



THE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER EXPERIENCE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Would I be a good school board member?

Yes, if:

- You value public education.
- You are deeply concerned about all students in your school district; each student is guaranteed a “sound basic education” under the state Constitution.
- You are both an effective speaker and a good listener.
- You can work effectively with fellow school board members in a group decision-making process.
- You are a lifelong learner; you want to understand more about what makes schools effective, learn about changes that affect schools and grow in your role as a school board member.
- You value the opinions of members of school community and are prepared to engage with them throughout your tenure as a school board member (this includes visits to the grocery store!).

What does a school board do?

In New York State, school boards:

1. Hire and evaluate the superintendent of schools.
2. Propose an annual budget to voters.
3. Create policies that guide all aspects of district functioning. Policies can serve to comply with legal requirements (e.g., describing how allegations of bullying or sexual harassment will be handled), provide notice of rights/responsibilities (e.g., Parent Bill of Rights Regarding Student Data Privacy and Security), articulate values (e.g., mission statement), and set rules unique to the district on issues that are locally decided (e.g., Will non-resident students be admitted to this district? What will be the tuition?).
4. Set goals (including goals involving student achievement) and evaluate progress.
5. Make key decisions including: acting on personnel actions recommended by the superintendent; adopting the school calendar; approving curricula and textbooks; approving purchases; and deciding whether a school should be closed (or built, with financial approval by the voters).
6. Hold public forums on the budget, provide required budget notices and otherwise engage and communicate with the public.
7. Set the district's priorities and positions in collective bargaining.
8. Form contractual agreements. These include purchases, articulation agreements with colleges and labor contracts.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, Continued

9. Make decisions involving legal actions, including responding to claims related to student or teacher discipline, tenure, special education, bullying, harassment and discrimination, among other topics.
10. Seek to influence state and federal education policy by passing resolutions, working with advocacy groups such as NYSSBA and interacting with state legislators and other elected officials.

How much time is required?

Half of school board members in New York State spend five hours or less per week on school board business, excluding meetings. About 38 percent spend six to 10 hours, and 12 percent spend more than 10 hours. Boards typically meet one or two evenings a month, and board members typically have written material to review before each meeting. Board members are also expected to participate in committee meetings, work sessions and annual or semi-annual retreats. Furthermore, New York State law requires you complete six hours of financial training during your first year in office. NYSSBA strongly encourages school board members to attend other trainings, especially ones that cover the state Open Meetings Law, conflicts of interest, executive sessions (private, confidential meetings of the board) and the state Freedom of Information Law (which makes school board member's emails and other materials open to the public).

Any tips about campaigning?

Yes: don't make any promises you can't keep.

An individual board member has zero authority. It's only when a majority of the board takes action through a vote that the board's authority is exercised. So while it's appropriate to state your position on issues when campaigning, avoid promising that you will ensure that the district will take specific actions if elected.

I have a relative who works in the district. Can I be a school board member?

Yes; about 47 percent of school board members have relatives who work in their school district or a different school district. However, before voting on any teaching appointment that involves a relative by blood or marriage, board members should disclose the relationship. In such cases, the board member may vote but a two-thirds supermajority is required for the appointment to be effective.

As a board member, can I be held personally liable for legal claims against the board or the school district?

Generally, this should not be a concern. School board members cannot be held liable for actions taken in good faith and within the scope of their authority. A governing board member is not immune from liability, however, if he or she:

- Acts outside the scope of his or her authority.
- Knows (or should have known) that an action violates a person's constitutional rights.
- Engages in criminal activity.
- Has a conflict of interest in violation of state law.
- Commits an intentional tort, such as assault.
- Violates the state open meeting law.

School districts typically have insurance policies that provide for defense and indemnification, providing a shield from personal liability. Boards also have legal counsel and should consult with them as appropriate.

Is there a Code of Ethics for school boards and school board members?

Yes. State law requires districts to adopt a code of ethics for district officers (i.e., school board members) and employees. Read NYSSBA's Model Code of Ethics at <https://www.nyssba.org/about-nyssba/>.