always certain people who want members to do their bidding-and that's not a board member's role," he said.

State school board associations spend a great deal of time and money training board members how to do their jobs correctly, Vranish said. But they don't train parents or prospective board members so that misperceptions about board roles don't occur.

The written test helps explain the purview of board responsibilities and includes questions like, "Can the board fire someone without recommendation from the superintendent? Explain your answer."

"The board test gives us a chance to educate the public on the board's role," Vranish said. "Our view is that people are pretty smart and will do the right thing if we give them the right information."

Vranish seeks opportunities to give individual board members a prominent-and positive-role during Parent Chats. "I have a good board, one that treats me well and pays me well," he said. "I want them to look good so that they are reelected."

When the district announced the opening of its new health clinic, the board's president, who is also a nurse, made the announcement. "I give board members a platform so they can speak about a subject about which they are comfortable and competent," Vranish said.

A final reason for the Parent Chat is to let the district control its message, Vranish said. "I'd rather have us give our story two days after the board meeting than let the town crier at the Dairy Queen explain what took place," he said.

## **Why Parent Chats? To build support**

Superintendent **Paul Vranish** of Tornillo (Texas) Independent School District, uses Parent Chats to create a healthy relationship between the district and its stakeholders. Parent Chats include a dinner prepared by school food service, a student performance, an opportunity for the district to deliver information about school plans and vision, and a competitive written test.

Why use Parent Chats? When a district wants to mobilize to pass a bond issue, Vranish said, it holds town meetings, answers questions, and listens to concerns-and hopes for the best. "The district that does that is practicing the moral equivalent of a one-night stand," he said.

"It's saying, 'Yes, I love you tonight, but after you give me that yes for my bond issue, I won't remember your name.'"

It's important for the district to treat the parent relationship like a healthy marriage, Vranish said, and Parent Chats support that purpose. "Like any healthy relationship, you don't have to do something nice only because you want something from the other person," Vranish said.

In Tornillo ISD, where 80 percent of parents speak Spanish, parents and their child take the written test together.

This reinforces the district's position that parents should be involved at home in monitoring their child's homework and academic progress, Vranish said.

## **Parent Chat questions affirm board role**

1. What defines a "meeting" as in, "We attend a board meeting?"
2. Can the public talk and interact with the board at a meeting?
3. By law, when is a board member a board member?
4. List the rank order of law and governing authority of a school district.
5. Is board training a requirement?
6. Can a trustee be removed from office?
7. Is the board required to vote on every item that is listed on the agenda?
8. Can the president vote on a motion?
9. What are the prerequisites for any board discussion on an agenda item?
10. Must the board go along with the superintendent's recommendation?
11. Can the board hire someone who the superintendent has not recommended?
12. Can the board fire someone without a recommendation from the superintendent? Explain your answer.
13. Can a trustee talk about anything discussed in a closed session?
14. List at least three things a board can do to exercise power and control over the school district.

Source: Tornillo (Texas) Independent School District.