



Helpful Information  
for  
New or Potential  
School Board Members

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## **Q & A for Prospective Board Members**

### **What is a School Board?**

“A school board is a corporate body that oversees and manages a public school district’s affairs, personnel, and properties.”

- admission, instruction, discipline, grading, classification of students;
- employment & management of staff;
- purchasing, leasing, maintaining, insuring school buildings, properties, equipment and supplies;
- detailed statement of estimated expenditures (proposed budget)

### **What are the Qualifications?**

*In a common, union free, central, central high school or small city school district:*

- must be able to read and write
- must be a qualified voter of the district-U.S. citizen, 18 or older, not incompetent;
- must be a district resident at least one year-continuous and uninterrupted;
- must not have been removed from district office within preceding year;
- must not reside with another member of same school board as member of same family;
- must not be a current employee of the school board;
- cannot simultaneously hold another incompatible public office;
- and...**
- yes, a former employee of the school district may serve on the school board;
- yes, an individual may be a school board member even if that person’s spouse, children, or other relatives are employed by the district;
- yes, a member of the clergy may be a school board member.

### **What is the Authority of a Board Member?**

- Unless the board has taken official action to designate an individual member as the representative of the board for a particular purpose, an individual board member has no more authority than any other qualified voter of the district.
- As an individual board member, you have no legal powers. You can exercise your powers as a board member only through board action.
- A school board is required to transact its business in the same manner as the governing body of any corporation; that is its acts are required to be authorized by resolutions or motions duly adopted or passed by a majority of the whole board at a properly constituted meeting of the board.
- A board of education is a public corporation whose purpose and authority are set forth in the State Education Law and other sections of law.
- A board of education has no inherent powers and possesses only those powers expressly delegated by statute or necessarily and reasonably implied therefrom.

## How Much Time Should I Expect To Spend?

The average board member reports spending approximately 6 hours a week on board work. Some seasons board members may serve longer hours, for example during budget preparation.

## What are the Characteristics Common to Effective Board Members?

**Focus** on Outcomes, Future, Governance

**Communicate** - not just speak, actively listen;

**Think Critically** - facts, relevance, effects;

**Team** - w/board, superintendent, community;

**Lead** - agent of change/navigator through change;

**Learn** - continuously.

## What are the Major Roles of Board Members?

**Representative** - of the entire community

**Steward** - of the district’s resources

**Leader** - of the district

**Advocate** - for public education

## How do School Boards Fulfill Their Responsibilities?

**Sets the District’s Direction** - Drawing upon the community, the board describes a shared vision, and establishes goals, standards, and strategy to transform vision into reality;

**Ensures Alignment** - of strategy, resources, policies, programs, and processes with district goals;

**Assesses & Accounts for Progress** - using comprehensive data, thorough deliberation, and open communication;

**Continuously improves** the district - accentuating and reinforcing the positive, and correcting the negative.

## What Pay Does a Board Member Receive?

School board members may not receive compensation for their services unless expressly authorized by an act of state Legislature...However...may be reimbursed for expenses actually and necessarily incurred in the performance of their official duties...also may receive reimbursement to cover the cost of conferences. (30th Edition, School Law, pg. 31, Section 2:39)

**But...**

*It’s a job with incredible perks. You get invited to read to kindergarteners. You hand out diplomas at high school graduations. And you know that every decision you make has a direct impact on children.*

## **What Legal Liability Does a School Board Member Incur?**

There is immunity for school board members when they carry out official functions within the context of a school board meeting. For immunity to apply, these functions cannot be exclusively ministerial. They must involve the exercise of discretion or expert judgment in policy matters.

School board members...may be individually liable in a civil rights action if they knew or should have known that their actions would violate the federal constitutional or federal statutory rights of a person.

## **How Do I Become a Candidate?**

### **Submit nominating petition to district clerk;**

- signed by at least 25 qualified district voters,
- or 2% of number who voted in previous annual election, whichever is greater;
- in small city districts, must be signed by at least 100 qualified voters.
- ordinarily, the petition must include: candidate's name & residence; residence of persons signing; specific seat which candidate seeks (n/a if district has at-large positions); name of incumbent; length of the term of office to be filled.

### **However, in small city school districts...**

- candidates run “at large;”
- so, only if voters have adopted proposition requiring candidates to run for specific seats the nominating petition must name the specific seat.

