

HOW TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATE: WHAT EVERY VOTER SHOULD KNOW

Before you vote, find out here what a school board does and what to look for in candidates. By Meline Toumani, GreatSchools.net Staff

Getting involved with your local board of education doesn't have to mean running your own campaign for a seat or taking detailed notes at every single meeting. The first simple step—one that every registered voter should take very seriously—is voting in the election of school board members. Read on to find out how school boards work, what they do, how they can be effective and what you should know about the candidates before heading to the polls.

What Is a Board of Education?

School board members make up the largest body of elected officials in the United States. We entrust them to set the policies of our most treasured institutions: our public elementary, middle and high schools. Every district has a board of education, and boards generally meet every month in meetings that are open to the public. These gatherings range from tame rubber-stamping sessions to intense, provocative discussions with the community where controversial issues are debated and landmark decisions are made.

School boards are nonpartisan. In most districts, members serve four-year terms, and terms are staggered so seats don't become open all at once. In general, to run for school board, you have to be at least 18 years old, a citizen of the state, a resident of the district, a registered voter and eligible under the state constitution to be elected to public office.

In most cases, a school district employee can't be a board member in that district. This means no teacher, principal, librarian, custodian or anyone else that works in a school in the district can serve on the school board, unless they resign from the employed position.

School districts are complex corporations; they're often the largest employers in a community and the decisions they make reach far, affecting jobs, resources and most importantly, the education of all children.

What Do They Do?

Somewhere in between the agendas, public comment sessions and resolutions, school boards make a number of important decisions. School boards establish a vision for the community's schools. They have to set up and maintain an effective, efficient organizational structure for the district that lets the superintendent and administrators manage the schools, teachers teach and students learn.

They are responsible for hiring and evaluating a superintendent, evaluating and adopting policies that affect all schools in the district, serving as a judicial and appeals body when conflicts go unresolved, monitoring and adjusting district finances, and managing the collective bargaining process in the district.

A school board has a symbolic role as well. The behavior it shows off in the meeting room, the rapport among school board members and the relationships that members have with teachers and administrators in the district all add up to the climate of public education in a community.

Whether healthy or dysfunctional, a school board has a heavy influence on the spirit that characterizes a community's impression of its school system.

How Can I Tell if My School Board Is Doing a Good Job?

By attending a few school board meetings, you'll learn firsthand what school boards do. Call your district office to find out where and when meetings are held. Once you've observed your school board in action, you'll be prepared to ask the following questions:

- How does the school board make decisions? Do the members function as predictable, single-issue advocates, or do they approach each decision with an open mind? Do they seem to make strategic choices for the well-being of the district? Strong decision-making requires analysis, the balancing of needs and concerns, and the ability to see the long-term implications of an action.
- How's the team spirit? Does the board exhibit a healthy group dynamic, or is it a parade of egos marching single-file? Do members show respect and trust for each other, and for the operating rules of the board?
- Is the board's authority well defined? The classic challenges of management don't skip over your board of education. There's a delicate balance between the board's act of choosing a strong chief executive (the superintendent) and letting him or her lead the way and the board's tendency to get involved with many levels of decision-making.
- Does the board understand the community? One of the most difficult parts of school governance is creating a strong relationship with the public. An effective board knows and respects its community, and encourages the community's trust in its school system.

What Should I Look for in a School Board Candidate?

First of all, you should think about the issues that are important to you in your school district. Are you concerned about student transportation, textbook adoption, funding for extracurricular activities, new curriculum standards and/or construction of new school facilities? What's your hot button? You'll want to find out where the candidates stand on issues that are important to you. You might also look for the following qualities:

- The ability to work well with a team and support group decisions, along with an understanding that the board sets a climate for the entire district
- A desire to work toward a stronger relationship between the district and the public it serves
- A keen eye toward serving the needs of all students, regardless of their abilities and backgrounds
- A professional, poised demeanor and respectful, respectable behavior
- Respect for diverse points of view
- Commitment to the time and energy required each week for meetings, phone calls, conversations, visits to schools, and professional development seminars and workshops
- Knowledge about district policies, guidelines, needs, challenges and strengths

At the heart of it all, members of a district's board of education must believe, unequivocally, in the value of public education. They must be dedicated to serving and teaching all children. They must believe in the democratic process and understand that their role is to act strategically, in line with the interests of the entire school community.

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