

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Hello, everyone. Welcome back to education, buzz podcasts, the monthly podcast that we're doing here in Harvard to keep you updated with what's going on in our district and our community with all the educational things. And occasionally we're able to draw out star power. And that's what we've done today because we have Laura Martinez with us and Laura, thanks for joining us.

Laura Martinez:

Hey, my pleasure. Thanks for inviting me because this, your first podcast, it is, I've listened to many podcasts, but I've never been part of one. So it's very exciting for me.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Pretty cool, because you do kind of get into a podcast after a while. And then the idea of a came is like, Hey, let's let people know what we're doing. Cause I think a lot of people have turned off the radio a little bit and just it's podcasts when they're in the car or working out or whatever. So, well, thanks Laura for joining us. I want to especially thank you for this because you've been a friend to the Harvard district and to me personally, for the last three years in your role with the Illinois association school boards. So maybe just so that our listeners know who you are and your role, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you're up to and your role with school board association?

Laura Martinez:

Okay. I am a field services director with the Illinois association of school boards and I've been working at ISB for six years. So I am sort of a liaison between our association and school boards in different regions of the state. So I w there's a geographical divisions in the state. And so I work with boards and basically the upper, I call it the scalp of Illinois, the districts in those divisions, Lake County, Kishwaukee division, and Northwest division. So I help boards learn about what it means to be on a board and effective governance. I primarily will do workshops with boards and superintendents go to their actual district and sit down with them and do workshops about governance, board, self evaluation, superintendent evaluation, and also present at our annual conference and communicate with board members and superintendents with questions about anything governance related. So I I'm like the go-to person for school, board members and superintendents who have questions or need information. And if I can't answer it, then I connect them with other people in our association who can help them. Right.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So how did that become something you were interested enough in? How did you acquire all this knowledge to do that? Cause it's, it seems like a very specific thing, per se, where you a board member and kind of fell into it, or were you in education or how did you come into this abundance of knowledge?

Laura Martinez:

It is very specific it's sometimes I think that there are, there are eight people in the state of Illinois who are able to meet with boards in closed session to do a board, self evaluation. That's a pretty low percentage of all the employees in the state of Illinois, that eight people are able to do that. I was not a board member. So learning about what boards do and what they should do and what they shouldn't do when their relationship with the superintendent came about. When I started working at ISB lots and lots of learning, I experienced listening to and attending board meetings and conferences and the wisdom of

my colleagues has been invaluable. I wasn't education. I was a Spanish teacher. I taught at a Chicago public high school for six years. And I, that is such a different entity that, you know, I understand teaching, but you know, governance and boards, you know, the Chicago board of education, very different, not elected from boards around the state of Illinois. So that experience, as far as understanding boards, that wasn't really there. And I also taught for about a year at a charter high school in Chicago. So even more sort of removed from Illinois school, board governance, but still education. And before that some library assistant positions and some other nonprofits. So definitely education has been important to me

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Around different parts of it, I think builds in your knowledge to answer question, because if you understand the educational side of it, I think that makes it a little easier to understand why some things are so problematic, perhaps for boards and superintendents too intense. His lab Proxima podcast boss Saturday in Espanol. I said, okay, our next podcast is going to be in Spanish. And so we'll wait on that for a little while. We'll do our first one in English here. All right.

Laura Martinez:

We

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

We're, we're, we're trying up here. So the reason Laura, we want to talk to you today, and I probably should've thought of this in November is that the deadlines are approaching for school board applications and April is the next school board election. And one of the things that I know is super important to me is trying to make sure that we're really lucky in Harvard right now. We have really a great school board that kind of runs things and are super committed and do a really incredible job, but we may have some turnover in that and there's always turnovers in boards. And so I wonder if you could just maybe for our public, who might be thinking, you know, maybe that would be interesting. They, we have this hashtag here, Laura, that we're really promoting Harvard called Harvard rising. And I think people are watching that saying, wow, they're doing some stuff over there. And so we're hoping that there'd be some people interested in perhaps running for the board that want to be a part of that Harvard rising that we're seeing here. And so why don't we just talk a little bit about if someone might be considering running for the school board, what are some of the things they need to know that they would be, are there requirements and how do you run? What are some of the details that someone would need to know?

