

# Your School Board and YOU



Insights for  
school board  
candidates  
and other  
interested  
citizens

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

**The mission** of the Illinois Association of School Boards is to *Light the Way* for its members by developing their competence and confidence through a robust toolkit designed to build excellence in local school board governance, including:

- Premiere training experiences;
- Networking opportunities for mutual support;
- Valuable benefits, pooled services, information, and expertise;
- Advocacy on behalf of public education; and
- A platform for a strong collective voice on common interests and concerns.

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# What a school board is

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The local school board grew out of the town meeting, dating back more than 200 years to the original Thirteen 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. This means that the school board should represent the citizens of the school district — not just some of the citizens, but all of them. Because different citizens have different ideas about schools, this responsibility always presents a challenge.

The ultimate responsibility for education rests with the state of Illinois. The state has seen fit to delegate much of that responsibility to the local school board. School boards — although elected locally — are state agencies carrying out a state function. While school boards are granted wide latitude in governing their schools, they are subject to numerous state laws and regulations.

Perhaps the single most important job of a school board is to employ a superintendent and to hold him or her responsible for managing the schools in accordance with state law and the school board's policies. The board also should set educational goals for the schools — based on state laws and community values — and see that the superintendent and the total staff vigorously pursue those goals.

Because a school board is a 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. A board member who attempts to speak for the total board, direct members of the staff or make other individual decisions is acting outside the law.

The school board is required to meet in public but that does not make it a public meeting. Except at time set aside for public input, citizens normally do not take part in discussions.

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. 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. Some boards also engage their communities through the use of surveys, citizens committees and public forums to determine the community's aspirations for its schools.

Effective community relations also is an important responsibility of the superintendent and staff.

## The school board and superintendent

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The school board hires a properly certificated and qualified individual to serve as superintendent of the district. Through its written policies, the school board directs and empowers the superintendent to function as chief executive officer in managing all aspects of district operations.

The board regularly evaluates the superintendent's work in relation to clear district goals and board expectations regarding district performance and the protection of district assets.

## What it means to be a school board member

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On the surface, being a school board member may seem to be the most thankless job in the world — struggling for long hours with the most complex problems facing America and taking all the criticism when things don't go right.

But scratch the surface and you will find that school board members feel rewarded in the inner satisfaction that comes from ensuring a good education for the youth of their communities.

Yes, school boards attract a few axe carriers and cru-

saders who seem to ignore the educational mission of our schools. But the vast majority of board members are well aware of the awesome responsibilities they have accepted and conscientiously look out for the best interests of all pupils and all citizens.

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.

School board members in Illinois serve without pay and are prohibited by law from having a significant financial interest in any business transacted by the school district.

The term of office for most school board members is four years. Research shows that most board members are elected for two or more terms. This is good because

it takes a year or more for a person to become a knowledgeable and productive board member.

Research also shows that the average board member spends 10 to 20 hours a month in board work. Some spend less; a few spend more. Regardless of time demands, 86 percent of Illinois board members describe their board experience as “satisfying.”

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## The best school boards

School board practices vary widely 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.

Good school boards know the difference between governance (which is their job) and management (which is the administration’s job) and place a high priority on respecting that difference.

Good school boards make every effort to operate openly by encouraging public attendance at their meetings and keeping constituents informed of the district’s progress.

Good school 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.

Good 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 trivia.

Good boards know they are in the business of education. They talk about education, study the needs of students and society, and base their decisions on those needs.

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## The best board members

The best school board member may be you. 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 sex, occupation, race, income, or social standing. Effective school board members, however, are characterized by the following:

- 1) The ability to work as a member of a team, including an open mind and an ability to engage in give-and-take and to arrive at a group consensus.
- 2) The willingness to spend the time required to become informed and to do the homework needed to take part in effective school board meetings.

- 3) The desire to serve children and the community and a strong belief in the values of the public schools.
- 4) The respect for needs and feelings of other people and a well-developed sense of fair play.
- 5) The recognition that the school district is probably the largest business in town and that the board is responsible for seeing that the business is run by highly skilled professionals.

Effective board members often are those who have proved successful in their particular vocations or avocations and who have demonstrated a genuine concern for community improvement.

