



Managing Chaos:

Redefining The Role of
today's School Board
Member

July 20, 2026

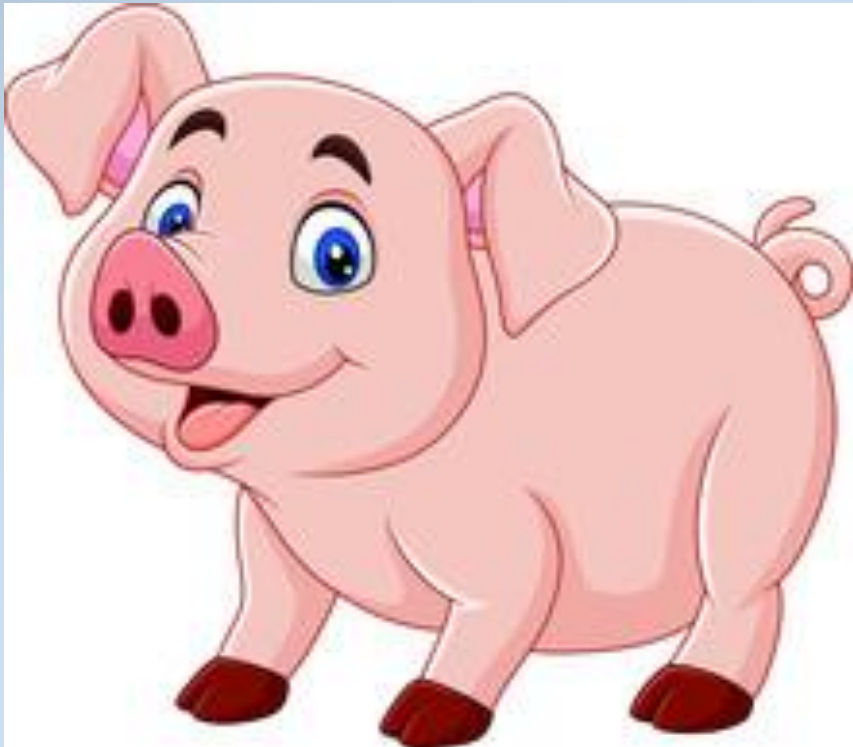
Hot Springs Convention Center

George R. Cotton, Sr.
President-Delta Preparatory Schools
Helena-West Helena/Blytheville, Arkansas

A Troubling but factual reality....

School Boards have become ground zero for America's education culture wars....with fiery debates over race, gender, curriculum, and pandemic policies making national headlines. But beyond the noise, how well do these elected bodies actually represent their communities?

- **"I learned long ago, never to
wrestle with a pig. You get dirty,
and besides, the pig likes it." -
George Bernard Shaw**



What helps frame my opinion.....

- Two term University City, MO. School Board President (6-years)
- Member of the City Council of University City, MO. (2 years)
- Current Delta PREP School Board President (5-Years)
- 25 Year University Vice President/Vice Chancellor
 - Florida A&M University/ University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff
 - Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center
 - African American History Museum, Detroit, Michigan
 - Born and raised in Phillips County, AR. (Helena-West Helena)
 - Father, Husband, Grand-Father, Educator, Citizen of The Planet



...When We forget why we're here...

Chaos

Mistrust

Protester charged with punching board member

By Stephanie Grant Stanley
Journal staff writer

A student protest before the University City School board meeting Thursday wasn't entirely peaceful—but it had nothing to do with the students.

Richard Dockett, an adult who was helping lead the students' march from University City High School to the district's administration building, is accused of punching George Cotton, a school board mem-

ber, University City police said.

The students were protesting the resignation of the high school principal, Doris Randolph. Dockett punched Cotton about 7:20 p.m. just outside the administration building, said Capt. Ralph Tackes.

Dockett, 46, of the 6800 block of Crest Avenue, is charged with assault in connection with the incident.

Cotton, 29, of the 1000 block of Roth Avenue, sustained
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Academic Failure

Anger

Member Alienation

Legal Responsibility: Board Member

- *Under Arkansas law (Arkansas Code § 6-13-620), school boards are charged with providing a general, suitable, and efficient system of free public schools. Their duties include:*
- Hiring and evaluating the **Superintendent**, who manages day-to-day operations.
- Approving budgets, policies, programs necessary for efficient school operations.
- Ensuring compliance with state and federal education laws.
- Acting as a **finder of fact** in matters such as student expulsions, suspensions, and personnel grievances, based on superintendent recommendations.
- Board members **MUST** transact business **only in legally convened sessions**, and any authority delegated to an individual member must be for a **specific, defined purpose**.

