

MASC *Bulletin*

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MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL COMMITTEES

Advice for New School Committee Members

Veteran members share their perspective on the joys (and pitfalls) of school committee service

School committee members newly elected this spring are coming into their responsibilities at a time of unprecedented changes—and challenges. As health costs continue to drive local budgets, collective bargaining practices are being questioned nationwide as never before. Calls for increased accountability and achievement have led to the development of revised evaluations for educators and administrators, which may include linking educator performance to student scores. And through it all, school leaders must grapple with the still-flagging economy and the loss of federal stimulus dollars which, for the past two years, have helped many school districts maintain programs and services.

However, as some experienced members point out in this Q&A, while much is changing, much remains the same. MASC asked the following questions of several veteran members in the hope that their insights will be helpful to those newly on board.

Participating school committee members are: **Mary Lou Osborne**, a seven-year member of the Winthrop School Committee; **Jeffrey Stulin**, a 12-year member of the Minuteman Reg. Voc. Tech. School Committee; **Liz Lafond**, an eight-year member of the Hatfield School Committee; and **David Margil**, a three-year member of the Natick School Committee.

MASC: Why did you first run for school committee?

Osborne: I first ran for school committee when budget cuts were so severe that our Middle School and High School libraries were closed. Some in the community were more concerned that funding for the athletic budget was cut. My children were both educated in this school system (youngest was still in HS) and I felt that serving on the school committee would be a way for me to “give back” to the district.

Stulin: As a regional school committee member I am appointed by the Needham town moderator. He knew I had an interest in educational issues so he offered me the position. I knew almost nothing about the school before I became a school committee member.

Lafond: I had a pretty good idea of what I would be getting into when I decided to run for the school committee since I work as an administrative aide for a large urban district school committee (although my own community is small and rural). The town was facing a number of new issues at the time, including consideration of school choice and needing to garner town support for a Prop 2 1/2 override to build a new elementary school. Both were huge issues for a town with a population of about 3300. As you might imagine, there was passion on both sides and I felt confident I could bring a calm, reasonable voice to the

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How to Work with your Elected Officials

MASC President Dorothy Presser has advocated for education at the local, state and federal levels. She knows first-hand the importance of reminding legislators of the connection between a highly educated workforce and the state's ability to remain economically viable and attractive to business and industry development. And never more so than now, as the aftershocks of the global recession continue to be felt nationwide.

“We must set aside personal and

political differences and encourage legislators to join us in making the achievement of Massachusetts children our shared, common goal,” Presser has indicated. “Staying focused on this goal is vital if we are going to remain an economic competitor in today's global society.”

As this legislative season is in full swing and the budget debate is ongoing, here are some tips for working with elected officials.

Know Who They Are—and Make Sure They Know Who You Are.

School Committees are the largest body of locally elected officials in the state. There are 200 legislators on Beacon Hill. There are more than 2200 school committee members. When you contact your legislator on an issue, he/she respects you and the insights you bring as an elected official. If you're a newly elected school committee member and uncertain as to who is your state senator/representative, there

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discussions at not only the School Committee level, but also in discussions with other various town boards and town constituencies.

Margil: I had worked on an operating override campaign and as a result had become quite familiar with town and school budget issues. When a member of the School Committee stepped down later that year, I applied for and received an appointment to fill the open seat until the next town election. Then I ran to keep my seat and won a three-year term. I felt strongly that having asked my fellow citizens to support a tax increase, I had a responsibility to make sure that those taxes were well spent in support of our students and the school system.

MASC: What have been some of the biggest changes in public education during the years you've been serving?

Osborne: I started serving in May of 2004, so MCAS had already been established, but since then, high-stakes testing has really taken on a life of its own. Even though testing results were originally meant to inform school systems of places in which improvements needed to be made, the press, the general public and "think tanks" have used the numeric scores to compare and contrast school system. I believe this is inherently unfair, since the funding mechanisms for education do not provide for equal education funding across the Commonwealth.

