

Better cooperation needed

The new School Board wasted little time displaying dysfunction at its reorganizational meeting on Thursday, and we hope this is not an example of what the next few years will look like in our school system's administration.

The meeting was going along fine until it came time to make appointments to a number of boards and committees on which School Board members serve. Only one or two members, plus alternates, are allowed for each of these bodies, but there were several volunteers for most of the positions. **'Challenging the old ways of doing things is good.'**

The board didn't appear to know how to deal with this issue, and it was clear that new member Sherri Story, in particular, felt that she was being sidelined.

The exchange was painfully awkward for onlookers and likely for some of those on the dais as well. And for most, it was hard to believe that the School Board had no better way of performing these committee assignments than to just see who spoke up and volunteered.

Appointments to these various committees certainly shouldn't be done randomly or arbitrarily. The committees — including the ACCESS College Foundation board, City Council liaisons, finance, special education, student discipline, the Suffolk Education Foundation and more — encompass a wide variety of specialties, and School Board members interested or well-versed in the topics of a certain committee should have the opportunity to put that to good use. Anything less would be a disservice to the committee members, the non-profit organizations that have invited board members from the School Board and to the taxpayers.

But what to do when there are more members interested in serving than are permitted on the committee? The board, it seems, didn't have an answer, and its attorney's solution — that those interested in serving should make sure they speak up first — should be looked at as temporary at best.

At the end of the meeting, it was a newly elected member and one of the youngest, if not the youngest, ever to serve on the board — Suffolk Borough representative Tyron Riddick — who spoke up with a common-sense solution.

Riddick proposed establishing a protocol for selecting committee members, stating it would be "in the best interest of our taxpayers if we have a more structured approach."

This is precisely the reason why new energy — especially lots of it at once — is healthy for government. Challenging the old ways of doing things is good.

A speedy resolution to this issue will allow the School Board members to work together more effectively and move on to doing what they were elected to do — help make Suffolk Public Schools one of the best districts in the state.

A baffling decision

When making any big decision — particularly one that could save local taxpayers many millions of dollars — it's best for the decision-makers to have all of the available information at hand.

That's why it's so confounding that the School Board recently voted against even receiving up-to-date information straight from the source about an energy performance contract proposal that has been under discussion for several years.

Energy performance contracting is a state-sponsored program through which government entities, like cities and school divisions, can seek estimates on energy-saving improvements to their facilities. Such improvements can include upgrades to heating, ventilation and air conditioning equipment, lighting and water fixtures and more.

Once the contract is complete, the company that performs the upgrades guarantees that the improvements will pay for themselves in energy savings. If they don't, the company strokes a check for the difference.

It sounds simple. But in Suffolk, it has been far too complicated.

The program was successful at the Western Tidewater Regional Jail, so Councilman Mike Duman, who sat on the jail board, pushed to have the city and school division look into doing an energy performance contract jointly.

After many meetings and much hemming and hawing in a now-defunct committee, an \$8 million proposal was finally put forward. But the question then became a matter of debt. Saying that they did not believe the city would support the debt, the School Board voted last April to cease pursuing the contract.

Earlier this month, School Board member David Mitnick — the only member left who supported pursuing the contract last year — brought up the topic again. He said Trane, the company with which the division had been working on the project, wanted to see if there was any interest in pursuing it, presumably hoping that four new people on the School Board would mean some new perspectives.

As it turns out, however, it's more of the same on the School Board.

Four members voted not to even receive an informational presentation on the topic. Chair Phyllis Byrum and Vice Chair Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck were two of them. They were joined by two new members, Karen Jenkins and Lorita Mayo, who surely could have benefited from getting some background on this important project.

A lot can change in almost a year, and we believe everyone on the School Board should have at least been open to hearing an update on this topic, if not for themselves then for the benefit of their new colleagues.

That they were not willing to avail themselves of all available information speaks volumes about how receptive this School Board will be to new ideas. In this 21st-century world of education, Suffolk needs them to do better.

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Looking for more improvement

A lapse in a small but important function in the Suffolk school system, and the loophole in state law and gap in local policy it exposed, seems to be on its way to getting fixed.

For several months, agendas and information on agenda items for the Suffolk School Board were not being released in a timely manner. As a result, members of the public were left unprepared or unable to speak on important topics at several meetings, and at least one School Board member even felt unprepared to vote at a meeting earlier this year, saying he had only received the agenda and informational material earlier that same day.

State law states that meeting notices must be posted at least three working days prior to a meeting. However, meeting notices and agendas are not the same thing.

State law also states that agendas and materials must be provided to the public at the same time they are provided to the members of the public body itself. However, there is no time frame given for this, so a public body could provide the agenda to its members right as the meeting starts and still be on the right side of the law so long as it posts the agenda online at the same time. Doing that benefits nobody — not the members of the public body, not the public and not those the public body is supposed to be serving — and it certainly doesn't advance the interests of transparency and accountability.

The Suffolk School Board also had no policy to address this issue previously.

We continue to advocate that the General Assembly give this issue time and attention in its upcoming session and consider updating the Freedom of Information Act to address this issue. Doing so would prevent public bodies not only here in Suffolk but also across the state from delaying the release of agendas, either intentionally or unintentionally.

But we are pleased that the Suffolk School Board appears to be on its way to making itself accountable on this front. The agenda for November's meeting was released in a timely manner, and the Policy Review Committee has proposed requiring meeting agendas to be released at least a week in advance. The board could formally adopt this policy as early as its Dec. 12 meeting.

The one-week policy would mean members would need to submit items they want on the agenda at least two weeks in advance to give division staff time to prepare. While this may be a little more than necessary, we do not find it to be onerous for a body that typically meets only once a month, and it's surely better to overshoot the mark than to continue in the haphazard way this has been conducted the last few months.

We look forward to continued improvement on this issue.

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