Laura Martinez:

Sure. And, you know, it's rare for a board not to experience turnover in election year. So school board elections happen every other year and on a number of years. So you're right next, April 6th is the next school board member election. And there's usually at least one new board member on every board every time. So not having turnover is, is the exception, rather than the rule. There are some requirements when it comes to running for a position on the school board and there's also some recommended practices. So I'll start with the requirements to run. There's a couple of things that a person needs to do. There's a couple of things to be filed. One is the statement of economic interest. And then the other is to file a nominating petition. And so these documents are filed with the County clerk and are available from the County clerk as well. I believe probably on the website. So a person who

wants to be a board member candidate needs to get 50 signatures of registered voters to support them and being on the ballot to be a candidate for school board.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

I was going to ask you about that. Cause I know that there are ballots. I didn't remember the number of how many people, but I think even in a pandemic, 50 a is doable.

Laura Martinez:

Yeah. And that right, that we were wondering if they would make any kind of change or recommendation for that requirement for this year, but there hasn't been any change.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Well, I'm glad to hear that, because that was one of the things that I was wondering if someone would hear this podcast and say, you know, that sounds like something I'd really enjoy that. I just, I'm glad to hear that the number of names you need, the signatures you need, isn't so overwhelming. Someone would feel, you know, like there's no way,

Laura Martinez:

Right? It's, it's definitely doable. However, if someone is considering this, they need to act quickly because the deadline to file is approaching. So there's a week that people can file. And it's always in December at some point, but the exact date varies depending on when the election is. So December 14th is the first data file. Okay. December 21st is the last day to file. So definitely doable if someone quickly and the names of candidates are printed on the ballot in the order in which the, they filed their petition was received. So many candidates try to be the first or the second to file, just so they have that name placement on the ballot. Okay.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Got it. Cause they would appear on the top and then it would go down in descending order from when they turned it in.

Laura Martinez:

Exactly. Yeah. So those are the requirements also to even be able to be a board member, somebody, a person needs to be a registered voter. They need to be a us citizen, which kind of goes hand in hand. I suppose you can do one and not the other. Well, okay. Anyway, at least 18 years old and at resident of the district for at least a year before the election.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So would that make sense that we would have someone actually be truly a resident before, you know, just joining the school board, they would want them we'd want to make sure they actually invested in the community.

Laura Martinez:

Right. Gotcha. As far as recommendations for running for school board, not requirements, some recommendations are to first of all, be very much pro public education and pro students and, and wanting the best for the students in the district. And I, that's always been a huge reason why people run

to be on the board from my experience, but attend some board meetings. What, what our board meetings, like, what is discussed? How did the board members interact with each other? No. Get to know as much about the district as you can. There's a lot of information that is available to anybody. And once you become a board member, you'll get inundated with a lot more information. But I think the district's website is a great place to start. So there's a be familiar with what the district's strategic plan is. And I know that's on your website. What are the, what are the goals? What is the district trying to accomplish? What's important. What's, what's being prioritized because that's a big part of the discussion that a board has.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So in your experience, Laura, when someone is making this considerations, what would be some of the reasons that someone who would run for board that are gonna allow them to be, you know, successful and enjoy the experience versus someone that might run and then find out that that's not what they thought it would be and they end up not enjoying it at all. What, are there some differences that you've noticed with people that run and have really enjoy it or those that thought it would be something quite different?

Laura Martinez:

Yes. I think one of the most common thing that I have seen and heard about is someone who's running for the board in order to do one thing, having a very narrow agenda, someone who's been dissatisfied with the way one specific thing has been going in the district for awhile and, and hasn't been able to resolve it. So they think, Oh, I'll go on the board. That's where all the power is. So for example, if someone wants to get rid of one of the science textbooks, so they've joined the board and that's their goal, they'll find that it's very difficult to get that one narrow agenda item accomplished because as an individual, that's how you campaign. But then once you're part of a board, you're part of a group of seven, you're one of seven voices or six other people whose opinion matters. And, and you have a discussion.

