

# So, You Want To Be A School Board Member?



*The Leading Voice for  
Connecticut Public Education*

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# **The School Board - An Overview**

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A local or regional board of education has one of the most important responsibilities in our society – connecting the will of the community to the education of its children. Its decisions affect the lives of students and their parents, the livelihoods of those the district employs and the economic well-being of the community.

School boards are a uniquely American institution, having grown out of town meetings in colonial times. Connecticut boards derive their power and authority from the State Constitution and the statutes of the State of Connecticut. Accordingly, a local or regional school board member acts as an agent of the state government with all the authority and limitations delegated by the General Assembly and the State Constitution. But, a board member also serves to provide local citizen control over education in the community.

More than 1,400 dedicated citizens guide Connecticut local and regional school districts as school board members. Every board has elected members, though in Hartford and New Haven some members are appointed. Our public schools serve approximately 540,000 children and employ more than 60,000 people. Connecticut school board members receive no compensation for their service, receiving only the satisfaction that comes from providing an indispensable public service.

## **So You Want to Be a School Board Member?**

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To become a school board member you must be a registered voter and not be employed by the board of education on which you serve. Your town officials can provide you with further information on candidacy. School board members serve anywhere

from two-to six-year terms. Aside from approximately 10 districts which hold elections in May, school board elections are held the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of odd-numbered years. In Connecticut, local and regional school boards vary in size from 5 to 13 members.

To enhance your knowledge about the duties of a school board member and become better acquainted with public education in your community, you should attend board meetings, speak with board members and members of the community and/or attend PTA/PTO meetings and visit district websites.

## What Are the Essential Attributes of a Good School Board Member?

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School boards exercise their authority at board meetings. The effective school board member should exhibit a strong commitment to working with others on the board in a nonpartisan manner toward the common goal of providing the best possible education for the children in the community. There are certain skills and attributes which are consistently present in successful board of education members. Good board members:

- Put children first
- Believe in public schools
- Build an understanding of education issues locally and at the State and national levels
- Maintain high standards of conduct
- Strive to reach consensus on difficult issues
- Work out interpersonal conflicts appropriately
- Treat all individuals with respect
- Manage stress and stressful situations
- Maintain channels of communication

- Take responsibility for actions
- Focus on important issues
- Demonstrate honesty, sincerity and critical thinking skills
- Value and seek challenges
- Maintain a sense of humor, and
- Above all, have the capacity to learn and grow as they recognize the scope of the responsibilities of service on a local board of education.

It is important to remember that decision-making authority is vested in the board of education, not in the individual members. Therefore, members of the board of education must work well together to achieve its goals.

## **The School Board: Challenges and Rewards**

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The education of its youth is an extremely important priority for any society. Citizens have strong beliefs about what occurs in their schools. Dealing with these challenges, as well as with limited resources, changing demographics, and ever-increasing expectations requires tact, patience and a strong commitment to public education.

Once elected, board members represent the citizens of the school district - not just some of the citizens, but all of them. Because citizens have different ideas about schools, come from varied backgrounds and have had different experiences, this responsibility sometimes presents a challenge. Thus, becoming a board member is a serious obligation, requiring committed individuals who have the time, enthusiasm and commitment to be successful in this difficult position.

However, the rewards of serving on a local or regional board of education are also great. Board members bring their unique experiences

and beliefs to the board table and the work that they do can influence the lives of children, long after these board members are no longer on the board.

If you speak to most school board members, they will tell you it is one of the most rewarding experiences they have ever had. Giving back to their communities, influencing the lives of children and carrying out an essential democratic responsibility can be one of the high points of any citizen's life.

There is no greater honor for a person of high purpose than to be selected by one's neighbors to help guide the education of their children. But it is an honor that must be earned through constant effort and a strong commitment to serving other people.

## Preparing for School Board Service

The place to start in preparing for school board candidacy is by attending meetings of the board. Learn how the board functions, talk with members of the board and staff and reach out to others active in the educational community, such as PTA/PTO members. The board candidate should make an appointment with the superintendent to acquire factual information about the district and to discuss challenges facing the board. The candidate also should read as much as possible about the nature of school board work and the laws affecting schools. Reading material is available in most school district offices, on the district website, CAFE's website ([www.cabe.org](http://www.cabe.org)), the State Department of Education website (<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE>) and the National School Boards Association website ([www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)). CAFE also sponsors briefings for candidates prior to each election.

