

September
2008

Provided by
**Illinois
Association
of School
Boards**

Recruiting school board candidates

Some school board elections attract large numbers of candidates. Some attract very few. For school boards that find themselves having to recruit candidates, here are some suggestions on where to look, what to look for, and what to tell potential candidates.

Where to look

- Look for people who are active in school-related organizations, such as parent associations and citizens committees.

- Look for people who are active in community service groups (such as Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary) and those with experience in governing boards, in particular. Such groups might include the governing boards of farm organizations, Chamber of Commerce, civic groups, labor unions, and churches.

- Don't overlook people because of age. Look for talented young people who are eager to learn and retired citizens who have been active community leaders.

- Don't rule out the "non-joiners" who probably make up the majority of your community. There are people out there with great untapped potential, but their low visibility makes them hard to identify. Perhaps you're acquainted with such a person.

What to look for

Writing in the *Illinois School Board Journal*, Professor Stuart A.

Anderson suggested the following qualities to look for in a school board candidate:

- Demonstrated success in a vocation or avocation, whether it be as a farmer, attorney, homemaker, service station operator, salesperson, or accountant.

- Displays a real concern for community improvement through membership in service clubs, parent-teacher organizations, church, or fraternal groups.

- Expresses a desire to serve on the school board in order to provide the entire community with a good educational system.

- Is willing and able to spend the time required to become an informed and effective school board member.

- Exhibits the ability to work cooperatively with other people.

In recruiting candidates, Anderson also suggests that:

- Although formal schooling may be a plus, don't rule out people who lack college degrees; it's performance that counts.

- Strive for balance on the board in terms of occupations, special interests, and residency; make the board as truly representative as possible.

Another set of qualifications comes

from the school board of Valley View Community Unit District 365. The qualifications were developed several years ago to help in filling vacancies by appointment, but might apply just as well to the recruitment of candidates for election.

- Demonstrates a desire to serve through past involvement in school activities.

- Governmental experience.

- Knowledge of schools and school board organization.

- Knowledge of the school board's priorities.

- Open-minded and interested in the district as a whole, not just a narrow part of it.

- An occupation that requires knowledge or skills important to the school board.

- Constructive attitude toward the teamwork required among board members.

- Constructive attitude toward the board/administration relationship.

- Availability for meetings and related board work.

Talking with potential candidates

How do you ask someone to run for the school board? The best advice is to be forthright and completely honest about the demands and rewards

(over)

of the job.

Most people will ask about the amount of time required. Try to be reasonably accurate in stating the time your board members devote to meetings and related work.

The amount of time devoted to board work varies widely among boards and among board members. In an Illinois survey, few board members reported spending more than 30 hours each month on their board duties. A majority said they spend 10 to 20 hours on board work each month. What's the average figure for your school board?

- Yes, it takes a lot of study to become an effective board member. HOWEVER, everything you learn will prove helpful in all other aspects of your life. School board membership will make you a more rounded person and a more effective citizen.

- Yes, the board is confronted with some difficult and controversial decisions that can generate a lot of emotion. HOWEVER, nothing worthwhile comes easy. You'll feel good about making a substantial contribution to your schools and your community.

- Yes, board members encounter people of low purpose who would use them for their own ends. HOWEVER, most people involved in public edu-

cation are at the high end of the spectrum. In addition, there is a special bond that grows among members of a school board who go through tough times together; they learn to see life's routine problems in a broader light and perhaps to take themselves a little less seriously.

- Yes, serving on a school board does take time and energy. HOWEVER, most board members find that a little planning and organizing makes the time available. Some board members find they must re-order their priorities. Some have to cut back on their hobbies. Others find they have less time to relax or watch television. A few find they must ask their employers for released time—and that's a contribution that some employers are happy to make.

Most board members find they must change their schedules in some way, but it's usually a change for the better. Board service gives the individual a real sense of purpose, even when it provides just a constructive use of leisure time.

- Yes, it's true that an individual board member has no authority to hire a coach or throw out a library book or buy new equipment for the chemistry lab. HOWEVER, the board member has one-seventh of the votes

and is free to offer evidence and persuasive arguments to the other six members. It's a democratic process that is more cumbersome than a dictatorship would be, but it's good for everyone in the long run.

- Yes, the school board is heavily dependent upon the knowledge and judgment of the superintendent, and we'd be lost without such a person. HOWEVER, the board hires the superintendent, draws up the job description, and adopts the policies that specify what the district is expected to accomplish and define operating parameters. The amount of authority and flexibility delegated to the superintendent is directly proportionate to the responsibilities associated with the job. The school board still holds itself accountable to the public, so there is no cop-out.

There are many other issues and questions that a prospective candidate might raise, of course. The goals should be to find a candidate who will approach board membership with a clear understanding of the demands and expectations—plus a constructive attitude toward the challenge.

Good luck!