Stulin: Funding, testing, special ed, views of career tech schools. It seems that people are always less willing to pay taxes, thus funding becomes an increasing issue. Special ed requirements are always increasing. The amount of testing is out of control (although I am in favor of some of the testing). People's view of career/tech education is evolving, in a positive direction in my opinion.

Lafond: The biggest changes have been around reduction in funding from both local and state sources. In my district, there are the challenges around staying independent, i.e., not succumbing to the push from the Commissioner's office to regionalize. As a small school district we have always found creative ways to share resources and find efficiencies through collaboratives, etc. School choice has brought about

“A good working relationship with your colleagues will make it possible for you to "agree to disagree."”

change in our small district as well. Our district has proven to be attractive to parents and students from larger districts and we have been able to not only recoup from the loss of a few students who left the district for choice or charter schools, but we have been able to attract and retain a number of students and that funding has allowed us to enhance the educational programs and facilities for all students in the district.

Margil: One of the biggest changes is the rapid evolution of personal technology and online collaboration and social networking. The way kids research and learn, and the interaction between teachers, students, and parents is changing as a result, and will never again be the way it was when we were in school.

MASC: What do you think is the biggest challenge about serving on your school committee? What solutions do you see to this challenge?

Osborne: The biggest challenge about serving on my school committee right now is that I serve with some newer members who at times overstep the boundaries of the school committee's role. Certainly, in time, members will learn more about a school committee's role in the educational system of a community and begin to see the boundaries more clearly. It also is helpful to encourage members to participate in any events that expose them to other school committees and how they operate.

Stulin: The inability of some committee members to work as a team is the biggest problem followed by funding and the citizen's willingness to really understand the issues in education today.

Lafond: It is a challenge to stay informed and up-to-date on changes at the state and federal levels as they relate to providing educational programming and in terms of laws and regulations. It can be a challenge to keep members focused on the business of the school committee in terms of understanding their roles and responsibilities and the limits of those roles and responsibilities. Training options, of course, offer solutions; getting members to trainings will always be something to work on. Open Meeting Law issues are always pertinent, but never more so than now with the new requirements aimed at providing greater public access and information. Budgeting and providing funds for not only the needs, but also the desires and aspirations of your students and the community are especially challenging at this particular time.

Margil: Probably the biggest challenge is keeping current on the vast array of important topics that we as a committee need to consider, debate, and vote on. Interestingly, technology may be one of the solutions to that challenge. I've been reading about how other districts that have started to distribute meeting materials electronically, which makes them easily indexable and searchable. I believe that would certainly help committee members manage all the information we're expected to absorb and recall over time.

MASC: How do you decide how to vote when making difficult decisions? What criteria or standards do you use?

Osborne: When making difficult decisions I try to remain open-minded to all possibilities while gathering as much information as possible on the topic. I might contact another school committee member from another district that has recently dealt with a similar issue. Also, MASC can steer me in the right direction for finding the infor-

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mation I need to make an informed decision. I try to share information with fellow committee members, expecting to fully debate and discuss the issue at our meeting. I try not to make up my mind until I have had the benefit of hearing from all my fellow members. I do weigh information I receive on issues for its reliability.

Stulin: I always try to choose the decision that is best for the kids of the school and the member communities while keeping the taxpayer in mind.

Lafond: It is important to be informed about issues of programming, budget, laws, etc. We have all been involved in some of those tough decisions. Once you have taken steps to get informed on a particular issue, it is important to listen to all the information brought forward with an open mind and to vote on the matter at hand based on defined district priorities, goals and objectives, student needs, and funding. It can be extremely difficult to not support an idea or request from students, staff or community that is well intentioned and has support of the student body, parents, etc., but which might not conform with specific rules, requirements, or stated priorities, or for which there is not enough available funding to support and/or sustain.

Margil: At the beginning of each school year we review, discuss, and approve the superintendent's goals for the year. When evaluating a proposal, it helps to understand how it aligns with those goals. Also, keeping the long-term health of the whole system in mind is something I always try to do when evaluating a decision. That kind of thinking can apply to budget decisions, personnel decisions, or program and policy decisions. The key question is, does it benefit students?

