

# WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL BOARDS

School Boards are one of the most significant and important structures in local communities and yet most residents are only minimally aware of how they function. This guide is written for a broad audience, from potential Board Members, to administrators and staff of the districts, to those who merely want to better understand how decisions affecting children and tax dollars are made. It provides basic information about school Boards, their structure, and their roles and responsibilities in ensuring the education of the citizens of tomorrow.

## Historical Perspective

Free public education is an American invention that is deeply rooted in the notion that an educated public helps sustain a free society. Beginning in the 19th century and fueled by the work of Horace Mann, Chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837-1849, a structure for public education was conceived. Simply stated, school districts became a community responsibility governed by a local Board: ergo, the current school district structure. Depending on the community, those who serve on Boards are called *Members* or *Trustees*.

## Board Purpose

The primary purpose of a Board of Education is to provide programs that prepare students of the community, as effectively and efficiently as possible, to become self-supporting, constructive contributors to society and to achieve maximum self-satisfaction and continuing self-development.

Everything a Board does should be focused on one major outcome: improved student performance and increased achievement related to instructional standards. To achieve this, Boards must work with the Superintendent and staff to ensure conditions that promote a quality teaching-learning environment.



## Major Responsibilities

1. To ensure the development and implementation of a district annual plan, which provides for meeting the current educational needs of all students, consistent with the long-term objectives of the district.
2. To ensure that adequate resources are available to carry out the objectives of the current plan.
3. To ensure the existence of a monitoring system which periodically helps the Board measure progress in attaining the objectives of the annual plan and the efficiency with which resources are being utilized.
4. To ensure that all legal responsibilities of the Board are executed on a timely basis.
5. To ensure the employment of qualified personnel in the delivery of all programs and operations.
6. To establish and levy taxes to support all programs/operations of the school district.
7. To conduct required meetings in an open, interactive manner with the public.
8. To ensure that all programs/operations of the school district are in compliance with state and federal guidelines.
9. To select, evaluate and support a competent chief school officer, the Superintendent of Schools.

## Goal Setting & Planning

Goals are ends/results that the school district strives to attain. The Board of Education annually establishes goals and reviews them periodically throughout the year including a final report at year end. Work plans are developed with the Superintendent to pursue these goals. The Board works with the Superintendent and staff to carry out the goals.

In education, planning is a process for determining where the district is, where it is going, how it will get there and what the desired outcomes are upon arrival. Planning is not concerned with future decisions, but is concerned with the future impact of decisions made today.

### Board/Planning Areas

- Administration
- Board Superintendent Relations
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Budget
- Facilities
- Policy Making
- Personnel/Human Resources
- Communication
- Community Relations
- Program Development

## Staff Development for Board Members

1. Newly elected Board Members should participate in a structured orientation program to learn how the Board functions as a policy making body.
2. The Board President and more senior Board Members, in conjunction with the Superintendent, should develop and provide internal orientation programs.
3. All Board Members should consider attending workshops on critical issues on an as-needed basis during their service. County, regional, state and national school board associations provide seminars and workshops for newly elected members.
4. Periodically, Board retreats should be held to address important policy issues, to receive staff briefings of educational programs, as well as to deal with priorities for the educational program.
5. The Board should set aside time each year to conduct a self-evaluation to assess how well the Board and Superintendent are working together as a team, reaffirm their roles and responsibilities and determine how each can more effectively meet their responsibilities.

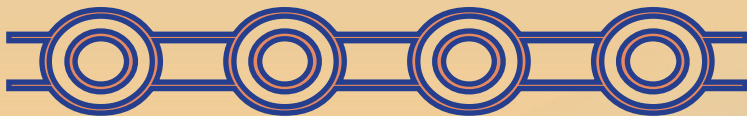
## The School Board Meeting

1. The Board follows specific policies which govern the development of the agenda and the formal meeting procedure which includes opportunity for the public to be heard but prevents an individual or group from dominating discussion.
2. Board Members efficiently expedite school business in a courteous and professional matter following Robert's Rules of Order.
3. The Board meets the letter and spirit of the "Sunshine Law".
4. The Board does not abuse the privilege of holding matters over for further study.
5. Board Members publicly support all actions approved by the Board as a whole.

