

# So You Want to be a School Board Member:

Candidate Information for the  
Illinois School Board Elections 2021



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# About IASB

The Illinois Association of School Boards is a voluntary organization of local boards of education dedicated to strengthening public schools. Although not a part of state government, IASB is organized by member boards as a not-for-profit under authority granted by Article 23 of the Illinois School Code.

Today, more than 99 percent of the school boards in Illinois hold active membership and support the Association through annual dues.

The Association's constitution provides that major policies be established by an annual Delegate Assembly and places governance in the hands of an elected board of directors. The board of directors, made up of officers and regional directors, employs an executive director to carry out the work of the Association through a staff housed in both Springfield and Lombard. Programs designed to provide leadership, service, and advocacy for local school boards fall mainly into four broad categories:

1. **Professional development** programs providing school board members with opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills.
2. **Governmental relations** programs for representing the needs and views of member school boards in the legislature.
3. **Direct services** that range from consultation with a field services director, policy consultant, or other IASB staff member, to policy subscription services and in-district workshops or coaching and implementation sessions for the board and superintendent teams, such as Board Self-Evaluations; Setting District Goals and Direction; and The Board's Work in Community Engagement; among others.
4. **Information services** conveyed through periodicals and special publications designed to inform and educate.

Visit [www.iasb.com](http://www.iasb.com) for valuable information and links to public education and school board governance.

Dear candidate:

Congratulations on becoming a candidate for your local board of education!

You have the opportunity to join nearly 6,000 Illinois men and women who voluntarily contribute countless hours toward the governance of our public schools. School board members represent the interests of nearly two million Illinois public school children.

As executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB), I want you to know that we are here to support each and every school board in its responsibility for local school governance and quality public education. We take seriously our responsibility to prepare aspiring board members to fully engage in board decisions on complex issues through leadership training and learning opportunities available to school board members. IASB strongly believes that ongoing professional development is essential to being an effective school leader.

Thank you for taking the time to prepare for school board service. Please let me know if there is anything we can do to help you. Best wishes for success in the April election.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Bertrand, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

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# A School Board Member's Approach to the Job

**1 Be prepared to participate responsibly.** Do your homework, come prepared to work, remember that sometimes the work is to listen, agree, and disagree as your values dictate, and accept that the group decision is legitimate even if it's not your personal choice. It is not acceptable to have opinions and not express them.

**2 Remember that your identity is with the community, not the staff.** It's easy to identify with staff as you probably will have more discussions with them about issues. But you must remember that your job is to serve in trust for the community.

**3 Represent the community, not a single constituency.** You will understand and/or identify with certain constituencies (parents, neighborhoods or communities, special ed, etc.), but you must remember that being a board member means serving in trust for the entire community. There's no way seven people can provide a spokesperson for every constituency or legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. You can be from a constituency, but you must not let yourself represent it.

**4 Be responsible for group behavior and productivity.** You are responsible for not only yourself but the group. If the group doesn't do its job, meddles in administration, or breaks its own rules, you personally share that responsibility.

**5 Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them.** You are obligated to express your honest opinions on issues, and so are each of the other board members. Encourage your colleagues to speak their opinions and listen to them carefully and respectfully. But don't allow yourself to be intimidated by louder or more insistent board members.

**6 Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom.** If you have special expertise (law, accounting, construction, etc.) remember that you are not personally responsible for decisions relating to that area. Use your expertise to help inform your colleagues (i.e., help them understand what fiscal health looks like vs. fiscal jeopardy) but don't assume sole responsibility for those decisions. Also remember that you are not on the board to help the staff or even advise them with your special expertise. Your job as a board member is to govern. If you wish to offer your help as an expert, make sure that all parties know you are acting as a volunteer, not a board member, and remember that asking for or accepting your help is a staff prerogative, not yours.

**7 Be aware of the community and staff's perceptions of the board.** If the board is perceived as being unethical, dishonest, secretive, or self-serving, whether justified or not, that will become reality for the community and staff. Consider how stakeholders might interpret your behaviors and decisions. Then act accordingly.



**8 Think upward and outward more than downward and inward.** There is a great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the district should make in the larger world. This requires ignoring the minutiae or details in order to examine, question and define the big picture. The latter is a daunting and awesome task, but it's board work — governance!

**9 Don't tolerate putting off the big issues forever.** As daunting and awesome as the big decisions are, they are the board's to make. (What are our core values and beliefs about education in our community? Based on those where do we put our resources?) If you don't, you're abdicating your authority. Your inaction is a decision of sorts and if you don't make it, someone else will by default.

**10 Support the board's final choice.** No matter which way you voted, you are obligated to support the board in its decision. This doesn't mean you have to pretend to agree with it. You may maintain the integrity of your dissent. What you support is the legitimacy of the choice even though you don't agree. For example, you will support without reservation that the superintendent must follow the formal board decision, not your personal preference.