Laura Martinez:

So a lot of times people with a very narrow agenda find out, Oh, I can't accomplish this. This isn't what I thought it was at all. A better way to go about it is to want to give back to the community, to, to really care about education and students, to one of the, part of the great new things or the direction that the district is going or you're concerned. And you want to be part of the solution, not necessarily having some narrow agenda that you want to accomplish, but you just want to learn it and be part of a bigger thing. That's a great point going in with an attitude of, I there's a lot, I need to learn. I'm going to learn as much as I can. I'm going to listen. I'm going to ask questions. I'm going to hear my fellow board members opinions and, and make my decision, decide what my vote's going to be after I have the information after I've participated in a discussion, an open minds, really important understanding the intro board relationship, wanting to work with people, be part of a team. Also understanding the relationship between superintendent and board, which I think really comes about once you're on the board, but that's a crucial relationship for the, for the district and be willing to, to learn from your fellow veteran board members about what that's like.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So when you talk to board members who maybe, you know, there's some great stories that I've seen in some publications, including yours, that you know, are stories of people that have been board members

for 20, 25, 30 years. When you talk to people like that and last, or are triple I was virtual this year. And there was a board member who I think had been on the board. It was a district in Southern Illinois, but had been on the board for like 30 years. And he was just talking about all the changes. When you talk to people like that, what are their stories of like the, the intrinsic rewards they get from this? Because they're, you know, it's, you're not going to get paid. It's a free, voluntary position. So people need to also know that, but what are those intrinsic benefits that people experience? Cause there must be something that are motivating people to be a part of it because they, they do give up nights for meetings and they have board packets to read, to be prepared for the meeting. So there's some work to it. What is it that they're getting out of it to make this worthwhile?

Laura Martinez:

I think one of the things is a deep seated desire to serve and really being committed to serving the community in that way and wanting to be part of something that's really important for the community. Part of the community devoted to education. And I think the more board members are the longer they're on the board. The more they understand that. And, and for some, the harder it is to leave because they've seen change. And they also, I think, understand how things can be kind of a pattern like there's, you know, really forward-thinking years and there's years where things are troubled and just, they can be a real calming presence. I weather the storm before I know it'll pass. I can really help with mentoring new board members. I can help guide this board and, and explain to them what best practices and what works for us. I can really be a voice of experience to the, the superintendent, which I'm assuming you've had a few superintendents within that 30 year period, but just to be a, a longstanding presence and really the serve and, and you're right, it's, it's volunteer. There's so much work that goes in. It's not just having a meeting for a couple hours every week, but just really being committed and devoted to serving and for the benefit of students ultimately,

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

But maybe we shouldn't scare people off and then tell him it's not a full-time job. You know, you can have a full-time job and still have plenty of time to, you know, be kept up to date. I know that for example, here, I send our board and update most every Friday and it ends up being three or four or five pages just with things that I think they should be aware of, of happenings. You know, like this yesterday I sent them something, I couldn't even wait till Friday because we've been waiting forever for Chromebooks. So I sent them an email and said, the Chromebooks are here. We have 700 Chromebooks. I mean, because we've been waiting and waiting and somehow stringing along our supply of Chromebooks and remote learning here, that just, Oh my gosh. Some of them are just about ready to croak. And so that was a big celebration. So there's things like that, that I try to wait until Friday, but it scare someone off that, you know, Hey, I work full-time, can I handle this? I think we have a number of people on our board that, you know, obviously have full-time jobs that fulfill their responsibilities very, very well.

