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## Getting the Board on Board: Helping Board Members Understand Early Childhood Programs

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# Getting the Board on Board: Helping Board Members Understand Early Childhood Programs

## **Abstract**

The article discusses the goal of early childhood administrators to make their programs visible to their board members, by providing data-based information about services. It outlines the key roles and responsibilities of not-for-profit or public boards. A well-presented information helps the board make the best policy decisions for those it serves. Moreover, it offers tips about making board presentations that may facilitate better understanding and policy making by board members.

## **Disciplines**

Education

Getting the Board on Board:

Helping Board Members Understand Early Childhood Programs

Early childhood programs are often administered by not-for-profit or public agencies (e.g., school districts) that are locally governed by boards made up of, typically, volunteers. Each board is unique, depending upon its membership and the mission, vision, values, and goals of the organization it serves (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Some boards govern organizations with missions specifically focused on young children and their families; others have broader missions where the early childhood program is only a piece in a tapestry of competing services (e.g., school-age or adult services). In the latter organization, an early childhood program may garner less board attention or understanding due to a) the size of the program in comparison to others in the organization, b) the priorities of the executive administration that oversees multiple programs, and c) the complexity or fragmentation of early childhood services. Some of this complexity results in early childhood programs being served by multiple boards. However, all board members need well-presented information from administrators to help the board make the best policy decisions for those they serve.

The main purpose of this article is to encourage the visibility of early childhood administrators to their board members by providing regular, data-based information about services, regardless of the program's size, perceived priority, or complexity. First, the author will briefly review the key roles and responsibilities of not-for-profit or public boards. Secondly, the article will follow an early childhood program administrator preparing for a board presentation. Throughout this vignette, the author offers tips about making board presentations that may facilitate better understanding and policy making by board members. (The tips are

summarized in Table 1.) This may result in an organization with aligned and supportive efforts and desired outcomes for young children and their families.

### What Boards Should Do

In his Policy Governance model, Carver (2006) describes the major role of not-for-profit or public boards as policymaking based on shared values. Board policies and decisions should reflect the agreed-upon values of the organization. A board that governs an agency solely devoted to early childhood services may have clearly articulated values available to them that neatly fit with and support young children- and family-centered policies; however, a board for a multi-service, multi-constituent organization may not have the luxury to be as specific. In either case, board members need to know and be able to apply the organization's values to all the programs affected by their policies.

Carver (2006) organizes the types of policies that boards enact into four categories: *ends policies*, *executive limitations policies*, *board-management delegation policies*, and *governance process policies*. The latter three are policies that help define the relationships of the board to its executive director or superintendent, the wider administration of the agency, and the internal workings of the board respectively. The early childhood program administrator may be most interested in the *ends policies* that boards enact, especially those policies that focus on the results or ends that are expected from administrators that are in service to young children and families. Communicating the impact that the early childhood program is making around these ends is crucial for board understanding and future support for the program.

### What Early Childhood Administrators Should Do

In an administrative meeting for Abilities Incorporated, a multi-service agency for people of all ages with developmental disabilities, Barbara Zimmermann, the director of Kids' Campus,

the agency's early childhood program, seizes an opportunity. Her executive director has offered to hold a future board meeting at Kids' Campus and has asked Barbara to provide a tour of the main facility for board members. Barbara appreciates this chance to show off her program and offers to provide a short presentation to the board about how her program is addressing the desired *ends* or outcomes that the board has articulated. The executive director takes Barbara up on the offer and she begins to prepare for her presentation over the next few months.

In considering the task at hand, Barbara realizes that one of the complexities of a program like Kids' Campus is that it is couched inside a larger bureaucratic structure that serves other types of consumers. Abilities Incorporated contains established programs for school-age and adult people with disabilities that date back to the 1950s. By comparison, young children's services are relatively new and less a part of the organization's identity or traditions. Unfortunately, board members may lack a full appreciation for the complex early childhood enterprise in their organization and often have equally vast, complicated, and competing programs to govern. Their attention (and the larger agency's resources) may be distracted away from early childhood services if they are uninformed or need reminders of their contribution. In other words, many board members may make decisions with only cursory information about young children's services. Barbara hopes that her presentation may be a first step toward addressing this.

#### Communicating the Complexity of Early Childhood Programs

Barbara soon realizes that one of her challenges will be communicating the complex organizational structure of the Kids' Campus early childhood program to the board, which is made up mostly of lay people (i.e., people who do not work in early childhood). Kids' Campus offers multiple programs that offer a myriad of services to approximately 180 children and their

families in a geographically large, rural, two-county area. Barbara constructs a simple table that represents the administrative umbrella for Kids' Campus' four main programs.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Barbara strategizes that, while she is giving the tour of the main site, she will be able to explain to the board members some of the specifics of each of these programs and highlight key services within them.