MASC: With public school funding continuing to be level-funded at best, what can school committees do to ensure that their students are receiving a good education?

Osborne: In general, school committees can fully support the administrators' role of recruiting and retaining quality educators. School committees

can also support the school/home connection which is vital for students to achieve their full potential. School committees can also support the creation of efficiencies where possible. For example, if the district can create an in-district program for students with special needs—who were previously sent to out-of-district placements—those students and their parents will be more content in the home community setting, and the district can ultimately benefit from a reduction in the total costs of educating those particular students.

Stulin: Without a change in attitude to funding, the quality of education will decline. It already has in many places.

Lafond: Staff morale is so very important now, perhaps more than ever, with continual cutbacks, state mandates around student performance on standardized assessments, growing challenges to meet diverse needs, etc. I think it's important for staff to know that the school committee recognizes and appreciates the value of staff and the sacrifices everyone must make to continue to deliver the best possible educational experience to the students. While budgeting, school committees must always remember to do their level best to continue to provide a well-rounded education that includes enrichment while balancing the obvious need for rich and rigorous curriculum around the core subjects, (after, of course, meeting all state and federal mandates!)

Margil: Leadership is not just debating issues and taking votes. It also means getting out to the community and advocating for what the school system needs to remain healthy. Find and connect with citizens in your town or city that believe in your mission and can help spread the message.

MASC: What do you believe is the function and role of the school committee?

Osborne: School committees serve to

support the educational objectives of a community. The committee also serves to educate the public as to the importance of current educational programs, keeping in mind that the committee represents all citizens of the community, not just those constituents who are parents of students, or the students themselves. The school committee in some ways is the "educational conscience" of the community, constantly reminding our fellow citizens that public education is important to the fabric of community life. We have responsibility for budget priorities for our schools and setting policies that best serve the education of our youngest citizens.

“The school committee in some ways is the “educational conscience” of the community.”

Stulin: The law gives us a legal purpose. My personal answer would take too long an explanation.

Lafond: The School Committee's role is to be knowledgeable and informed of what their roles and responsibilities are as elected officials and representatives of their communities/constituents. The School Committee's function and role is to deliberate and act upon matters of budget, policy, and hiring, retaining and evaluating the superintendent.

Margil: In addition to the functions defined in statute, I believe that school committees need to set a progressive vision for education in their communities and lead toward that vision at every opportunity. Right now, many committees are faced with just keeping the lights on and the teachers in the classrooms, but we can't stop trying to make things better when we can.

MASC: What advice do you have for new members?

Osborne: I would advise new school committee members to gain some knowledge and acquire respect about what our school staff do day in and day out. That's usually easier for a member who has a child in the school system, but it should be possible for any member who had a real interest in and concern for the school system. I would

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Tools for Schools

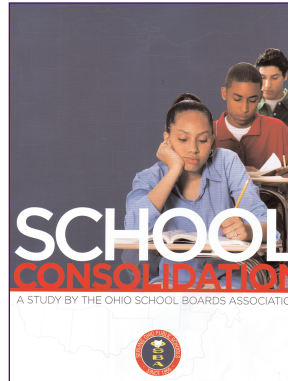
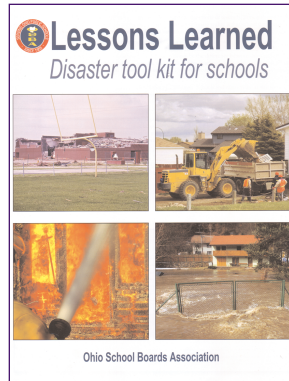
Two toolkits you need:

Disaster Planning and School Consolidation

The Ohio School Boards Association has recently issued two resource guides that no district should be without. The first, **Lessons Learned: Disaster Toolkit for Schools** is a proactive planner on crisis management; preparedness; legal, insurance, and safety concerns; and best practices in the event and after-math of a crisis.