Laura Martinez:

Right? That's a good point. It not to scare anyone away because districts depend on the generosity and volunteer spirit of, of board members to run. And that is, it's such a, kind of a, I think, microcosms the wrong word, but it's really such an example of democracy, of a group of individuals who are usually elected sometimes appointed by other board members, but elected by the local community to serve on the board and, and make decisions and, you know, understanding the gravity of that position is important. But knowing that there there's time to be invested, but it's certainly not like you said, a full-

time job. And what I think is really neat is that, you know, seven board members coming from seven different backgrounds and experiences and jobs and coming together and, and everybody benefiting from the differences. And, you know, if, if a board member is an attorney, say that board member can help his fellow board members understand maybe some things or some of the finance background, but it's really for the edification of the board members not to, you know, run the district, but those experiences are helpful.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

It's interesting you say that because that's, one of the things I've watched with our board is we have such a wide variety of experiences that they really do have, you know, certain areas of interest and expertise that allow them to, and the other board members then rely on that say, you know, what do you mean by that? Or tell us a little bit more about that. And then we, they can help that. So that's kind of a great point. So let's transition to, so someone's actually been elected or in our situation we've had, because we have the different townships and we have to have a certain amount of people in various townships. That is another thing that affects us and that's allowed us or caused us to have to appoint people. And so we had some interviews because we had a vacancy last time. And so we that's how Hugo rolled on one of our board members was selected. So, but once you are on the board, what's the next step. I mean, what, what happens just so people know how that transition happens into being an active board member?

Laura Martinez:

Well, just like before, you're a board member, once you're on the board, there are things that are required and then there's things that are best practices. So I'll use that same framework. Great. So a board member is required. So the, the election happens and then there's 21 days to get the official canvas of votes. And then there are 28 days after that, that board members are required to be seated. So it's usually some date in may, that's the deadline to seek new board members. So board members are they're sworn in, they take an oath of office and that's something that is usually in policy, but there's also a code of conduct that is in your policy manual two 80 in the board member section. But those are things that so legally a board member has to take the oath of office, but should be familiar with the code of conduct as well. Then there is mandatory training that the state requires for newly seated board members. Okay. One of those mandated trainings is training on the open meetings act and that needs to be, isn't it it's pretty important. And that needs to be taken within 90 days of being seated.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Yeah. So people sometimes ask me about that because there are things then as a new board member, you have to consider, for example, you can't be discussing school board business with a group of three or more because then that's outside the, considered a meeting. So we have to sometimes be thoughtful about how we do things that like we have a parent advisory committee and it's a really useful committee because those board members are served there, get a really hear from the community and the parents, but we can only have two board members attend these meetings because it would violate the open meetings act. We have more than that. So there are some things that right away, you're like, Oh, okay. I got to think about that. Even emails, they can't email amongst themselves more than just a one-to-one even that's discouraged. So yeah, that's a, that's a big one to learn, isn't it?

Laura Martinez:

It is. It's, it's crucially important. And I would say a big percentage of the questions that I get in my colleagues get at ISB, have to do with the open meetings act and this okay. But this isn't okay. And of course your own local district attorney is the best to ask questions because that is definitely legal, but right. Once you're on a board, you have to kind of rethink how you communicate, not with everyone in your life, but with your fellow board members, because there are things in place. And the idea behind that is that boards should be conducting their business open to the public. So the public should be able to hear boards, talk about issues, to hear the vote and to be a part of it. There are exceptions to when it doesn't have to be available to the public. And those are those exceptions to the open meetings act, but board members need to be familiar with that too. So yeah, the open meetings act training is really important. And then the other required training is called. There's an acronym for that. Just like there is for everything

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Acronyms, when you join a board while you there's a, there's all these things that will bombard you with acronyms, won't we?

Laura Martinez:

Yeah. It's called PDLT it's professional development, leadership training. And that covers the, the laws that have to do as a school district. So there's the Illinois statutes. And then there's a section in there just about schools and school districts it's called the school code. So that's something that board members should be aware of, but not memorized. But the, the legal part of this training is about first amendment and search and seizure and free speech, which is the first amendment and things like that. And then there's also a finance piece to that. Now, usually when we offer this training, we couple it with para training, which I don't remember what that acronym stands for, but it has to do with when boards take action on employees who are being, let go,

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

It's the evaluation act. And just, it's all about teacher evaluation. That whole process that is you're right related to anyone that might be released at the end of their school year. There's real regulations that in process and the board becomes involved. Yeah. That's another one.