During the tour, Barbara must weigh how much information the board can digest in one outing. One issue that she anticipates is inclusion. To provide inclusive placements for most of the students with special needs, most classrooms in Kids' Campus are made up of a combination of similarly-aged children from the different programs. For example, 4-year-old students with special needs are in Head Start classrooms; infants with developmental delays receive their center-based early intervention services in the child care program. Without overwhelming the board, Barbara wants to emphasize that not only children, but funding streams, policies and procedures, curricula, resources, and personnel “interact” in these classrooms. By doing so, she can demonstrate her role of providing coherence-making leadership. More importantly, she can demonstrate how these ingredients combine to make a responsive early childhood program and, in turn, that the board's broader ends for the agency are met.

Barbara realizes that this board presentation may be the first of several board presentations, both internally to Abilities Incorporated and externally to other boards that govern aspects of her program (e.g., school boards or public health boards). A major challenge for administrators attempting to create coherence in umbrella organizational structures such as Kids' Campus is the fact that they are served by *multiple* governing boards. Being available to inform all of the

boards that govern one's program should be a goal for all early childhood program administrators.

Governing boards are made up of largely voluntary citizens, sometimes elected, sometimes appointed, and often recruited for their expertise and leadership roles in other professions, such as finance, law, philanthropy, or marketing. However, they may lack a clear understanding of early childhood intervention services, even though they will make decisions of policy and resource allocation that can affect the daily operations and the overall quality of services to children and families. Because of this, it is incumbent upon administrators to educate boards regularly about early childhood services and programs.

#### Leadership from the Early Childhood Administrator

An administrator, like Barbara, who intimately understands the complexity of the early childhood enterprise in her agency, is needed to communicate to board members who are probably removed from the day-to-day reality of serving young children and families. Although it is helpful for the executive director of Abilities Incorporated to be generally knowledgeable and supportive, in many organizations, the early childhood administrator may emerge as the person who can a) describe relationships between programs and services, b) speak to the types of children and families served in each program, and c) inform board members with some precision on the possible effects their decisions may have on the program's operations.

Collins (2005) admitted that administrators in the social sector have much more complex governance structures to navigate than their business counterparts. He hypothesized that social sector leaders needed a measure of "legislative" leadership:

In legislative leadership, ...no individual leader—not even the nominal chief executive—has enough structural power to make the most important decisions by himself or herself.

Legislative leadership relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen (2005, p.11).

Leaders of early childhood programs, like Kids' Campus, need to create a presence within their agencies, employing these skills of persuasion, creating political currency among key stakeholders, and building shared interests among them. One small but potentially powerful way to practice these leadership skills is by being an occasional influential presence before board members who make key decisions about these programs.

#### Fostering Relationships with the Executive Director and Others

Barbara knows that her board will set agency policies, pass internal budgets, and influence decisions that will directly impact Kids' Campus (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). In a larger agency, where adult services predominate over early childhood services, it is especially important to keep the early childhood message in front of the board regularly. Barbara was approached by her executive director to make this presentation, but if a request is not recurrently forthcoming, she should proactively request to formally present to the board, optimally, at least once a year about the entire program. Other presentations also can be requested at other times throughout the year to concentrate on specific issues that keep early childhood on the board agenda.

One of the first things that an early childhood director can do to start this process is to *foster a cooperative and trusting professional relationship with the executive director*. Executive directors often help set the agenda for board meetings with the board president and regularly make presentations before the board. If they are good leaders, they will have political context about the board and will be able to counsel directors about the timing and the content of their presentations. Barbara and her executive director meet regularly to discuss her programs,

services, and issues. In preparation for the board presentation, the executive director assists Barbara, filling her in on board make-up, habits, and interests.

Also, there can be “power in numbers” when presenting before a board. Co-presenting with the executive director, other administrators, teachers, or parents can emphasize the importance of certain programs, and demonstrate collaboration or shared leadership.

### Knowing Your Audience

Many not-for-profit agency executive directors expect their top administrative team to attend board meetings regularly. If not, it is important for early childhood directors to *attend a few meetings before presenting*. When Barbara attends a few board meetings before her presentation, she finds it helpful for getting a snapshot of the process, customs, interests, group dynamics, individual personalities, and agendas, both hidden and explicit, that make-up the board’s personality. Having this information can assist her in assessing the audience’s previous knowledge, proclivities, and current concerns.

Although boards are often governed by national and state regulations and fulfill common duties, each board generates a local “law” of their own and has, by and large, local authority for the community or agency that it serves (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Knowing some information about the board’s track record on issues can be helpful. Barbara asks the executive director for information about the key issues on the current agenda and how the early childhood information may be situated in her future presentation.

