

A Conversation with School Board President Mark Hogewood

Recorded by Kimberly Cook

Recently, Mark Hogewood, outgoing president of the Vestavia Hills Board of Education, discussed his experience serving as a board member. As he said, these are just his thoughts and he is not speaking for the board. He also emphasized that it has been a privilege to serve on the BOE and have a front-row seat to witness the professionalism of our faculty and staff, the quality of our students and the passion of our community.

What is the term and what are the time requirements typically?

The term of office is five years, beginning the first board meeting in June. Regular board meetings are set for the fourth Wednesday each month at 6pm. Occasionally, depending on board member availability and scheduling constraints, meetings may be moved, with notice, to a different day of the week or time. Work sessions are called, as needed, and may occur before the regular monthly board meeting or on a different day of the month.

The time required in service will vary, depending on your time in office and experience. I found it took one to two years to understand the dynamics of the position. During my early years in office, I spent 5-10 hours per month attending meetings and attending to board business. Towards the end of my time in office--the last two years, during which I held the office of vice-president and then president--I spent 15-20 hours/month serving.

What are some of the typical duties of a board member? I spent time gathering information to better understand the issues I was voting on, attending special school ceremonies and events, and attending board meetings and work sessions.

In addition, there are several key calendar events, such as the Teacher Institute (in the summer; before school starts) and high school graduation. Often, the board president is called upon to give a speech at these type events. Members of the board try to attend as many school events as possible.

Board members receive stakeholder input and share that input with the superintendent. Also, members of the board with particular backgrounds can be useful for advising on matters such as real estate, law or finance.

How much time did you spend each month performing board duties? It took one to two years for me to better understand how the board functions and get up to speed on board issues. During this initial period, I worked 5-10 hours each month. By the fourth year, I worked 15-20 hours each month, with the highest amount of time being spent in the fifth year, the year in which board members typically serve as president.

What training is required for board members? There is a total of six hours training required each year, two of which must be whole board training. Training helps board members

understand the issues and topics encountered in decision-making; it also helps members better understand their role and responsibilities, making them more effective board members.

Here is the link to the Alabama Association of School Boards training webpage:
<http://www.alabamaschoolboards.org/training>.

What are some issues you see the board facing in the next couple of years? Obviously facilities are a primary focus right now. There are also state issues that might affect our system and the uncertainty that comes with the recent hiring of a new state superintendent.

What advice do you have to give to future board members? The chief role of the board is to set policy and goals. The details and “how we get there” are the responsibility of the superintendent. It is important for board members to follow the chain of command/chain of accountability.

When I was applying to the board I asked a superintendent from another school system, “What is the most important thing for me to do as a board member?” He answered, “Never surprise your superintendent.” I think that goes both ways. In my view, a good relationship and strong communication between the superintendent and board are essential.

It is also important for board members to get along with each other. In my opinion, a board functions best when we remember that we are part of a team and we have no individual authority to fix problems or decide issues. We are not authorized to “go solo”—board members are a “we” not “me.”

The following articles have been helpful reminders to me about a board member’s role; I think they would be helpful for a new board member also:

- See link, “[7 Signs of Effective School Board Members](#)” by Kathryn Blumsack and Terry McCabe, *American School Board Journal*.
- See attached “7 Habits of Highly Effective Board Members” by Susan Salter, *Alabama Association of School Boards Magazine*, January 2000.

What are some good resources to prepare for a board interview? There are reports and planning documents on the board website (www.vestavia.k12.al.us) that contain valuable information:

- Board of Education annual report
- strategic plan
- minutes from recent meetings
- videos