Laura Martinez:

Perfect. Thank you. So that PDLT and pair of training is required within a year of being seated online trainings, right? Well, yes. We offer them online through our website and also I wanted to make sure to encourage anyone who's considering running for the board to check our website. I asb.com. We have a section dedicated to candidates, new board members, lots of information to, to find out there and any word. I mean, anyone is welcome to look at that. It's open to the public, but I just wanted to make sure I got the, yes, we offer that on our website. We will also be, yes, we'll be offering that next. Usually we do an in-person new board member workshop and election years. I don't think we're doing that next year. I think it's going to be all, but we do offer that. And then,

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So the one thing I guess people should know is there are a lot of opportunities for you to learn how to grow your understanding of being a board member. There's a lot of PD that's not only required, but also available to you. And of course the biggest one that we should talk about is the annual triple I conference in Chicago that we just finished virtually. That is really a, I think an amazing event because

there are superintendents, board members, school, business managers, all, everyone involved in the whole educational process, all in this massive conference downtown. And that's where a lot of the board members can go to pick precise things. They're interested in, for example, we're, there's two things that have happened recently here in the district that our board members really excuse me, really attach themselves to we're about ready to do a big construction project. So that allows us to some people attended, how does we learn the ins and outs of saving for a construction project and how do we communicate that to public? And they learn that through sessions at AAA.

Laura Martinez:

AAA is so great. And it's one of my favorite things. And of course, everyone has been very disappointed this year that we weren't able to hold it in person like we normally do for understood reasons. Next year, we're hopeful that we go back to being in person. But I think one of the greatest benefits of the triple I conference and it's called triple I, because it's more acronyms, it's three professional associations that are involved. I SP, which is school board association, I ASA, which is the school administrators association and then Illinois asthma, which is the business officials association. So just to note on another acronym, but the, the networking that happens there is, is it's just phenomenal to me. That's besides learning about what's best practices, what's happening in other districts, longer workshops that ward members from all over the state can be sitting at tables with each other. And

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

One thing you said earlier too, I think is related to that, and that's just that you, you are a part of a team. And that really is kind of where some of the team grow spirit grows a little bit too, is that when you're in these sessions and you are going to these functions, and there's always unbelievable guest speakers to really inspire you. And it's kind of where some of that comradery grows because that's one of the things that, that I guess is one of my observations. I tell people that are talking about school board is you are a part of a team and that comes with the triumphs and the struggles when things are great. And you like, for example, when we were able to figure out how to do this big locker room project that the board is able to do, that was just such a wonderful celebration.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Cause we've been talking about this for such a period of time, but there are things also that are hard, that are not easy decisions. And I think we're in the middle of that. And I want to give a shout out to our local school board because these con the consultation that they've been providing me and all the discussions about how do you return, what's safe, what do we do in the pandemic and all that? It's been really challenging. I know that there have been some places where people have, you know, the, some school board meetings have been rather contentious. In fact, we've been lucky to avoid all of that. Thankfully knock on wood because we've just been doing a lot of communication, listening to our community about what they're telling us. So we've been lucky, but it's a really hard time to consider being a school member board member right now, actually, isn't it?

Laura Martinez:

It is. And again, not to discourage anybody, but I mean this year with everything that's going on, it's been incredibly stressful. It's been stressful for superintendents who are the ones who are figuring out the how and the, the day to day of what happens in the district and what, what do we do and what, what it's gonna look like in each classroom. But, you know, the board is at the top of the strut of the organizational structure, the board is ultimately responsible. And so the burden that's been on boards