Before presenting, Barbara discusses with the executive director any recent changes to the board that might help preparations with the current audience in mind. Board membership will change over time and one new member can change the dynamics of the board. Also, what may

have been presented in a previous presentation may need to be revisited with new board membership.

### Representing the Profession

Social-sector boards often try to emulate corporate boards and may hold presenters to corporate expectations for professional presentations (National School Boards Association, 2006). Regardless, making a presentation to a board offers an opportunity for the speaker to *represent not only his or her own professionalism, staff, program, and agency, but also the early childhood field*. One's appearance should reflect the profession that you represent positively. The day-to-day management of early childhood programs often dictates a more practical dress code, but one should consider a more professional appearance at board meetings. Barbara looks to her executive director for clues as to how to dress for the board meeting.

Likewise, Barbara realizes that her presentation skills should meet a professional standard. She considers technology or handouts that can further enhance the message and educate the board members at their current level of understanding. Her executive director advises her to keep the presentation to approximately 15-20 minutes. Presentation slides should be easy to read without too many "bells and whistles," and not read aloud verbatim. By attending to these directions and details, Barbara shows respect for the board and commands some respect for herself and her profession.

### Connecting to the Mission

One of the primary functions of any governing board is to establish the mission, vision, values, and broad goals of the organization (Widmer & Houchin, 2000). Connecting the early childhood program's activities to these foundational expressions of organizational direction

demonstrates awareness of the broader ideals of the agency and how the early childhood component helps to realize these ideals.

Board members generally favor alignment and coherence in operations. The presenter can help them “connect the dots” among board policies and programs, and promote support for early childhood efforts. Barbara includes a slide early in her presentation that allows her to *demonstrate the early childhood program’s connection to the higher purpose of the organization*. The rest of the presentation should speak to the contribution that the early childhood program makes to the overall ends of the organization, the board’s primary concern (Carver, 2006).

#### Using Data to Make a Point

Boards govern organizations that exist in an era of accountability and data-driven decision making. An early childhood administrator’s presentation should *include relevant data that helps build a rationale for program needs or purpose, or describes improvement or outcomes* (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2008). The data should be relatively easy to read and understand. Graphic displays of data in your presentation can allow for quicker reading during the presentation. Barbara, wanting some technological expertise, asks for help from a technology coordinator or another “techie” in the agency that can help her create clear graphs and charts. She provides handouts or a copy of the electronic presentation ahead of time so board members have a chance to prepare for the presentation.

Demographic, student performance, stakeholder perception, and school process data can be provided and combined to highlight specific issues and answer questions from the board (Bernhardt, 2004). *Demographics* describe the statistical characteristics of the population that the early childhood program serves as well as those it employs. *Student performance* data can be

the results achieved by students and families in the program, such as student work, testing data, or transitions to inclusive classrooms. *Stakeholder perceptions* can be accumulated through surveys, interviews or focus groups that ask key constituents about their feelings and thoughts about the program. Finally, *school process* data illustrates processes used in schools to get desired results, such as instructional methods, behavioral interventions, transportation, or the referral process. Barbara considers which data will give her the best opportunity for conveying her message in the time allotted.

### Giving a Helpful Example

Sometimes, numerical data alone cannot completely communicate the importance of an early childhood program to the health and well-being of children and families. An inspirational or merely illustrative story can help board members appreciate the impact the program may have (Cohen & Prusak, 2001). The right anecdote can put a human face on the data and assist board members in seeing the complexities of a situation and share vicariously in the joys and struggles of working with children and families. For example, Barbara plans to describe in her presentation a recently implemented parent-teacher communication vehicle and relates how it made a difference for a real child and family. She realizes how important it is to *tell a story, helping board members, who may never see the children and families, realize that their decisions have actual consequences*. Good stories may “stick” when other data may not be as easily remembered (Gladwell, 2001).

Stories also provide the speaker with an opportunity to show “passion” for what counts in serving young children and families, in what often can seem a very bureaucratic and distant process at the board level. (One caution with this suggestion is to not forget confidentiality when

relating these stories.) During the tour, Barbara turns one board member's misunderstanding about "play" as a teachable moment about its role in preschoolers' development.

### Knowing the Early Childhood Field

One way to inspire confidence in board members during a presentation is to *connect your local activities to the standards of professional early childhood organizations*. Recommended practices, such as those provided by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), as well as codes of ethics, white paper positions, and legislative stances are ways to connect the local message to thinking in the wider field. For example, Barbara demonstrates to the Board the use of some assistive technology in a classroom and ties it to Technology Applications Practices recommended by DEC (2005).

Referring to research and evidence-based practices also demonstrates to board members that the program's practices are predicated on what is known in the field and that administrators and faculty have done their homework for providing quality services. Accreditation efforts and successes also should be shared with the board. Further efforts of keeping abreast of the latest developments in the field through professional development and visiting exemplary programs should be communicated so that the board can continue to fiscally support those efforts in the future.