### Executive Sessions of the Board of Education

Most states suggest and/or require executive sessions be used to discuss:

- Acquiring, selling or leasing school property
- Negotiations
- Particular personnel matters
- The identification of a law enforcement officer
- Placement of students with handicapping conditions
- Disciplinary action to be taken against personnel
- Litigation



## The Role of the Board President

The Board President is a leader of leaders—a first among equals. As such, the President should:

1. Be elected for his/her leadership skills rather than seniority, popularity or rotation of position.
2. Conduct meetings in an orderly fashion which requires a working knowledge of Board policy, knowledge of the agenda, a command of parliamentary procedures and an understanding of how to use these tools to keep the meeting running smoothly.
3. Encourage discussion by all Members, draw discussion to a close in a timely fashion and summarize concerns on key items prior to a vote.
4. Involve all Board Members as much as possible and be willing to delegate and share responsibilities.
5. Serve as the spokesperson to the public and the media.
6. Function as a confidant/liason between the Board and Superintendent.
7. Ensure that each Board Member has access to the same information, agenda and resources, to avoid members acting independently.
8. Listen attentively and then summarize a discussion, especially after long and complex debate, and keep the group focused on issues.
9. Treat all points of view fairly and courteously.
10. Be prepared for crisis meetings by staying clam and emphasizing the purpose of the Board's actions.

## The School Board Attorney

Whether the school Board is elected or appointed, the services of an attorney familiar with education law is critical, if not mandatory. Additionally, the increasing attitude in most communities toward litigation as related to problem resolution has increased the need and cost of legal services in school districts. However, there is broad variation in how local Boards use attorneys in day-to-day operations. Suggested guidelines to consider are:

- The Board attorney should attend public meetings and executive sessions of the Board when legal items are on the agenda and/or legal advice may be needed.
- The Board President or his/her designee and the Superintendent or his/her designee should have access to the attorney for advice and counsel, specifically on matters of policy, contracts and decisions of the Board that require expert/professional knowledge of the law.
- The attorney should speak for the Board, when directed, on legal issues.
- The school attorney is not a policy maker.
- A current Board Member should not be the school attorney.

### Attorney Compensation

Board attorneys are provided compensation for the professional services they provide. Questions to be considered are:

- Should the Board attorney be compensated with a global retainer or for providing specific services?
- Who is responsible for monitoring expenditures related to the school Board attorney's services?

## School Board Policy

School Board Policy constitutes the rules which guide the behavior of school district personnel in all areas of school operations. Policy handbooks describe the Board's expectations of students, teachers, administrators, school Board Members, parents, outside contractors, and non-employees interacting with the school district. Responses to most issues not included in Board policies are within the discretion of the Board.

The following are guidelines related to Board policy:

- All policies should be reviewed and updated by the school Board attorney and external agencies charged with this responsibility on a pre-determined schedule.
- Changes in federal and state law that affect district policy should be incorporated immediately.
- District policies should be adopted annually by the Board.
- All new Board members should receive training in the specifics and purpose of District Policies.
- Perceived policy violations should be brought to the attention of the district's attorney prior to any disposition by the Board.
- Board Members, school administrators, the district clerk, union presidents and school Board attorneys should have a District Policy Handbook.
- All district policies should be readily available and accessible for all staff to use.

## School District Budget

The district budget represents a blue print of what the school district plans to do in a particular year and beyond. In a broader sense, the budget document reflects the vision or lack of vision held by the school Board and their view of schooling and education.

The major fiduciary responsibility of the Board of Education is the development and implementation of the district budget. Every action, expectation, and purpose of the Board translates, in some fashion, to cost—which is money and taxes. Every dollar to be spent has a line or place in a budget.

Boards should recognize that the conditions of one contract may have a direct impact on the contract of other bargaining units, both within the district and with neighboring districts.

The school budget, a most important responsibility of the Board, serves a variety of purposes:

- As a political document, the budget reflects the Board's values and sensitivity regarding school taxes. In communities where voter approval is essential, this fact is a constant restraint on spending.
- As an economic document, the budget demonstrates the Board's skill in controlling costs, its entrepreneurial attempts in raising non-tax revenues, and in matching spending to programs/operations.
- As a social document, the budget reflects most directly on the main business of school districts—teaching and learning. Student learning is the central core of the business of schools, with all other services playing a supportive role.

In the 21st century, district budgets, given their size and impact on local taxes, need to be developed in concert with all representatives of the various school district's operations. Initial compilation is best done by qualified, knowledgeable officers of the district's business operations. Subsequent drafts, of which there will be many, should be shared with Board committees, if existing, or full Board review. The review model should be adapted to size and complexity of the school district. However, the final document should pass the review of the full Board of Education.

