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How Education Companies Can Stay on the Good Side of School Boards

School Board Members' Influence on Purchasing Is Often Indirect -- But Powerful

Robin L. Flanigan



Many school board members don't have a lot of face time with education companies. Even so, they're often the last line of defense when it comes to which products, services, and assessments a school district will invest in.

In many districts, school board members have at least some role in giving final approval to major district purchases — even if they’re not likely to go against the recommendations put forward by their staff.

And if something goes awry with a costly or high-profile product, it’s not unusual for board members to hear about it, and start asking questions.

“School board members can and do have a lot of impact on the decisions that are made as to what companies are coming into their district,” said Beth Branham, president of the National School Boards Association and a member of the 9,000-student Lexington School District Two school board in West Columbia, S.C.

But just how much influence do they have? And how can companies use that clout to their advantage when trying to make a sale?

To give companies insight into school board members’ expectations, and how to build a relationship with them, *EdWeek Market Brief* Contributing Writer Robin L. Flanigan spoke with Branham and Michelle Olympiadis, the District 3 representative for the Atlanta Board of Education, a 55,000-student district, about approaches that tend to work—as well as those that fall flat.

Some think marketing to school boards is a waste of time and energy. What do you

About These Insiders

Beth Branham is president of the National School Boards Association.

She has served as president and a



member of the board of directors with the South Carolina School Boards Association, and has been on the Lexington School District Two school board in West Columbia, S.C., since 2000.

Michelle Olympiadis is the District 3 representative of the Atlanta Board of Education.

She is a former member of the Georgia Department



of Education’s special education advisory panel and the student success stakeholder committee, and a former inclusion committee

say to that?

chair of the Georgia Parent
Teacher Association District 10.

Branham: The superintendent is the most influential in K-12. However, he/she works for the school board. The influence of school board members varies from district to district and state to state, and based on what is being marketed. On major contracts and decisions, many districts have board members serving on the selection committee, and the board is usually the final vote of approval.

How can a company understand what board members want from them, and develop a connection with those officials?

Branham: Almost every state has a State School Boards Association, and almost every single one of those has an annual conference where they invite school board members in for training. I would find out when those trainings are, because they generally offer booths for vendors to come in, and I find that makes a big impact on school board members as well.

Most states have associations of school boards. They're great places for companies to establish a connection with board members

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You're going to stop and talk and have that personal face-to-face outreach with them. On top of that, school board members are walking around with other school board members and they may stop and say, "This company is doing a great job and I want you to meet them." Just being visible is really valuable.

Olympiadis: I once met a vendor at a conference, and he followed up with me via email to tell me he was going to be in Atlanta. We figured out a way to carve out

some time so I could meet him at the board office and we could have a conversation. As a company, you're going to know which accounts you want to go after.

From the very start, what do education companies need to keep top of mind when trying to land a contract with a school board?

Branham: Vendors first of all need to be very careful about the proposal they're sending in. You might be a great company, but if you just end up handing something you did for another district or another school, that can knock you out of the round early on. Really drill down into what a specific district is looking for and reach out to the district—maybe to a procurement officer or, if it's a small district, an assistant superintendent—to get any information you need.

Districts really like when proposals are tailored and it looks like a vendor really took time to learn something about us. That makes a huge impact.

And then just a common-sense thing: proofread your proposal. The last thing you want to do is have a bunch of misspellings and grammatical errors when you're applying for a K-12 contract. It does happen.

What percentage of companies get those types of things right, and what percentage blow it?

Branham: It's probably going to be about 50/50. But I can tell you this: The ones who are sending out the general proposals, if they're going against others who went specific, then it's more like a 95 percent chance the vendor that is specific [in discussing our needs] is going to get the job.

Once you have some sort of relationship with a vendor, how do you prefer to communicate?

Olympiadis: This is not my full-time work, and it's my understanding that for the majority of school board members, it's not their full-time work. So from that perspective, when I get another email, I bump it up to the superintendent's office and from there it's the administration's responsibility whether they want to follow up or not. Ideally, if they could invite us to a school event they're doing, that's a little easier to navigate.



Sending someone to a board meeting a couple of times a year to speak with board members, and the superintendent's staff, lets them [the district] feel they're not just one of the tons of districts you might be doing business with.

Elizabeth Branham

In what ways do companies demonstrate that they would serve as outstanding partners with the school district?

Branham: It sets a company above and beyond if people feel like they're getting personal service. So sending someone to a board meeting a couple of times a year to speak with board members, and the superintendent's staff, lets them feel they're not just one of the tons of districts you might be doing business with.

All school board members talk to neighboring schools, and they're more likely to give you a good recommendation if you're really following up and it's not just, "Hey, we got your business and now we're moving on to the next place."

Olympiadis: Just having a willingness to be open. If they've made a mistake or there's a hiccup or learning opportunity, to be frank about that.

What's an example of when a vendor impressed you with that sort of forthright approach?

Olympiadis: I recently sat down with a vendor that we currently use because they felt they were potentially being underutilized and wanted to understand how they can provide *more* capacity. Sometimes we miss what I call “the last mile” of really making sure that we fully have pushed out a program or product to everyone who thinks they may potentially want to use it.

What are the things that anger school board members about vendors' performance?

Branham: Once they're hired, generally from that point they're dealing with district office staff and so they may not feel like they need to be as professional. But those messages are getting passed on to board members. Eventually, your contract may come up for renewal—you want to make sure you've performed well but have also been responsive.

If they haven't been responsive, how do you typically find out?

Branham: For the most part, you don't hear about outside vendors from the public. You're going to hear more from people within the school district, but those are the types of people that school board members listen to.

We want our teachers and our principals and our top administrators to have the tools they need to provide the services we want to have provided for our children. So we do really listen to their input as to performance after the hire. And particularly when a vendor is getting ready to come back up for renewal, there's a lot of outreach to staff and others as to what their experience has been like.

If a vendor is performing very poorly, then it could get to the point where the superintendent asks the board to terminate the relationship.

What kinds of products and services do you wish you were seeing more of in the market?

Branham: This is going to sound crazy, but there's not enough from a technology standpoint. The big-name vendors are the ones you hear about the most, but I just don't think they're paying enough attention to the market. Tech companies should have really innovative or unique learning experiences that children or teachers could be using in the classroom, but I don't see them being heavily advertised and promoted.

Olympiadis: We buy all these things that we hope will help improve this, or increase that. My hope is that when someone wins a bid in a school district, they are truly sincere in delivering the best quality they can, because they understand they are impacting human beings.

See also:

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- [What School Districts Mean When They Tell Companies, "Do Your Homework"](#)

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