**11 Don't mistake form for substance.** Don't confuse having financial reports for having sound finances or having a public relations committee for having good public relations. Beware of the trap of having procedures rather than substance.

**12 Don't expect agendas to be built on your interests.** The board's agenda should not be a laundry list of individual members' interests but a plan for taking care of the governance of the district. Being a community trustee is very different from seeing the organization as your personal possession. The board's job must be designed to insure that the values of the entire community are faithfully served in the determination of what the district should accomplish.

**13 Squelch your individual points of view during monitoring.** Your own values count when the board is creating policies. But when you monitor the performance of the superintendent or the success of programs, etc., you must refer to the criteria the whole board decided, not what your opinion was about those criteria. And as you review the criteria, your monitoring should not be based on whether things were done the way you would have done them, but whether they were a reasonable interpretation of the board's policy.

**14 Obsess about ends.** Keep the conversation focused on values, mission, vision, and goals. Talk with other board members, staff, and the public about these matters first and foremost.

**15 Continuously ask of yourself and the board, "Is this board work?"** The deliberations of the board must add value. The board must deal with fundamental, long-term issues that require the wisdom and decision-making of a diverse group of seven people who look at the whole — not just at pieces or the issue du jour.

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# Board Orientation:

## Building the Board Team

Every other year, most school boards gain at least one new member, and some even acquire a new majority of four or more new members. Whenever new members join the governance team, whether one or more board members or a new superintendent, it is valuable to go back to the basics.

Each member of the board has the potential to make an important contribution. Every new board also has the potential to create a high-performing governance team. Getting to that destination of a high-performing board involves providing new board members with the information they will need to effectively do their job, building the new team, and pursuing learning opportunities.

The three distinct tasks are:



- 1. Orientation to your district** — What important issues require board member attention right now? What impact will these issues have on our long term goals? What important board decisions are coming within the next year?



- 2. Orientation to board processes** — How do we run our meetings? How do we communicate effectively with one another? How do we effectively govern the school district within our roles as board members?



- 3. Continued learning** — IASB training, meetings, and resources

Boards will want to schedule all of these orientation tasks in order to effectively on-board new members. There is no right or wrong order to these activities. In fact, some orientation tasks may begin before a members is seated. In all cases, it is in the board's best interest to welcome new members with all the information they need in order to effectively represent the community.

IASB staff has developed materials to help school boards orient newly elected or appointed board members to their position. Access this free resource on the IASB website by using the word orientation in the search feature.

# YOUR FIRST YEAR: A Roadmap to Success

Allow IASB's New Board Member Roadmap to help you merge with fellow members of your board and guide you through a successful first year.

## MAP YOUR JOURNEY

**IASB Welcomes You to the Board (Livestream)** — A live webinar that will prepare you for the journey you are about to embark on as a new school board member. Learn about IASB and all it has to offer to you and your board as you move forward in to your new role.

## CHART YOUR COURSE

Time  
sensitive

**New Board Member Training Bundle (Online)** — This bundle sets you on the road to success and includes three courses produced by IASB for new board members:

1. **The Basics of Governance** — Get up to speed with this essential course on board and board member roles and responsibilities and learn how high-functioning boards make a positive impact on student learning in their districts. *It is **recommended** that every newly-elected or appointed school board complete this training **within 90 days of taking the oath of office.***
2. **Open Meetings Act (OMA)** — Learn the law as it applies to school board meetings and members. *Per 05 ILCS 120/1.05, every newly-elected or appointed school board member **MUST** complete this training **within 90 days of taking the oath of office.***
3. **Professional Development Leadership Training (PDLT) and Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) Training for School Board Members** — Review education and labor law, financial oversight and accountability, and fiduciary responsibilities, plus PERA evaluations for school board members who will participate in a vote on a dismissal based upon the Optional Alternative Evaluation Dismissal Process. *Per 105 ILCS 5/10-16a, every new school board member elected or appointed **MUST** complete this training **within the first year of the first term.***



## ATTEND WAYPOINT WEBINARS

**New Board Member Webinars** — Ride along for a series of webinars designed to accelerate the learning curve for new board members. Focus on the road ahead and what you are learning over the first six months of your board experience.

## CONNECT WITH FELLOW TRAVELERS

**Division Meetings** — Each of IASB's 21 regional divisions holds meetings each spring and fall, offering topical presentations, networking opportunities, and updates from IASB staff and leaders. New board members are encouraged to join their fellow travelers at Division Meetings this fall.

## TOUR THE MAIN EVENT

**Joint Annual Conference** — Recognized as one of the nation's largest state education conferences, the Joint Annual Conference is the premier statewide training event. Partake in a "grand tour" of all the learning Conference has to offer, with many events specifically designed for new board members.

You will continue to learn and grow both as an individual and as a board. Visit [www.iasb.com/NewMember](http://www.iasb.com/NewMember) to learn about your Association's events and how to contact our IASB staff for support and resources needed for a successful journey.

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