### The Role of Board Members in Budget Development

The budget development process may seem very complex to Board Members, particularly new ones. Therefore, it may be helpful for Board Members to:

- Recognize that no Board Member can learn every single aspect of the budget and know where all the money is being spent.
- Read all the material given on the budget, identify questions and present them to the whole Board for review and response by the Superintendent, business officers or other administrative staff.
- Bring common sense and business acumen to the budget making table. Most everyone has built some kind of budget and can use this as a basis for understanding a district budget.
- Request additional information if a budgetary item has a history or a local cultural reason for being in the budget. Ask the question, "Is it still important?"
- Look at the broad picture and not allow a specific salary or single item drive the budget review.
- Request more information about a program or a program visit so as to better understand the components of a particular budget item.



## The Role of the Board in the Educational Process

The Board is responsible for the governance of the district, with focus on development of policies for its effective operation. As it works with the Superintendent to identify roles and responsibilities, it must maintain its focus on ensuring conditions that promote optimal student achievement/performance. In this process there are significant issues to be considered:

- A need to ensure that existing educational programs provide evidence related to student learning. Seek a range of data on specific programs related to cost factors and allocated resources. If necessary, seek outside consultants for validation and study, for the purpose of program continuation, modification, refinement or elimination.

- A need to ensure that specific programs and services meet mandatory requirements and educational enrichment and/or remedial needs of students.
- A need for annual reviews of student performance in academic and non-academic areas. Celebrate achievements of students, teachers, and administrators with appropriate ceremonies at propitious times in the school year. View improvements as successes no matter how small, and treat small gains as trend data.
- A need to support program and staff development for administrators and teachers, focused on student learning. Development should emphasize personal and organizational changes needed to respond to an ever changing, multicultural, global society.
- A need to review building administrators annual goals related to student learning as overseen by the Superintendent.

### The Role of the Board in Special Services

The federal government established the legal right for special services for students with disabilities with the adoption of PL 94-142. States have established their own regulations to ensure the appropriate educational programs for these students and compliance with the spirit and rules of PL 94-142. Generally, district committees exist to ensure the accessibility of programs and/or services for this special population of learners. In most cases, these committees report the results of their work directly to the Board of Education who may approve or question the committee's determinations on educational services for a specific student. Names are replaced by case numbers in all communication exchanges in this procedure.

This area of programming is the only one excluded from the direct supervision of the Superintendent. The role of the Board and its Members is clearly stipulated as satisfying the recommendations of the special committee. Except at the committee level, confidentiality is the *sine qua nom* in this entire process.

The role of the Board is clear and straightforward, and includes:

- Reviewing and acting upon the committee's recommendation in prescribed time;
- Maintaining confidentiality of all information pertaining to the student;
- Ensuring that services are delivered as indicated in the student's individual educational plan (IEP);
- Recognizing that cost of service is not a determining factor.



## The Board and Community Relations

The school Board, by virtue of historical tradition and state legislation, is deemed the representative of the specific communities it serves. Therefore, Boards must be aware and sensitive to the concerns and needs of the local communities.

Boards are encouraged to engage in activities that:

- Promote community participation at open meetings by creating a friendly, non-combative environment.
- Seek to broaden the Board's exposure to non-involved community groups in order to increase participation of all stakeholders.
- Meet with school-affiliated groups of parents to identify their needs and even their perceptions of school-related issues.
- Join local civic groups.
- Develop programs with and for senior citizens within the schools as well in selected community locations.
- Provide readable, attractive publications about school programs and activities.
- Promote the schools as community centers serving broad community interests and needs.
- Ensure that each school has holiday programs open to all community members.
- Encourage contacts and collaboration with business community representatives, providing them with information/access to school happenings.
- Develop school-based programs using community resources.
- Implement annual ceremonies such as the "The Year That Was!"
- Encourage school personnel to conduct informal meetings beyond the walls of the schools, in popular community sites.
- Promote the belief that the community has a rich harvest of resources to be included in all school activities.

## Board/Superintendent Relations

One of the most difficult tasks of the Board of Education is exercising the "delicate balance" between its authority to set priorities and monitor results, and the authority and responsibilities of the Superintendent of Schools to plan, organize and control.