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## How to talk to your schools

Some people call a school board member with their concerns, suggestions and questions. Sometimes this works, particularly if a district-wide policy is involved. More often than not, however, the matter must be referred to the superintendent or other staff member for handling. 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 where a student-related problem is involved, for example, or the principal

where a school regulation or practice is what concerns you. Many larger school districts maintain community relations departments. A few employ an “ombudsman” whose job is to represent the best interests of individual citizens and students. In any event, these people will help you or direct you to other staff members who can.

When a situation cannot be resolved at the lowest possible level, then it should be taken to the next level in a kind of “chain of command.” Once you have talked to the teacher and/or principal, you may still have to bring to the attention of the superintendent those matters that involve state laws or district-wide policies.

When 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. Some set time limits so that all can be accommodated. Find out in advance about any such ground rules. Then set down your views in writing and distribute copies to the board at the meeting. Your views are strengthened when they can be read as well as heard.

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.

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## Building good schools and good school boards

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If you feel that you have less and less say about the education of your children — if you think that more and more decisions are being made by special interest groups, employee unions and government officials in far-away cities — recognize that only you can help reverse the trend. You can help if you will:

- Elect capable and well-motivated people to your school board and then support them and see that they represent all the people in your school district.
- Establish a constructive relationship with your child’s teacher and school administration and keep informed of what is going on in the school and in the district.
- Seek ways to resolve school problems through discussion and consensus and to avoid the conflicts that

disrupt the team effort essential for good education.

- Work 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 — not just some parental clique, but all the parents in your district or school area.
- Work with your school board in communicating your views to lawmakers and agency officials in Springfield and Washington, D.C.
- Run for a position on the school board if you feel you’re the kind of person who could learn to do a good job as a school board member. But take some time to prepare yourself for the job.

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## Preparation for service on a school board

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What do school board members need to know? A person who plans to run for the school board should acquire a basic understanding of the local district, including:

- Purpose (what are the schools trying to accomplish?)
- Organization (who does what?)
- Finance (income and expenses and the protection of assets)
- Government (state laws and regulations and local school board policies)
- Board procedures (how is business conducted?)

The board member also must understand the proper relationship of the school board to the state, the community and the superintendent — and the proper relationship

of the individual board member to the other members of the board. Because he or she casts only one vote, the board member who hopes to bring about change must do so within the existing legal and organizational framework. Many a good idea has died because it was not properly presented to the full school board or because some part of it presented avoidable legal difficulties.

School boards establish a wide variety of policies and standards describing what the schools are expected to accomplish in such areas as curriculum, transportation, building maintenance, staff development, student services, labor relations, human rights, and community relations. Many of these policies and standards are routine and the board can reasonably rely on the judgment of the superin-

tendent and staff. Some are not so routine, however, and produce disagreements in the community or even among the staff. School board members are not experts in all these areas of policy; they must rely on the superintendent to help them. However, the board member must learn enough in all of these subjects to ask questions, evaluate the answers and vote with conviction.

The place to start in preparing for school board candidacy is by attending meetings of the board. Learn how the board functions. To learn more about school prob-

lems, talk with members of the board and staff. The board candidate should make an appointment with the district superintendent to acquire factual information about the district and to discuss problems 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. The Illinois Association of School Boards sponsors briefings for candidates prior to each election. Additional sources are listed at the end of this document.

## Elections

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Illinois contains different types of school districts (community unit, elementary, high school, consolidated, charter, etc.). With few exceptions, governing school boards consist of seven members elected to serve terms of four years. Elections are held on the first Tuesday in April of each odd-numbered year, unless that date conflicts with the celebration of Passover. Terms are staggered so there are three or four seats contested at each biennial election. Vacancies caused by death or resignation are filled by appointment (by the remaining board members) until the next election.

In most school districts, board candidates run

*at-large*. This means members of the board can live anywhere within the district and a voter can cast his ballot for any candidate(s).

In some community unit and consolidated districts, proportional representation between congressional townships and between urban and rural areas is required. This may restrict the number of board members that may be elected from any given area.

The responsibility for conducting all elections rests with the county clerk (or election commission in some locales).