Candidates for the board run on political party lines in every district in Connecticut except Berlin and many board members feel strong loyalties to their parties. Generally, best practice is for board members to informally "shed" their party loyalties at the boardroom door, except for voting on board officers, which is traditionally done by party. In virtually all other cases, however, all board members should vote based on what is best for their students.

# The School Board: The Responsibility

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In Connecticut, the last few years have seen many new initiatives in education. The implementation of the Connecticut Core Standards, a new teacher/principal evaluation and support system and the move towards personalizing learning beyond what traditional schools have done before are in full swing. Greater numbers of students are taking more difficult and more advanced courses than every before, more are graduating from high school and the State and our boards are striving to reduce our achievement gaps.

There is much still to be done as we prepare our citizens for life in the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A school board member should try to learn as much as possible about education in his or her community, as well as across the state and nation in order to maximize school board effectiveness. Serving as a school board member demands time, energy and a willingness to listen, but, school board service is an incredible learning experience. An important attribute of a board member is a dedication to lifelong learning—a characteristic we also hope to develop in all of our students.

Boards meet at least once monthly (except during the summer) and because of committee meetings and other duties, board members can find they are often at other meetings several additional times a month.

Boards of education have several functions:

- Building public support and understanding of public education. This means communicating and interpreting the school district's mission to the public, listening to the community, and when appropriate, incorporating citizens' views into the discussions and actions of the Board.
- Implementing state and federal law on the local level.
- Developing trust and credibility with municipal and state officials to advocate for the needs of the district.

- Developing, implementing and monitoring the district's policies, including short- and long-term goals. These policies serve as the road map for the school district. They give direction to the administration and staff and become the foundation for accountability.
- Selecting, retaining and evaluating the superintendent of schools, who serves as the district's chief executive officer and implements board policy. Perhaps no single decision a board makes has more impact than the selection of the superintendent.
- Developing, approving and monitoring implementation of the budget. The budget provides resources for the educational priorities of the school district.
- Serving as the impartial hearing panel on such issues as termination, expulsion and grievance.

Effective boards and board members establish good working relationships with the superintendent and refrain from becoming involved in the day-to-day operation of the schools. They remember that board members have no individual authority other than to vote at a formal board meeting. Outside of an official meeting, or unless otherwise designated by the board, an individual board member is an ordinary citizen, with no more authority than any other citizen.

## The Board Meeting

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The purpose of a school board meeting is to transact the legal business of the school district through discussion and voting among the members. Because the school board needs to understand what the community thinks, most boards provide time at meetings for citizens to be heard, although this is not legally required. This is one way that boards can gauge the desires of the people they represent, even though persons who speak up at school board meetings often do not represent the entire community, or even the majority.

State law requires that board meetings are open to the public, except boards may meet in executive session when discussing certain issues, such as a specific individual, collective bargaining strategies and other times, defined by the Freedom of Information Act. While the scheduling of board meetings also must be posted, this is usually done by district staff.

## Effective Boards

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The National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education has developed eight characteristics of effective boards. Effective boards:

- Commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision. Effective boards make sure these goals remain their district's top priorities and that nothing detracts from them.
- Have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels. In high-achieving districts, poverty, lack of parental involvement, and other factors are seen not as excuses but as challenges to overcome.
- Are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement. High-performing boards establish a vision supported by policies that target student achievement.
- Have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
- Are data savvy: They embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
- Align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.

- Together with their superintendents, lead as a united team, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
- Participate in team development and training with the superintendent to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for improvement efforts.

Effective school boards also know the difference between high-level oversight and governance (which is their job) and day-to-day administration (which is the job of the superintendent and staff). Such boards enact major policies only after all sides of the matter have been studied and all persons or groups affected have been consulted. Many boards provide for public hearings before enacting new policies and require new policies, elimination of policies or amendment of policies to occur only after two meetings.

Effective boards attempt to reach decisions that all members can support.