• **Arkansas school boards are authorized to:**

- Prescribe the form of school organization: grade levels for all schools
- Specify size, type, style, quality, and location of district buildings within ADE guidelines
- Select superintendent and approve hiring of teachers, subject to state requirements
- Adopt policies/procedures consistent with the law for students, staff, district operations
- Comply with state and federal laws and the policies and regulations of state education agencies
- Determine the district's education philosophy and goals
- Adopt/Approve budgeting process and ensure legal/effective fiscal management
- Review and approve an annual audit of the school district

- **School Boards are NOT authorized to:**

- Act as “Individual Board Members” working to implement “Individual” agendas
- Evaluate/ Assess the performance-operations of district staff
- Review/Determine efficiency or capability of General Contractors, Vendors
- Hold or conduct Individually led SB Meetings discussing policy/Board agendas
- Guide SB operations in a manner that advocates a Political or Financial Agenda
- **Individually** inform Press/Social Media/Community on Executive, Personnel, Legal Issues
- ***SPEAK OR ACT AS A BODY OF ONE WHEN BOARD DECISIONS FAIL TO GO YOUR WAY***

Order and Timelines Help Reduce Chaos

- Have clearly stated Agendas and timelines for meetings...STICK TO THE AGENDA.
- WHEN CHAOS TAKES OVER, ASK VERY SPECIFIC QUESTIONS...
- So, John, help me understand exactly what your concern is?

Set a “time limit” for voiced concerns from the opposition

Acknowledge the opposing point of view...and invite them to provide you with more information that can enlighten your personal knowledge and awareness.



SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER CREED:

ENGAGED AND PROACTIVE BOARD MEMBERS WILL EVENTUALLY END UP ON THE LOSING SIDE OF A BOARD DECISION



INVITING CHAOS.....

- ***“The decision by this Board is probably the dumbest mistake that I have ever seen. It’s obvious that they don’t care anything about children and are literally destroying this district. They are evil people and we need to run them out of town in the next election!”***

