

# MASC ADVISORY

## School Committee Leadership During COVID-19 School Closures [masc](https://www.masc.org)

To: Massachusetts School Committee Members  
From: Deborah Davis, President, MASC

As the uncertainty surrounding the Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on the education of our students continues, families, employees and the community are looking to their school district leadership teams to provide a unified message.

Meetings, events, and normal routines are being disrupted worldwide. Providing education and delivering services will look different than before. Implementing any changes will require surmounting new challenges with determination and patience. Among the many concerns are: ensuring that in the interests of equity, we are looking out for our most vulnerable students, maintaining individualized instruction for students with disabilities, providing nutrition and support for our most vulnerable students and reaching non-English speaking populations with appropriately translated messaging. And this is just the tip of the iceberg for our school districts.

The school committee and superintendent have vital and unique roles to play as this unprecedented event unfolds. With the situation changing daily, however, best practices are as important as ever.

### Here's what school committee members can do to best serve their district.

- **Be patient and understanding of your friends, neighbors, constituents, and community leaders.**

Crises can bring out the best or the worst in everyone. People are worried about their families and livelihood. They want immediate information to assuage their insecurities. With the unpredictability of the future comes anxiety, stress, impatience, and fear. People will say things they later wish they could take back. Financial insecurity ruins relationships, businesses, and political stability. Relationships and collegiality are at risk. School committee members have an extraordinary opportunity to help guide our districts over the next few months. As we always have in a crisis, let us take advantage of the opportunity to be among those who lead our communities through.

- **Continue to meet as necessary and appropriate.**

As we practice social distancing and are encouraged to stay at home, holding a meeting can seem more difficult. Some Boards of Health are discouraging or banning in-person meetings within communities. However, the Open Meeting Law has been relaxed to allow for virtual meetings and municipal legislative bodies are exempt from the Governor's order limiting non-essential gatherings. Chairs should work with members, and with the superintendent to ensure that meetings, in whatever form, can still be held to conduct necessary business.

- **Let your superintendent lead.**

This is the time for your superintendent to manage the district. Superintendents need to make operational decisions often on short notice and without delay. The school committee chair also has an important role as the liaison with the superintendent, keep the board fully informed, and bring the concerns of the school committee to the central office.

Allow your superintendent or other designated spokesperson, including the school committee chair, to continue to be the voice and face of your district. During the difficult days and weeks to come, relying on the chain of command as a best practice is as important as ever.

This is the time to lead in unity and to avoid confusion in the community. Stay in regular contact with your superintendent and call special meetings only when the meeting is necessary for the welfare of your district.

- **Roles and Responsibilities - know your lane.**

Superintendents are facing unprecedented management challenges in their districts. These are much easier for the superintendent to navigate when a well-informed school committee is supportive. However, the role of the school committee also does not change and there are responsibilities and decisions that continue to belong to the committee. It is as unfair to both parties to cede these responsibilities as it is to step on the management toes of the superintendent. Monitoring and making any necessary decisions regarding the FY20 budget, as well as final approval of the FY21 budget remain the responsibility of the school committee. Any decisions regarding negotiating implementation of temporary measures or changes to Collective Bargaining Agreements should be committee decisions. There may be a need to change or suspend certain policies during this time. These decisions, as well, belong to the school committee.

- **The message from the leadership team should be consistent.**

Make sure your district maintains a unified public message and remember to let your superintendent or other designated person to be the official voice of your district.

Promote messages that are:

- Supported by your full leadership team
- Timely. If you have information the community wants, share it as quickly as possible.
- Clear, calm, and reassuring
- Factual (Here's what we know, here's what we are doing, here are organizations we are working with.)
- Showing leadership in communicating about health practices (not just school-related information).

Schools are often the primary source of information about health and nutrition

Stay connected with your community. They are looking for your district's calm and capable leadership. Share positive messages through video on social media. Share hope, gratitude, and compassion in a world facing panic and a pandemic.

- **The school committee and superintendent should stay connected.**

Social distancing is the watch word, but committees need to stay together, even if at a distance. Though in-person meetings may be discouraged, stay in touch with your governance team members. Keep one another informed and along with your superintendent, move forward with a consistent message. Clarity builds trust with your team, staff, and community. Your leadership is being tested. Now is the time for all school committee members to work with their superintendents in the most collaborative, supportive, and positive way possible.

- **Stay informed.**

New information and guidance are coming regularly from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, as well as from other state agencies, the Federal government and other sources. Information about changing requirements for districts, and changed deadlines for cities, towns and districts are important to know. Use MASC as a resource to stay informed through our regular updates, which can be found under the Coronavirus Resources tab at [masc.org](http://masc.org), through the listserv, email updates, and through Facebook and Twitter. Also, remember that the MASC staff is available via phone or email to answer your questions and concerns.

**Note:** MASC thanks our state association colleagues for inspiration and information included in this article.