### **How do I file the petition?**

- in the office of the district clerk
- not later than 30 days (20 days in small city school districts) before the election date.
- between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m.

## **When is the Election?**

Each school district (except Albany and Big 5) must hold its board election on the third Tuesday in May.

## **Do I Need to Disclose Expenditures and Contributions?**

If campaign expenditures by candidate or on his/her behalf exceed \$500, or if contributions received by candidate on his/her behalf exceed \$500, candidate must file sworn statement itemizing such expenditures and/or contributions with both the district clerk and commissioner of education.

- statement only with district clerk if \$500 or less;
- must file preliminary statement 30 days before election;
- must file second statement 5 days before election;
- final statement 20 days after election

*Please see your district clerk for details.*

***What Makes a Good School Board Member?***

- Should have a broad background of experience and knowledge, or be ready, willing and able to learn quickly.
- Must be motivated by a sincere desire to serve the community rather than to achieve personal glory or carry out a personal vendetta.
- Must invest many hours in discharging his or her duties.
- Must understand the forces of change in society to provide today’s kind of education for today’s children.
- Tolerant and free of prejudice.
- Be a member of the district’s education team.

***What Does a School Board Member do?***

- Help set goals and establish policy for the school system.
- Make decisions on a wide range of problems – some routine, others more complex.
- Must remember decisions are to be made only by the board acting as a whole in a public meeting.
- Establish a good working relationship with the superintendent of schools.
- Help build the community’s support and understanding of public education by serving as a link between the school and the public and interpreting the schools to the public and the public to the schools.

***The general responsibilities of a school board:***

Plan the district’s future

Establish goals for the district

Establish policies for the district to achieve goals

Hire and evaluate the superintendent

Approve, review, and support the instructional program

Approve and monitor the budget

Ratify collective bargaining agreements

Oversee school facilities and operations

Establish and maintain effective community engagement

Hear appeals related to policies

Lobby and collaborate with district, town, county, state, and federal organizations

## ***Expectations of Colleagues***

1. Remember the **role of the school board** is to:
  - Set policy
  - Recruit, hire and evaluate the superintendent
  - Not to administer the district
2. **Meetings are conducted in a business-like manner**, following accepted rules and procedures.
3. **Be prepared:**
  - Review materials before meetings
  - Have questions prepared
  - Alert board president/ superintendent (in advance of meeting) of issues/concerns you might have.
4. **Good listening skills** are displayed during the meeting. Be objective and open minded. Be prepared to logically and non-emotionally present your views.
5. When differences arise, a **spirit of compromise** is evident. Work toward consensus. Leave your personal agendas at the door.
6. **Keep colleagues/superintendent well informed:** Pass on things relative to the school system to your colleagues and the superintendent and expect the same from them.
7. **Allow the school system chain of command to work:** Communicate throughout the board president/superintendent. Allow the superintendent to communicate the views and positions of the board to the school administrators.
8. There should be a **good relationship between how long the board spends on an agenda item and the importance of the item.**
9. After a board meeting is concluded, participants feel that their **time has been well spent** and that **meaningful accomplishments** have been attained.
10. Board members **restrict their legislated authority to the context of the school board meeting** and refer outside comments to the appropriate school authority.
11. **Informational requests** by the board and agenda items are **addressed in a timely fashion.**
12. **Board members feel fully informed** regarding district issues and changes in funding.
13. Remember that your **constituents** are the students of the district and the taxpayers of the community. Always guide your actions and decisions by what is best for the students and acceptable/affordable to the community.

## ***Expectations of the Superintendent (Administration)***

1. Relationships with the Board –
  - Keeps the board informed on issues, needs, and operations of the school system.
  - Offers professional advice to the board on items requiring board action, with appropriate recommendations based on thorough study and analysis.
  - Ensures that requests for information by the board are addressed in a timely fashion.
  - Manages staff and resources in the execution of the policies and achievement of goals as established by the board of education.
2. Educational Leadership –
  - Implements the district’s philosophy of education, as reflected in the district mission statement and goals.
  - Continues personal professional development.
3. Relationships with the community –
  - Nurtures the relationship between the public and the school in order to maintain constructive community relations and public awareness of educational matters.
4. Business and Finance –
  - Effectively evaluates and negotiates the district’s financial needs and determines that funds are spent wisely, with adequate control and accounting.
  - Keeps the board informed on issues and changes in funding.
5. Staff and Personnel Relationships –
  - Develops and executes sound personnel procedures and practices.
  - Encourages participation of appropriate staff members and groups in planning, procedures, and policy interpretation.
  - Evaluates performance of staff members, giving commendation for good work as well as constructive suggestions for improvement.
6. Personal Qualities –
  - Is effective in oral and written communication
  - Is able to facilitate among groups in order to reach reasonable and fair conclusions
  - Maintains high standards of ethics, honesty, and integrity in all personal and professional matters.
  - Respects the rules of confidentiality.

