

CANDIDATE CONSIDERATIONS:

# Qualifications & Characteristics of a School Board Member



*Lighting The Way To Excellence  
In School Governance*

## 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, and characteristics of effective school board members.

### School Board Member Qualifications

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In order to qualify for school board membership, an individual must be as of the date of the election:

- a U.S. citizen;
- a resident of Illinois and the school district for at least one year preceding election;
- at least 18 years of age; and
- A registered voter.

Some restrictions also exist. 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. A school board member cannot be a school trustee. 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 described in Section 11-9.3 of the Criminal Code), or convicted of an “infamous” crime.

### School Board Member Job Description

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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. Only within a legally called school board meeting do the members of the board exercise their powers and responsibilities.

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 policy 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/principles.cfm](http://www.iasb.com/principles.cfm).

## Why School Board Members Serve

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In 2013, IASB asked incumbent school board members why they serve, and they gave many reasons:

- Most (86 percent) describe their service as “satisfying” or “very satisfying.”
- Many (57 percent) believe they represent the interests of the children first, and another 37 percent believe they represent the best interests of public education in the community.
- The single most important reason (39 percent) voters elected them was for their “experience and knowledge,” while another 28 percent said they were chosen because voters believed their schools were good and the candidate would “help keep them good.”
- More than a third (44 percent) said valuing public education was their single most important motivation for running.
- Two-thirds (69 percent) believe their personal goals have been achieved or have made progress.
- The most positive thing about being a school board member is seeing their students graduate and continue to grow (42 percent), followed closely by their personal involvement in public policy discussions and decisions (35 percent).
- More than a third (38 percent) serve more than one term.
- More than a third (39 percent) plan to run for re-election.

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

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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.

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Source: Recruiting School Board Candidates, IASB 2016

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