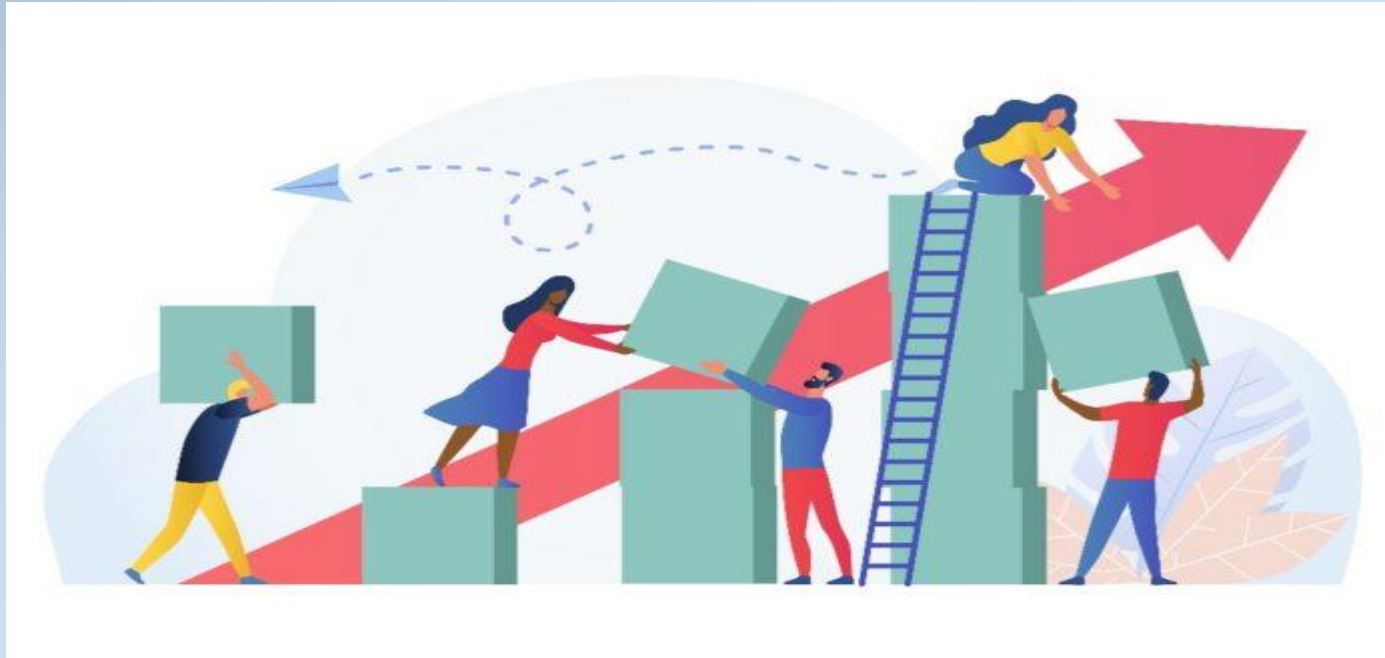


Reducing Chaos



“As a Board, we take every decision very seriously...Mr. Johnson and I have been on the same side of various issues, we just happen to be on opposite sides of this one...that happens from time to time...I look forward to the day when we are back on the same side again.”

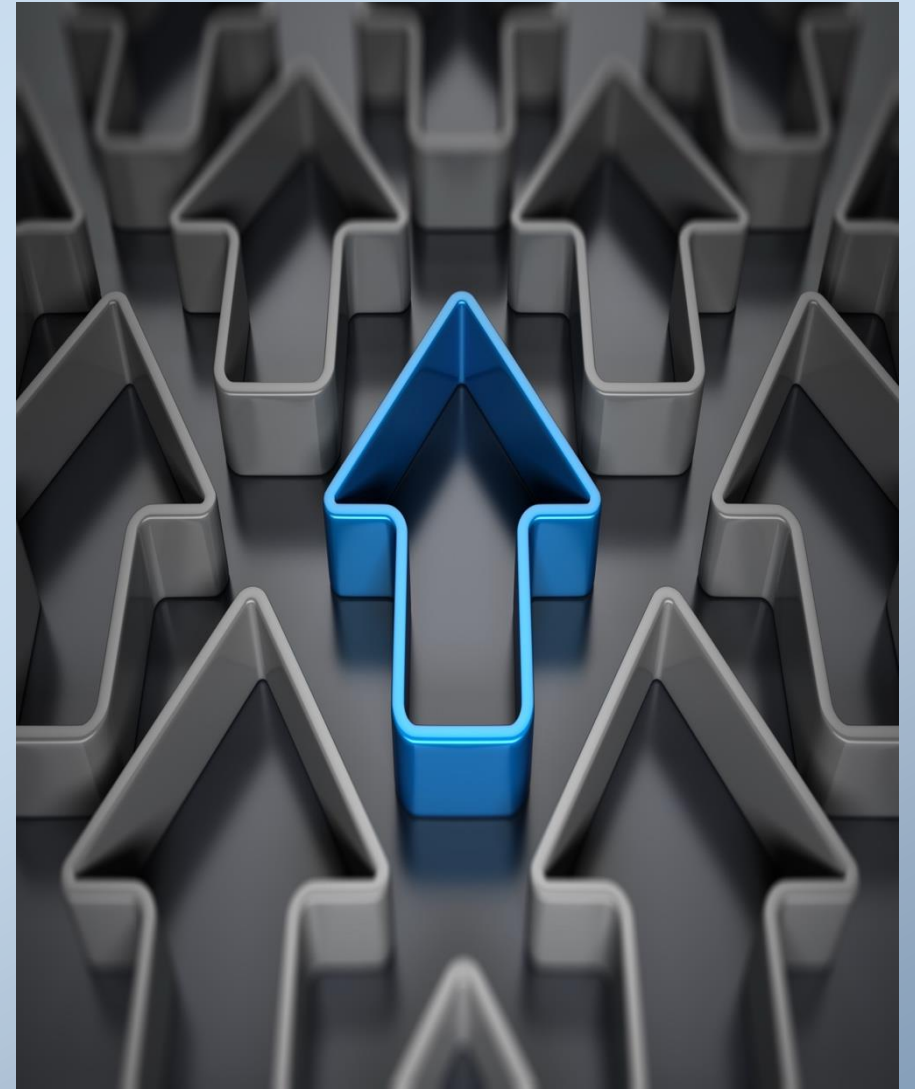
Effective School Boards manage through chaos by realizing that even the most disconnected and out-of-touch Board Member is right every now and then....let them realize that progress.