## Candidates

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A candidate for an Illinois school board must be at least 18 years old, must have lived in the school district for at least one year, and must be a registered voter.

To become a school board candidate one must do the following:

- 1) File a Statement of Economic Interests with the county clerk and obtain a receipt. (Statement forms are available from the county clerk.)
- 2) File the following with the county clerk: A nominating petition signed by at least 50 registered voters or 10 percent of the voters, whichever is less; a Statement of

Candidacy; a county clerk's receipt for the Statement of Economic Interests. (Petitions and Statements of Candidacy are available from the board secretary.) These must be filed with the secretary no earlier than 113 days before the election and no later than 106 days before the election during normal office hours.

- 3) If a candidate receives or expends \$3,000 or more in an election campaign, reports must be filed with the county clerk in compliance with the Illinois Campaign Disclosure Act.

# A Code of Conduct for school board members

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The Code of Conduct presented below was adopted in 1976 by the Board of Directors of the Illinois Association of School Boards and recommended to its member school boards. Today, specially printed copies of the Code hang on the walls of many school board offices where they serve as constant reminders of board responsibilities.

As a member of my local school board, I will do my utmost to represent the public interest in education by adhering to the following standards and principles:

1. I will represent all school district constituents honestly and equally and refuse to surrender my responsibilities to special interest or partisan political groups.
2. I will avoid any conflict of interest or the appearance of impropriety which could result from my position, and will not use my board membership for personal gain or publicity.
3. I will recognize that a board member has no legal authority as an individual and that decisions can be made only by a majority vote at a board meeting.
4. I will take no private action that might compromise the board or administration and will respect the confidentiality of privileged information.
5. I will abide by majority decisions of the board, while retaining the right to seek changes in such decisions through ethical and constructive channels.
6. I will encourage and respect the free expression of opinion by my fellow board members and will participate in board discussions in an open, honest, and respectful manner, honoring differences of opinion or perspective.
7. I will prepare for, attend, and actively participate in school board meetings.
8. I will be sufficiently informed about and prepared to act on the specific issues before the board, and remain reasonably knowledgeable about local, state, national, and global education issues.
9. I will respectfully listen to those who communicate with the board, seeking to understand their views, while recognizing my responsibility to represent the interests of the entire community.
10. I will strive for a positive working relationship with the superintendent, respecting the superintendent's authority to advise the board, implement board policy, and administer the district.
11. I will model continuous learning and work to ensure good governance by taking advantage of board member development opportunities, such as those sponsored by my state and national school board associations, and encourage my fellow board members to do the same.
12. I will strive to keep my board focused on its primary work of clarifying the district purpose, direction and goals, and monitoring district performance.



## Further reading

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Many of the following items may be available in your school district office. If not, obtain them from the sources indicated.

### School Elections

*State of Illinois Candidate's Guide*. Published each year by the Illinois State Board of Elections, 2329 S. MacArthur Blvd., Springfield, IL 62704, and available for downloading at [www.elections.illinois.gov](http://www.elections.illinois.gov). Explains how to nominate candidates for public office, including school board candidates, and procedures for complying with the Illinois Campaign Disclosure Act.

### School Boards at Work

*The Effective School Board Member*, \$2 from IASB. An introduction to the work of boards of education in Illinois, including their duties and responsibilities.

*Understanding School Finance*, no charge from IASB. A brief look at where Illinois schools get their money and where they spend it.

*The Illinois School Board Journal*, \$18 for six issues a year from IASB. Covers the issues facing school boards in Illinois and across the nation. Emphasis is on public policy and improving governance.

*Illinois School Law Survey, 14th Edition (2016)*, \$60 from IASB. Answers in plain English to more than 1,300 legal questions in 27 chapters, includes digital version.

*Coming to Order — A Guide to Successful School Board Meetings*, \$20 from IASB. This 93-page book explains how to plan and conduct meetings that comply with the law and serve the interests of both school and community.

*Essentials of Illinois School Finance, Seventh Edition*, \$35 from IASB. This book is a training manual and desk-top reference for school business managers and budget makers as well as a reference for anyone who needs to understand the essentials of Illinois school finance.

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