The current financial climate across the country has led to increased interest (especially among state bureaucracies) in “urging” school district consolidation as a means to improve efficiencies and save money in the operation of

public school districts. However, the evidence concerning the actual savings resulting from school district consolidation is mixed at best. Results from an in-depth analysis on consolidation in Ohio, as reported in **School Consolidation**,



found that shared services and purchasing cooperatives appear to be a more promising approach to saving money while preserving a sense of community identity.

MASC's Ohio counterpart has made the publications available to MASC members at no charge. Both are posted on the MASC website (www.masc.org) in the “Members Resources” section under “Forms and Publications.” If for any reason

you have difficulty accessing them on the site, send an email to MASC

Communications Director Jenifer Handy and we will email you a pdf of the document. In addition, the Ohio School Boards Association sends their condolences to the Massachusetts school districts who are trying to recover from the rogue tornado earlier this

month and OSBA staff who have experienced tornados on a fairly regular basis have offered to be available in case you want to reach out to them for guidance.

how to work with legislators

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is a link on the MASC website (<http://www.masc.org/useful-links>) that will direct you to the legislature's website where you can verify your local legislators. It's also valuable to know where your legislators stand on education and related issues. Most MA legislators now have their own websites where they have posted their positions, policies and votes taken. Get to know their faces—and their aides!

Know the Issues.

MASC's division meetings, conferences, special workshops, sponsored webinars, *Bulletins*, *Legislative* and *Legal Updates*, and advocacy web page are great places to start. The MASC Field Directors and other MASC staff can also be key resources on current issues. MASC staff is always available to help you not only develop the best talking points for your issues, but also to ensure that you are familiar with existing laws, rules and regulations that may relate to your issue. For the greatest impact, always be pre-

pared to support your issue with as much research and local evidence as possible.

Be Inclusive.

Help your legislators be vested in your schools. Invite them to school events and student award ceremonies. Ask them to read a book to a class or attend a special skills demonstration. Have them tour the school, ride the bus or serve as principal for a day. When you go to them for help on issues, they will have already established a connection to your schools through the experiences they had in the district.

Be Prepared.

Pick one or two messages that you want to emphasize with your elected official. Don't just bring a problem, but instead be prepared to offer possible solutions as well. Have a strong 30-second presentation and one-page fact sheet that you have committed to memory and support your argument with local examples and data. And remember: keep it simple.

Make an Appointment.

Don't be surprised if you end up speaking with a staff member when your legislators are in the throes of a session. Timing is everything. You might also try arranging to meet with them in the district (here's when inviting them to join you at a school event can serve multiple purposes). However, it's also very important to build strong relationships with legislative staffers who tend to be the ones who help their bosses with fact-finding and developing their agendas and positions.

Leave Something and Ask for Something.

Leave your one-page fact sheet that emphasizes your key messages. And don't forget to ask (respectfully) for your legislator's support on your issue. If you can get a commitment—great. If you sense hesitation, or a direct “not possible,” be certain to thank them all the same for their time. There will be issues in the future and you want them to think favorably of your visit and your commitment to education. And don't forget to follow up with a positive thank you letter!

2011 MASC/MASS Joint Conference Update: Special End of Year Savings in your Mailbox

Although summer is just beginning and for most school committee members, the 2011 Joint Conference is still a season and a half away (November 9-12), the MASC and MASS Board of Directors want to make it as advantageous as possible for you and your colleagues to attend this year's program in Hyannis. We know that the end of the fiscal year presents an opportunity for considerable savings by using current years funds to register early.

At this fiscally challenging—and uncertain—time, we are therefore offering school districts an opportunity to register for this year's conference on/before July 15, 2011 at a very special "End of Year Reduced Rate" of \$250.00 per registration. (Standard registration is \$375.00). You can register easily—online (www.masc.org) or check your mailbox for a form that you can mail or fax to us.

This special registration rate is

NONREFUNDABLE, but you can transfer that registration to one of your colleagues should you suddenly find yourself unable to attend.