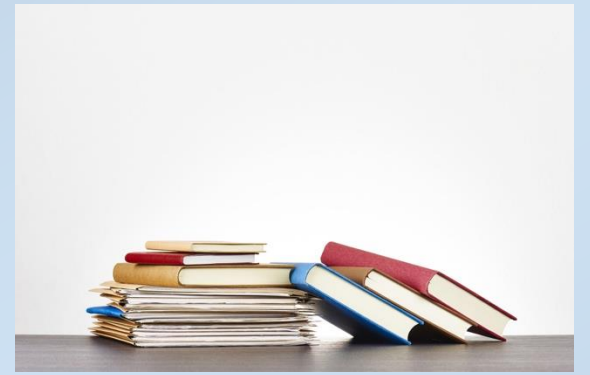
*Towards Chaos Reduction, it's not about **WINNING**, but rather gaining **RESPECT** and **TRUST** of **Members***

CHAOS IS RARELY MANAGED BY “THE BOARD”

- **“The role of the School Board President should never be taken lightly....it is too often misunderstood and possibly the most underestimated elected position in City government. It is the Board President who **MUST** own the responsibility for reducing chaos and managing Board relationships when things go rogue....solid leadership that is devoid of Ego, Patronage, and Political agendas are best suited to adequately manage Chaos”.**



CHAOS DEVELOPS WHEN:



- **Members feel a sense of isolation and futility**
- Political and personal ambitions collide with educational mission
- **A lack of trust and animosity exists amongst members**
- Leadership allows mistrust to creep into the room
- **Communication ignored between members**
- Leadership allows an “Us-V-Them agenda to develop
- **Members forget that School Boards are Educational entities**
- **Members are firmly set on pushing political agendas**

Practical Tips for Managing Chaos

Allow “opposing opinions” to be heard

Work to build a sense of commonality in the face of opposition

Board Leadership MUST make time to Listen to ALL Members

Create defined ways for Win-Win decisions/Member engagement



Always RESIST the urge to respond to public conflicts, but ALWAYS acknowledge Service.

(I will leave the official response to our President on that, but I will just say that Mr. Johnson is my colleague, and while I don't agree with his position on this, I respect his right to fight for his beliefs"

**In as much as possible,
always de-escalate tensions
with vocal and controversial
Board Members out of the
Public View**



The Unruly and Obnoxious Member

Set Firm and Agreed Upon
Rules of operation

**ALWAYS ALLOW TIME FOR
OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS**

Establish consequences and
Member Conduct policies

Give Public/Private Notification
of Consequences



ENFORCE THE POLICY

**Local School Board Breaks Into
chaos....full story at 5, 6, and 10!**

NEWS

LIVE

**REACH OUT TO THE
OTHER SIDE AFTER
A CRITICAL BOARD
LOSS, *it develops
character and
builds RESPECT.***

*(John, I know that this
was important for you.
I'm calling because I
want you to
understand why I voted
the way that I did)*

**Allow people Time To
Be WRONG, and
show some Empathy**



The Call Their Bluff Theory

- “ I want to defer from our normal Board Agenda this evening to address conflict that has been brewing, and I would contend led, by my colleague, Board Member Johnson. There is no secret that he and I are on opposite sides of a very public and often, heated controversy....As President, I don't think that our conflict has been productive. Tonight, I am asking my colleague to plainly state his opposition to the Board decision, and to clarify to the public why he has been so active and adamant that this Board was wrong in our recent decision. As President of the Board, I have solicited and received support from my fellow members to allow Director Johnson, up to 20 minutes to present his position. I now yield the floor to my colleague, School Board Member Johnson.”

CAUTION: Make sure that your position is grounded in facts

When all else fails.....



Release the Kraken!

I'M HERE TO LISTEN!

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- **Managing Partner & Owner**
- **The Cotton Partnership**
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