### ***Nine High Performance Traits***

Each Board Member understands the purpose and role of the school board.

- A. There is little confusion where the board wants  
The districts to go and who is doing what.

Board Members are competent and have skills needed to work in groups and keep themselves knowledgeable about the field of education.

- 3. Board Members trust each other. While they may not always agree, they believe in the good intentions of each other.

The board atmosphere is supportive; respect is shown to varying viewpoints and conflict is managed by being hard on the problem and soft on the people.

- 5. Expectations for board members are high. Everyone strives to accomplish a lot, while maintaining high standards of quality.

- 6. Everyone participates. Interaction is not dominated by one of two individuals; participation is relatively equal.

- 7. Procedures have been established for operation. The board has talked about and agreed upon a process for decision making, conflict resolution, and meeting management.

- 8. The board is future focused. Long term costs and benefits of each decision are considered, legal and political precedence is considered.

- 9. Board completes a regular self-evaluation.

## ***Pearls of Wisdom***

### **Confidentiality**

Is it okay to tell your spouse what goes on in executive session?  
Why is confidentiality important for a school board?

### **Election Promises/Representation**

Now that I’m elected, all those people want me to make good on my promises

### **Chain of Command**

Do I need to follow the chain of command?  
Where does that chain of command begin?

### **Board Member Authority**

You have no power or authority as an individual board member; only the board as a whole can make policies and decisions for the school district. The board may delegate authority for a specific purpose.

-School Law, 31st Edition

### **Governance vs. Operations**

Where do you draw the line?  
What’s the difference between setting policy (the board’s job) and administrating in the schools (the superintendent’s job)?

### **No Surprises**

Don’t spring surprises on other board members or the superintendent. No one likes surprises, unless it is their birthday.

### **Building Visits**

Board members have the same rights as parents or district residents to visit schools.

Must comply with district policies regarding visits.

For board business, members must have board authorization prior to the visit and have an appointment time.

- School Law, 31st Edition

### ***Keys to a Good Working Relationship***

- Know your job
- Devote the time needed
- Don't pretend to be an instant expert
- Admit what you don't know
- Don't jump to conclusions
- Keep your mind open to change
- Understand that the superintendent is practicing a career
- Don't become a complaint department
- Don't make promises outside of board meetings
- Communicate disagreements in private
- Don't take all the credit
- Support the superintendent
- Know your superintendent
- Be realistic
- Don't surprise the superintendent
- Recognize professionalism

## ***NYSSBA Board Development Opportunities***

**Annual Convention:** Held every October for three and a half days. Have the opportunity to attend numerous educational sessions, hear keynote speakers offering insight into successful boardsmanship, visit commercial and education exhibits and network with other colleagues.

**Academy for Public School Governance:** Offered twice annually (July and September), from Friday evening through Sunday noon. A benefit to the newly elected board member is the foundational knowledge and skills they need to contribute effectively to their governance teams.

**School Board Institute:** Based on the National School Board Association’s eight-part “Key Work of School Boards,” the SBI focuses upon an original set of performance standards that define what NYS school boards and individual members must know and be able to do to govern effectively and enhance student achievement. Offers a comprehensive series of eight courses and are available at multiple locations throughout NYS.

**Fiscal Oversight Training:** New York State requires newly elected, re-elected, and appointed board members to complete 6 hours of fiscal oversight training. NYSSBA offers fiscal training at the July and September Academies, at regional workshops throughout New York State, and for individual districts and neighboring districts, in collaboration with local school board associations and BOCES. (Course is available on-line. Check [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org))

There are **additional workshops** available for instruction. Check [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)

“Prospective Board Member Workshop” handout

***Helpful resources***

[www.btboces.org/sba](http://www.btboces.org/sba)

Broome-Tioga School Board Association Website

[www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)

New York State School Board Website

[www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

National School Board Association Website