Qualifications & Characteristics of a School Board Member

Are you considering school board service?

Nearly 6,000 men and women step forward to serve as school board members for 850 public school districts in Illinois. Many board members serve multiple terms, but there is turnover in every election cycle. As such, nearly 1,200 new members are elected every other year. As a prospective candidate, consider the following points on school board service: qualifications, the description, reasons for serving, characteristics of effective school board members, and preparation for service on the school board.
School Board Member Qualifications

In order to qualify for school board membership, an individual must be (as of the date of election): a United States citizen, a resident of the state of Illinois and of the school district for at least one year preceding election, at least 18 years of age, a registered voter, and not a school trustee. Some school districts have additional residency requirements. Most school board elections are at-large bids, but in some districts, residency within specified sub-districts may limit who is eligible to run for a specific school board seat.

Certain offices cannot be held simultaneously when the duties of either office create a conflict of interest. Federal law also prohibits postal employees from running in partisan elections. A school board member cannot be employed by the district (employment contracts worth more than $1,000) or have any interest directly or indirectly in any contract, work, or business of the school district or in the sale of any article to the school district.

Lastly, a school board member cannot be child sex offender as defined in Section 11-9.3 of the Criminal Code, or convicted of an “infamous crime.”

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. 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.

School Board Member Job Description

The governance of local school boards, by democratically elected men and women, remains at the heart of two vital United States structures: the public education system and democracy itself. Our public schools are the ties that bind this diverse and pluralistic society into a nation, and that guide this nation to its future. Only our public schools are prepared to serve, without reservation, all students in America and to enable citizens to be active participants in our democracy.

School board members sit in trust for all of their local communities. Every two years, board members are elected by voters to serve 2- to 4-year terms on local school boards. So what is the “job” of a school board member? What does he or she actually do?

To understand what a school board member does also requires knowledge of what a school board member does not do: no single board member has any power outside of a legally called school board meeting.

Subject to some exceptions, a school board has all powers granted by the Illinois School Code, along with those that are necessary for the maintenance and development of the schools that the board controls. The board must adopt and enforce all necessary rules for the management and governance of its school district. The board, however, can and does delegate many of its powers and duties to the superintendent through its board policies. With limited exceptions, each board must employ a superintendent who shall have charge of the school district’s administration.

Illinois School Code directs that a school board shall make all decisions pertaining to the employment of the superintendent and direct through pol-
icy the superintendent in his or her charge of the administration of the school district. When a school board delegates its powers and duties in this way, it should ensure that the superintendent understands the board’s policy directives and must be prepared to support the superintendent’s recommendations. The school board will monitor this process as it evaluates the superintendent’s performance.

In conjunction with and in addition to duties enumerated in the Illinois School Code, good governance imposes the following responsibilities on the board:

1. Clarifies the district’s purpose
2. Connects with the community
3. Employs a superintendent
4. Delegates authority
5. Monitors performance
6. Takes responsibility for itself

For more information on these responsibilities, please refer to IASB’s Foundational Principles of Effective Governance, which is available online at www.iasb.com.

Why School Board Members Serve

In 2018, IASB asked incumbent school board members about their service:

- They say the single most important reason (44 percent) voters elected them was for their “knowledge and experience.” Others (20 percent) said they were chosen because voters believed they would “represent all citizens of the district.”
- Almost half (49.6 percent) said valuing public education was their single most important motivation for running.
- Most (54 percent) believe their goals for school board service have been achieved or progress is underway.
- The most rewarding aspects to school board service were said to be student growth and academic improvement (chosen as a top three factor by 64 percent or respondents), followed by “Sense of accomplishment in protecting our district’s financial resources” (60 percent), and “Making tough choices that ultimately improved our schools” (51 percent).
- More than half (60 percent) serve more than one term.
- 42 percent of respondents plan to run for re-election; a similar percentage was undecided.

More than two million Illinois school children enrolled in public schools depend on school board members who understand the importance of public education and are willing to serve their communities and sit in trust for those interests.
Characteristics of Effective School Board Members

While most school boards will be comprised of individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, individual school board members can be more effective when they exhibit the following characteristics:

• A thoughtful, sincere, and deliberate approach to the position. The effective school board member seeks first to understand the issues, knowing that their decisions have a tremendous impact on their communities.

• A constructive attitude towards teamwork. The effective school board member understands that he/she has no legal authority as an individual. It is only around the board table that decisions are made and a board member exercises any authority.

• The willingness to spend the time necessary to be well-informed on the issues coming before the local board and to remain reasonably knowledgeable about local, state, national and global education.

• The ability to represent the entire community and not surrender to special interest or partisan political groups. The “entire community” includes citizens who may not have a direct relationship with its public schools.

• The temperament to respond accordingly and appropriately through challenging events. Board membership is an immense responsibility, so the public actions and words of its members will impact the district and its image and integrity.

• The willingness to listen thoughtfully to others. Although board members cannot be expected to agree with everything colleagues and constituents say, they are expected to listen respectfully to their opinions and concerns.

• The willingness to express one’s own opinion and participate in discussions in an open, honest manner, while encouraging and respecting the free expression of opinion by colleagues.

• The maturity to respect the confidentiality of privileged information and to take no private action that would compromise the board or administration.

• The willingness to model continuous learning by taking advantage of professional development opportunities, such as those offered by state and national school board associations.

• The willingness to abide by and support the code of conduct as adopted by the local school board.

• The ability to identify, recommend and encourage prospective candidates and mentor new board members to become effective school leaders.

Preparation for service on a school board

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:

• Goals (improvement efforts underway)

• Structure (who does what)

• Finance (both short-term and long-term status)

• Government (state laws and regulations and local school board policies)

• Board procedures (how business is 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 districts 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 superintendent 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 problems, 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 resources are listed below.

### Further reading

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

**School Elections**


**School Boards at Work**

*The Effective School Board Member.* Published and sold by IASB. An introduction to the work of boards of education in Illinois, including their duties and responsibilities.

*Illinois School Board Journal.* Published by IASB for members and subscribers. Covers the issues facing school boards in Illinois and across the nation. Emphasis is on public policy and improving governance.

*Illinois School Law Survey.* Published and sold by 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.* Published and sold by IASB. 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.* Published and sold by IASB. A training manual and 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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