



# About School Boards

## What is a school board and what does it do?

The local school board grew out of the town meeting, dating back more than 200 years to the original 13 Colonies. Times have changed, but the basic function of school boards today remains the same: to provide local citizen control over education at a point as close to the parent and child as possible.

Today, school board members represent the interests of two million Illinois public school children. The Illinois Constitution grants boards of education wide latitude in governing their school districts, subject to numerous state laws and regulations.

Perhaps the most important job of a school board is to hire a superintendent. Through its written policies, the board directs and empowers the superintendent to function as chief executive officer in managing all aspects of district operations. The board evaluates the superintendent's work and holds that person accountable for district performance and compliance with board policy.

Because a school board is an elected governmental body, it can take action only by majority vote at a public meeting. The individual board member has no authority other than the right to cast a vote at such a meeting. The purpose of a school board meeting is to transact the legal business of the school district through discussion and voting among the members. Effective boards engage in an ongoing two-way conversation through the use of public forums, surveys, citizens committees, and other engagement tools to determine the community's aspirations for its schools and students.

## What makes effective school boards?

School board practices vary from place to place. The degree of formality required in conducting meetings, for example, may depend on whether the board meets before a large audience, a small one, or no audience at all. There are some characteristics, however, that are common to good school boards everywhere. A good school board

Knows the difference between governance (which is its job) and management (which is the administration's job).

Makes every effort to operate openly by encouraging public attendance at its meetings and keeping constituents informed of the district's progress.

Enacts major policies only after all sides of the matter have been studied and all persons or groups affected have been consulted.

Attempts to reach decisions that all members can support.

Maintains efficient procedures to conduct business.

Works to provide quality education opportunities for all students of the district. The board talks about education, studies the needs of students and the community, and bases its decisions on those needs.

A Code of Conduct for Members of School Boards adopted by the IASB Board of Directors (1976) espouses high ethical standards for boards of education and individual board members. IASB also developed six principles that describe the work of school boards and are the cornerstone of IASB's beliefs about the governance process.

### **What makes a good school board member?**

Board members come from all walks of life. The ability to function as one member of a seven-member governing board is not determined by gender, occupation, race, income, or social standing. Effective school board members, however, are characterized by the following:

The ability to work as a member of a team with an open mind and an ability to engage in give-and-take to arrive at a group consensus.

The willingness to spend the time required to become informed and to do the homework needed to take part in effective school board meetings.

The desire to serve children and the community and a strong belief in the values of public schools and educational success.

The recognition that the school district is a large operation and that the board is responsible for seeing that the district is run by highly skilled professionals.

### **Who should I talk to about a school concern?**

Some people call a school board member with concerns, suggestions, and questions. This may be appropriate when discussing district-wide policy. More often than not, however, the matter must be referred to the superintendent or other staff member. Remember

that the individual board member has no authority other than voting on official actions at meetings. Therefore, the individual board member is rarely the place to begin when you have a concern.

The best place to begin is with the person(s) directly involved. That would be the teacher for a student-related problem, for example, or the principal when a school regulation or practice concerns you. Some school districts maintain community relations departments or employ staff to represent the interests of individual citizens and students. These people will help you or direct you to other staff members who can.

Once you have talked to the teacher and/or principal, you may still need to bring to the attention of the superintendent those matters that involve state laws or district-wide policies.

If the superintendent cannot resolve your problem, you should ask to be placed on the agenda for the next board meeting. If the concern is important enough to be brought before a public meeting of the full board, you'll find this approach gets a much better response than talking to an individual board member.

Most boards set aside time at meetings for public input. Find out in advance about any time limits or other locally-established rules. However, if you take your concern first to the person(s) directly involved, and work your way up the chain of command, you will almost never need to appeal to the school board.

### **What if my concern is about the school board or individual member?**

The Illinois Association of School Boards is not a regulatory or oversight organization for local school boards. If you feel that your local school board is in violation of the law, it would be best to speak with your local Regional Office of Education or law enforcement. Only the regional superintendent has the power to remove a board member from office for willful failure to perform official duties.

### **How can I help to build good schools and good school boards?**

School boards have a crucial responsibility to make the most effective, efficient use of school resources and protect those resources against waste and abuse. You can help make sure local decisions about education programs align with your community's needs by

- Electing capable and well-motivated people to your school board, supporting them, and working to ensure that they represent all citizens in your school district.

- Establishing a constructive relationship with your child's teacher and school administration and staying informed of what is going on in the school and in the

district.

Seeking ways to resolve school problems through discussion and consensus and to avoid the conflicts that disrupt the team effort that is essential for good education.

Working for the widest possible participation in your school's parent organization and see that your school board and school administration know what parents think on major issues.

Working with your school board in communicating your views to lawmakers and agency officials in Springfield and Washington, D.C.

Running for a position on the school board if you are committed to the district, students, and community and believe in a quality educational system governed by locally elected school board members. But first, take some time to prepare yourself for the job. See [Information for Candidates](#) to learn more.

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*This text is adapted from "Your School Board and You" published by IASB.*

- [The Historic and Political Role of the School Board \(pdf\)](#).

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# The vision of the Illinois Association of School Boards is excellence in local school board governance supporting quality public education.

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