1. The Superintendent, as the Board's chief executive officer, advisor and educational leader, should develop, operate and manage the educational programs of the district.
2. The Superintendent should take a leadership role in helping to develop, maintain and implement policy that establishes priorities for the district.
3. The Superintendent's recommendations to the Board must be based on an assessment of the situation and be based upon valid reasons and not a reaction to undue pressure.
4. The Superintendent must share with the Board concerns of the constituents, staff and students, and political implications as well.
5. The Superintendent must provide the Board with procedures for employment, evaluation, retention and permanent appointment of staff.
6. The Board must review annually the Superintendent's performance and provide appropriate compensation.
7. The Superintendent and the Board must establish lines of communication on a regular basis.
8. A working relationship of mutual trust, respect and honesty should be the goal

of the Superintendent and the Board. Criticism of each other is done privately.

9. All official communication between Board members and professional staff need to be conducted through the Superintendent.
10. The Superintendent and administrative staff should provide to the Board all pertinent information, both good and bad, relative to matters under consideration, including probable consequence of alternatives under consideration.
11. The Superintendent and Board must treat privileged information with great discretion.
12. The Board should take action only upon recommendation of the Superintendent.

### 7 Pitfalls in School Board/Superintendent Functioning as an Effective Team

1. There is a lack of unity about mission and goals.
2. There is a lack of role clarification for the Board Members and Superintendent.
3. There are competitive positions on issues instead of cooperation and teamwork between Board Members and the Superintendent.
4. There is a lack of team development.
5. There is inaccurate information passing between the Board and the Superintendent and/or vice versa.
6. There is poor quality of decision making and problem solving processes being used to deal with district matters.
7. There is a lack of skills, interest or commitment needed to successfully carry out particular goals.

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## The Role of the Board in Collective Bargaining

1. Bargaining in good faith is a high priority and is always expected/required.
2. The Board, in conjunction with the Superintendent, should select the bargaining team to represent the district. Board Members may subject themselves to political pressure or personal attack by being at the bargaining table.
3. The negotiating goals should be developed by the Superintendent, with the administrative staff and the Board, prior to beginning negotiations.
4. The chief negotiator should be an individual who specializes in collective bargaining. He/she should be the spokesperson at the bargaining table. Other members of the district team might be the chief business official, the chief instructional administrator, a principal or other administrators.
5. The Superintendent must keep the Board informed of all progress or lack of progress during the negotiations.
6. Confidentiality must be maintained at all times and feedback from the process should not be shared.
7. Board Members should not make public statements or speak with the media about the negotiations process.
8. The Board's ultimate responsibility is to approve or ratify the bargaining agreement.

## Organizational Relationships

Board Members should be aware that school districts are complex organizations, subject to many conflicting political forces in the communities they serve. This complexity is a function of the many different stakeholders that need to share in the direction of the organization. Parents, teachers, administrators, real estate agents, local businesses and community residents are just a few of the constituent forces. Each group seeks its place at the decision-making table. The range of inputs and opinions is often overwhelming, contradictory, and difficult for Boards to integrate into a workable plan of action.

As in all organizational relationships, insights, knowledge, and opinions from those in power and status positions, such as Board Members, are usually sought and subjected to varied influence.

*Outside of the Boardroom, Board members should be aware of the consequences of:*

- Offering opinions on unresolved matters before the Board.
- Giving specific time-tables on unresolved matters.
- Sharing insights from other organizational members.
- Creating inconsistency in responses to all organizational members and groups.
- Contributing to the rumors common in all school districts.

*Board members should:*

- Share the substance of their communications from the public with the entire Board.
- Work collaboratively with the entire Board to establish the Board's response to all community groups on controversial matters.
- Remember that damage control starts in the boardroom.

## Board Member Ethics

A Board Member represents the entire community, not a selected group or section of the district. At no time should a Board Member use the office for personal gain or for the benefit of special interest groups. A Board Member, including the Board President, has no authority as an individual except as part of the decision-making process of the Board of Education or if directed to act by the Board as a whole. Most Board Members do not receive a salary or any form of compensation.

A good Board Member will:

1. Never take action which can compromise the district or the Board.
2. Never allow outside pressure of special interest groups determine his/her position and/or decision.
3. Publicly support actions approved by the Board as a whole.
4. Not violate the confidentiality of Board decisions/discussions.
5. Abide by the guidelines of the "Sunshine Law".
6. Make decisions base upon facts and good judgment.
7. Not undermine the authority of the Superintendent and/or administrative staff.
8. Understand that he/she has no authority except as a member of the corporate Board.
9. Not be a micro-manager.