Good boards are efficient. This means that their procedures for conducting business are appropriate to their needs and that they do not waste time on issues that do not relate to the mission of the board. In order to be efficient and save the time of the members, most boards have committees, which are charged with providing the boards with recommendations in areas such as policy, bylaws (which are the board policies concerned with how the board itself works), finance, communications and other important issues. Boards in which committees work well and in concert with the Board have a high level of trust with each other.

## **It Is All About Student Achievement**

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Local board of education members are besieged with numerous competing issues; student discipline, budget, problems with school buses and negotiating teacher contracts are just a few examples. It is easy to forget that the primary purpose of a board of

education is to ensure high achievement for all students. Board members must keep this in mind to ensure that board meetings stay focused on student learning and that other discussions do not overshadow the most important task.

## CABE Code of Ethics for Boards of Education

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This is an abridged form of the CABE Code of Ethics, based upon “Standards of Leadership for Members of Boards of Education” recommended by the CABE Board of Directors.

*I will* be a staunch advocate of high quality free public education for all Connecticut children.

*I will* as an agent of the state, uphold and enforce all laws, rules, regulations and court orders pertaining to public schools.

*I will* strive to help create public schools which meet the individual educational needs of all children regardless of their ability, race, creed, gender, physical condition or social standing.

*I will* work unremittingly to help my community understand the importance of proper support for public education, whether it be in providing adequate finances, optimum facilities, staffing and resources, or better educational programs for children.

*I will* join with my board, staff, community and students in becoming fully informed about the nature, value and direction of contemporary education in our society.

*I will* strive to ensure that the community is fully and accurately informed about our schools and will try to interpret community aspirations to the school staff.

***I will*** recognize that my responsibility is not to “run the schools” through administration but, together with my fellow board members, to see that they are well-run through effective policies.

***I will*** attempt to confine my board action to policy-making, planning and appraisal, and will help to frame policies and plans only after my board has consulted those who will be affected by its actions.

***I will*** arrive at conclusions only after discussing all aspects of the issue at hand with my fellow board members in meetings. I will respect the opinions of others, and abide by the principle of majority-rule.

***I will*** recognize that authority rests only with the whole board assembled in a meeting, and will make no personal promises nor take any private action which may compromise the board.

***I will*** acknowledge that the board represents the entire school community, and will refuse to surrender my independent judgment to special interests or partisan political groups.

***I will*** refer all complaints through the proper “chain of command” within the system, and will act on such complaints at public meetings only when administrative solutions fail.

## CABE . . .

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- is the only statewide organization devoted solely to representing the needs of boards of education.
- provides information in this time of increased fiscal stress and uncertainty.
- provides advocacy on behalf of local boards at the Legislature, the State Board of Education and other state and federal organizations by testifying on key issues, following all bills and providing legislators with needed information.
- allows your board chair to participate in the board chair listserv which engages participants in thought-provoking conversations about current issues and allows board chairs statewide to exchange ideas.
- provides boards with an expanded network with more resources to tap and allows them to have a voice in the work of representing the needs of boards statewide.
- gives boards the strength found in numbers, and allows us to better influence legislators with regard to making decisions that are in the best interest of school boards and public education.
- helps in professionally educating boards so that they are more effective. Tailored workshops, such as on FOIA, roles and responsibilities and goal-setting, are provided as a member benefit to local boards (there is no fee).
- provides advice on many educational issues is available with a call to our office. If we do not know the answer, we point the caller, a board member or superintendent, in the right direction.
- helps districts better focus on student achievement by helping board members understand more clearly their role in this critical area.

- can potentially save your district money with our services, as well as the information provided at workshops and the Convention.
- offers regional or statewide professional development opportunities that are offered throughout the year at greatly reduced member rates.
- provides timely *Advocacy Highlights*, *Policy Highlights* and other emailed updates, as well as the highly-regarded *CABE Journal* with information on current issues.
- provides legal and negotiations information that covers issues that board members and superintendents need to understand. And, we are only a phone call away should you need a quick response.



***Is is more important than ever  
for school boards to unite  
to protect public education.***





*The Leading Voice for Connecticut Public Education*



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