shoulders about what do we do? The safety of our students and staff is the most important thing. Can we do this? Should we do this? I mean, to overuse a word unprecedented. So, but so needed so needed to have people dedicated to the students in education and the district to be concerned about this and talking about this and, and, and working with their superintendents on this. But yes, it, it sometimes can be contentious and can cause conflict. Now conflict can happen on boards, sorry, for other reasons, too. And, and it does because you're talking about something that's so near and dear to people is, is their students and, and, and their tax money. And so it can happen and conflict doesn't always need to be negative or something to be afraid of, but this year, the stress and the magnitude of the decisions is just an almost unbelievable.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Yeah. And I've read a few things in some professional organizations that I read that send me things just that, that, that the superintendents that are riding through this versus the ones that are leaving the profession are those that find themselves with supportive and collaborative boards that they're really working in saying, this is not, and we're going to maybe disagree about, you know, an approach to do things, but we're always, when it gets done, we're going to come together with the will of the board. And I might not have maybe personally agreed with this strategy. I love what Dr. Crosby always says, he's one of our, a veteran board members. He said, I've spoke my piece about this. And I will abide by the will of the group. And, and that's such a, an important thing for people to understand is there may be times when you're in the minority opinion, but it just it's time to move on from the topic, just because that's what the discussion was. And maybe you'll, you know, over time that viewpoint might change. But that, that's a challenging thing sometimes for people to, I think,

Laura Martinez:

And is such an excellent point. And, and one that I think is, is part of the struggle sometimes for boards is that we always say that every board member needs to express their opinion. And, and that's why there's seven board members is to hear those seven different opinions, but then the board votes and majority wins and understanding that, and then supporting the process and saying, if you're on the losing sides, they have a vote as a board member, understand I had my chance to express my opinion I did, and the votes still went, but the other way, and I accept that because I accept this process and I'm going to support the decision because that is how it works and right. Understanding that and supporting moving forward, no matter where your vote was, is it's so important. And, and that mutual support and that moving forward attitude and working together and supporting the superintendent so important, right?

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Well, this is my first superintendency. And I will tell everyone that I've just been so blessed to work with seven people that really care. And I mean, there was an old idea of back when I was a teacher in Cedar Rapids, way back when that, you know, these board members were opening their packet when they arrived at the board meeting. And that was the days when nothing was electronic. So that tells you how old I am, I guess that there were packets, everything was paper. Now it's all digital, but we are lucky because we just have really committed Borman members that take the time and are thoughtful and willing to come together as a team. And, and when those moments come where we have to have discussion different viewpoints. So we, we kind of followed Dr. Crosby advice that, yep. I've been able to speak my mind, you know, where I'm at and I'll abide by what the board says.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So that's how I know that I'm a, I'm a lucky guy in these. I like your word Lord. It's truly unprecedented. And so we hope this podcast has been something of an encouragement to anyone they're still listening with us because it is a, I hope. And I hear from our board members that is really rewarding for them. They, they love that. And I think especially some that have seen, as you said, the good times and the bad times, and they can offer perspective like, wow, this is we're really doing some exciting things. And so anyone out there in Harvard, that's thinking about that. If there are other questions I know in a prior, prior district, we did like a board member orientation where potential candidates could get a presentation. And we may do that. If we have multiple candidates in the spring, just kind of give them an orientation to the board prior to the election.

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

So they understand a little bit of more about what the district is about and get more acquainted with us. So, Laura, it's been fantastic to take some of your time today, and I just want to give you a real shout out, cause I asked you to do this and you're like, Whoa, that's going to be new. And I know you're going through your treatments and you're just a warrior to be proud of everyone. So I'm in your camp and rooting for you and for you to take this time for us has been fantastic for me. And I think a lot of people in our community and perhaps this is a useful podcast for people all around to understand this. Cause we've talked about things that aren't just unique to Harvard. They may work in Lombard or Rockford or wherever they might be. So thanks for being with us. And I think you called it the scalpel of Illinois up here. We're sure glad to be with you. And all the support you've provided me and our board is, is much appreciated. And we're there fighting for you and rooting you on.

Laura Martinez:

Thanks so much for this has been really fun. I think it's great that you're doing these podcasts and forming your community community about what's going on in the district. And I so enjoyed my time here and I appreciate your invitation and your support. So look forward to working with you more in the future. Yeah,

Dr. Corey Tafoya:

Absolutely. All right. Well that was our education buzz podcast with Laura Martinez from the Illinois association of school boards. Thanks, Laura.

Laura Martinez:

Thank you very much. [inaudible].