This year, the conference format has been adapted to make it possible for more members to participate, since many of you will have Friday, November 11 (Veteran's Day) off from work. **The Delegate Assembly has been rescheduled from its traditional Wednesday afternoon time to Friday afternoon and the conference will begin on Wednesday, November 9 at noon** with a full schedule of panels and sessions prior to the opening of the Exhibit Hall and the ever-popular Exhibitors Reception. Thursday will feature a "fiscal" theme, with programs to help your district meet the challenge of providing services in the face of continued budget cuts, and a General Session that will explore the impact of changes to collective bargaining and new strategies to consider. Friday's

General Session speaker will be nationally known educator and author Tony Wagner, who serves as co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and whose most recent book, *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—And What We Can do About It* has been on widely acclaimed as a "must-read" for all school leaders.

So sign up now to take advantage of this special end-of-year opportunity. The savings will go a long way to help ease the fiscal challenges we know you are facing and the more than fifty workshops on fiscal and cost-savings issues, evaluation regulations and collective bargaining, legal updates, strategies for engaging students and raising achievement and the impact of social media on health and wellness will give you the most up-to-date information you need to move your district forward.

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also urge them to take advantage of any opportunities to meet with other communities' school committee members in various settings to learn the role of a school committee member. In addition, I believe that often former school committee members in the home community can serve as good mentors for new members.

Stulin: Run for the hills! Seriously though: (1) Learn more about educational issues. (2) Learn more about financial issues. (3) Be committed. (4) Learn to get along even with difficult people. (5) Remember: Helping the students, not inflating your ego, is the

goal.

Lafond: My advice is to seek out the training to first be knowledgeable of the individual's and body's roles and responsibilities; establish and maintain open communication with the superintendent, other committee members, and, as appropriate, other local and regional elected officials. Mark MASC's and DESE's websites as favorites and go to those sites regularly to look for updates, refresh yourself on current issues of importance, and stay connected. Watch, Listen and Learn! Remember, that you are one member of a committee charged with an important mission and strive to work well with your fellow committee members.

A good working relationship with your colleagues will make it possible for you to "agree to disagree" when necessary, which will allow the group to focus on the work at hand with greater efficiency.

Margil: Do your homework and learn everything you can, but don't let yourself fall victim to 'analysis paralysis'. Early on it's always hard not to overreact to loud, contrary voices in the community. But keep in mind that no matter how good a job you do, some people will always be upset. Don't take it personally, just remember why you got involved in the first place—to make things better for students!

Public sector collective bargaining: new approaches

School leader input sought

In an effort to identify effective collaborative approaches to education innovation and set the stage for improved labor-management relations in the Commonwealth, Professors Barry Bluestone (Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy—Northeastern University) and Tom Kochan (Sloan School—MIT) are conducting a survey on labor-management relations in local school districts. The data from the sur-

vey will be used to host a working meeting later this year of all the key education stakeholders—school committee members, superintendents, union leaders and state education officials—to begin to chart concrete strategies for using collective bargaining and constructive labor management relation to advance education innovation and student achievement.

“This is an important opportunity for MASC members to play a leading role in helping to understand and develop new and cooperative collective bar-

gaining initiatives. We respect the importance of our labor agreements and the professional and support staffs who teach and nurture our students. Our goal is to move forward collaboratively and not find ourselves coerced into accepting approaches currently being debated in states like Wisconsin, Ohio and New Jersey,” notes MASC President Dorothy Presser.

All members are encouraged to respond to the brief survey, which can be accessed at <http://www.zoomerang.com/Survey/WEB22CHBLVFCYCS>.

Upcoming Events

July 13 (W)

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Marriott Courtyard, Marlborough

July 16 (Sa)

CHARTING THE COURSE

Mohawk Trail Regional High School, Shelburne Falls

July 27 (W)

COSCAP SUMMER CONFERENCE

Ashland High School, Ashland

September 17 (Sa)

CHARTING THE COURSE

Lee Middle School, Lee

November 9-11 (W-Sa)

MASC/MASS JOINT CONFERENCE Resort and Conference Center, Hyannis

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