### Demonstrating Leadership

Early childhood administrators provide leadership in a complex, emotional, and poorly funded enterprise. When presenting to board members, *demonstrate leadership by emphasizing the administrator's key roles in envisioning, organizing, networking, and facilitating*. Barbara demonstrates this in several ways. She demonstrates *envisioning* to board members by helping them understand new directions for the program and by connecting new ideas to old ones

(Kouzes & Posner, 2002). She demonstrates *organizing* to board members by sharing the structures and resources that it takes to get the desired results in the program (Bolman & Deal, 2003). She demonstrates *networking* to board members by sharing the credit for success with others and acknowledging collaboration with internal or external partners (Herrity & Morales, 2004). She demonstrates *facilitating* to board members by explaining efforts to help staff make major changes, working with families, building a learning community, and celebrating successes with all participants (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Leadership is not gained by holding a position, but by engaging staff in efforts toward continuous program improvements for children and families. Most board members recognize and appreciate the challenges of leadership and will look for those attributes in those administering the early childhood program.

#### Avoiding Surprises

Board members have volunteered to represent a community-at-large that receives services from the organizations they govern, such as schools and not-for-profit organizations, which often puts them in positions of making very public decisions (National School Boards Association, 2006). There are political (and personal) risks to making public decisions as many result in some constituencies being unsatisfied. Board members, therefore, can feel vulnerable to attack and embarrassment, and do not appreciate being surprised, especially by administration during board meetings, with volatile information that they haven't been prepared to mull over. Barbara's executive director cautions her to *refrain from springing revelations of potentially volatile and sensitive information to the board in a public arena*.

Sometimes, an early childhood administrator feels that difficult information needs to be communicated to the board. In these instances, this should be discussed and cleared with the

executive director. Prepare the board by supplying some information in advance so that they have time to reflect on the situation. Many boards receive their agenda and supporting documents (such as handouts of the electronic presentations) in a packet prior to board meetings.

### Answering Questions

Barbara tries to *anticipate questions that the board might ask* and prepares to have thoughtful answers for them. As with the inclusion question, she will consider the best way to present that aspect of the program. However, sometimes, board members may ask questions that the presenter does not have a ready answer for. In most cases, it is fine to say, “I don’t know” and promise to get back to the board with the information. Remember poise, graciousness, and professionalism, even if the board members may lack all of the above in the way that they ask the questions. Also, look to your executive director for assistance if necessary.

The fields of early childhood, Head Start, special education, and daycare regulations have unique jargon that can make presentations to “lay audiences” opportunities for misunderstanding. When presenting to a board, explain or avoid jargon as it will impede or blunt the intended message otherwise (Mostert, 1998).

### Conclusion

Barbara finishes her first presentation to the board and feels that these local policymakers have a better understanding of the early childhood programs, but this is just the beginning. With her executive director, she will establish a regular schedule of board presentations that can increase further appreciation and promote better decision making around services for young children and their families. This first presentation helped get the board “on board” with the early childhood enterprise. She looks forward to keeping them “on board” with regular opportunities for sharing information, challenges, and successes.

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Table 1.

Tips for Early Childhood Administrators Making Board Presentations

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1. Foster a cooperative and trusting professional relationship with the executive director or superintendent in advance so that they may provide guidance and support with the board.
2. Attend a few meetings before presenting in order to get information on board make-up, style, and presentation norms.
3. Remember that you represent not only yourself and your program, but your staff, your agency, and the early childhood profession. Before presenting to the board, consider what it means to be “professional.”
4. Explain briefly to the board how the early childhood program is connected to the higher purpose (mission, vision, values, or goals) of the organization in your presentation.
5. Include relevant data in your board presentation that helps build a rationale for early childhood program needs or purpose, or describes improvement or outcomes.
6. Tell a story, helping board members, who may never see the children and families, realize that their decisions have actual consequences for real people.
7. Build board support for the early childhood program by evoking the national or state standards of professional early childhood organizations and government agencies (e.g., DEC or Head Start) that support the program’s practices.
8. Give the board examples, when appropriate, of the leadership provided by the early childhood program administrator, including envisioning, organizing, networking, or facilitating.

9. Refrain from springing surprises on the board in the public arena, especially volatile or sensitive information.
10. Anticipate questions that the board might ask.

Table 2

*Early Childhood Programs Offered By Kids' Campus*


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<u>Program</u>	<u>Ages</u>	<u>Center-Based</u>	<u>Home-Based</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>
Early Intervention	B-3	Yes (1 site)	Yes	35
ECSE	3-5	Yes (3 sites)	Sometimes	35
Head Start	3-5	Yes (3 sites)	Not typically	65
Child Care	B-5	Yes (1 site)	No	45

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