## Superintendent Selection Process

The selection of a Superintendent of Schools may be the most critical responsibility of a Board of Education. It is critical that this person work well with the Board and the community in accomplishing the expectations of the district. The importance of developing a leadership team made up of the Board and the Superintendent cannot be overstated. No doubt, the decisions made will have a direct effect on the successes and failures of the school district. The best way for a Board to achieve these goals is to hire an outstanding leader as the Superintendent of Schools.

Currently, there is a dearth of experienced, qualified candidates for the position, making the recruitment and selection efforts of a Board difficult and time consuming. There are two general approaches for the Board of Education to consider in pursuing this search activity:

- The Board itself conducts the search;
- The Board hires a qualified, experienced consultant to conduct the search.

In making the decision, there are a number of factors which the Board should consider:

- Time frame necessary to ensure a thoughtful search process.
- Predisposition of the Board to engage in such an activity.
- Community attitude as relates to the process.
- Prior experiences of the Board in the process of selecting a Superintendent.
- Economic, political and social factors within the school district.

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Regardless of the approach selected, the entire Board, after completion of the screening vetting process, should interview 5-8 candidates, followed by a second round of interviews with 2-3 finalists. Additionally, there are some issues which the Board must consider:

- The development of a candidate's profile, based upon broad-based input obtained through surveys, focus groups, and public invitation, merged with the Board's own perceptions of the needs of the district.
- A decision on which activities the full Board or a sub-committee will be involved.
- A plan by the Board to ensure that representative members of the staff and community meet with the final candidates, with feedback solicited and included in the final deliberations.
- A site visit, with no less than 2 Board members, to the district of the candidate of choice; inclusion of others is at the option of the Board.
- Prior agreement with the Board attorney to negotiate a contract with the successful candidate; the negotiations to occur within the parameters established by the Board.

### Use of an External Consultant

Boards may wish to consider hiring a professional consultant who has extensive experience and a record of success in the recruitment and recommendation of a Superintendent. The consultant will work closely with the Board in all aspects of the process, depending on the needs of the district and the direction and support of the School Board. Given the time constraints on Board members and the myriad of steps in the process, the consultant approach often works best for a school district in accomplishing this complex task. But the final responsibility for selection remains with the Board of Education.

### On-Going Role of the Board

Once a decision is made and a Superintendent is in place, it is necessary for the Board and Superintendent to remain vigilant in terms of the productivity and effectiveness of their relationship. To support this, it is necessary for the Board to:

1. Specify parameters within which the Superintendent is expected to operate.
2. Determine the progress being made in relation to the Superintendent's approved plan.
3. Evaluate the performance on the basis of:
  - a. achievement in relation to the approved plan
  - b. compliance with laws, regulations and policies of the Board
  - c. ability to deal with concerns of faculty, students, community, Board
4. Provide the Superintendent with support and the resources to accomplish the mutual goals of the Board and the school district.

## The Board as an Agent of Change

Twenty-first century realities, braced by the changes happening daily by the globalization of economies, values and media impact suggest the necessity of the educational system to keep in step with the international community.

Education has been the proven way for societies to keep themselves vibrant and competitive in all world markets. The history of American education and the related advancement of our country's ability to maintain a basic economy are evidence of how public education helped adjust to the dynamics of change.

Board members, by virtue of the critical role they play in our nation's school districts, must be the engine that drives a district to face change squarely and courageously.

As agents of change, Board members may think about the following:

- Identify and build on district strengths, make good things better—nothing is good enough.
- Encourage staff to understand program weaknesses and address issues, create dialog, and reward their findings/solutions.
- Challenge the notion that increased costs alone do not address weaknesses.
- Recognize and change the human behavior that contributes to weaknesses in your school district.
- Become involved in the politics of education in the region, state, city—be judicious in scope based upon interest/availability of Board Members.
- Employ leaders with managerial/leadership skills and reward them accordingly. Let your leaders know what you expect from them.
- Create leadership at all levels of your school district from the classroom to the superintendent's office—think 360°.
- Celebrate and reward changes that make a difference by sharing such accomplishments with the entire staff.
- Drive your school district, don't let it drive you.

## Other Educational Organizations

- [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)-National School Boards Association (NSBA)
- [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)-New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA)
- [www.nyscoss.org](http://www.nyscoss.org)-New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS)
- [www.asbonewyork.org](http://www.asbonewyork.org)-Association of School Business Officials of New York (ASBONY)
- [www.nassausuperintendents.org](http://www.nassausuperintendents.org)-Nassau County Council of School Superintendents (NCCSS)
- [www.suffolksuperintendents.org](http://www.suffolksuperintendents.org)-Suffolk County School Superintendents Association (SCSSA)

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