



New Jersey School Boards Association

How to Become a School Board Member



January 2011

Dear Prospective School Board Candidate,

Congratulations! By requesting the 2011 School Board Candidate Kit, you have taken the first step toward filling a vital role for your community – that of a school board member.

Serving on a school board has become increasingly complex. Rest assured, however, if you're elected or appointed to your school board, you won't "go it alone." The New Jersey School Boards Association, a service organization with a mission to train, assist and represent the state's local boards of education, will be with you every step of the way.

NJSBA's staff stands ready to provide you with the assistance, training and information that you need to be an effective leader for your community's schools.

We provide expert information on the responsibilities of school board membership – in print, online, over the phone and in person. We strongly encourage school boards to fully utilize the expertise of our staff of attorneys, policy and labor specialists, and field service representatives.

NJSBA also advocates for local boards of education in Trenton, on Capitol Hill, in the courts, and in the court of public opinion. If an issue arises that may affect the governance and operations of your district, you can be sure that NJSBA will be there representing your interests.

I trust this kit will provide you with the tools necessary to assist you with school board candidacy.

I invite you to attend any of the regional candidate briefings that NJSBA will hold throughout the state in March to learn even more about the responsibilities of serving on a board of education. These free evening programs, conducted by our experienced staff, will give you a broader understanding of what to expect if you are elected to serve as a school board member. For information about the candidate briefings, call NJSBA toll free at (888) 886-5722, ext. 5210, or check online at www.njsba.org.

Sincerely,

Raymond R. Wiss
President

Legal Requirements

To become a member of a local board of education in New Jersey, you must—

- Be able to read and write
- Hold U.S. citizenship and one year's residency in the school district
- Be registered to vote in the district before filing the nominating petition
- Have no interest in any contract with, or claim against, the board
- Not hold office as mayor or member of the municipal governing body or, in the case of county school districts, the county governing body
- Not simultaneously hold two elective offices

Getting Elected to the School Board

School districts that elect board of education members are called "Type II" districts. On Wednesday, April 27 – the Annual School Election – district voters elect school board members for terms of three years. To be included on the ballot, you must:

- Complete a nominating petition that includes the signatures of at least 10 qualified voters living within the district (one of which may be your own). A petition form is included in this kit. The petition must be submitted to the district's school board secretary at least 50 days before the election.
- Adhere to all state requirements to file campaign-expense reports with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC).

You can garner support for your candidacy by communicating your goals and aims for the schools to the electorate.

Nominating Petitions

Each candidate for election, including an incumbent, must be nominated directly by petition, signed by at least ten people (one of whom may be the candidate).

Each nominating petition, addressed to the secretary of the board, must state the following:

- That the signers are qualified voters in the school district

- The name, residence and post office address of the candidate and the office for which the candidate is endorsed
- That the signers endorse the candidate and ask that his or her name be printed on the ballot
- That the candidate is legally qualified to be a school board member

The nominating petition includes a section where one of the signers makes a sworn statement verifying that the petition is prepared in good faith, signed by each of the signers in his or her own handwriting, and that he or she believes that the signers are duly qualified voters in the school district. The candidate, if he or she is one of the signers of the petition, may also make the verification.

The nominating petition also includes a section where the candidate must include a signed statement certifying that he or she is

qualified to be a school board member, consents to be a candidate, will accept the office if elected, and is not disqualified as a voter.

Nominating petitions must be filed with the board secretary on or before 4 p.m., Tuesday, March 8, 2011.

Reporting of Expenditures

The New Jersey Campaign Contributions and Expenditures Reporting Act requires all school board candidates who receive any contribution (including their own funds), regardless of the amount, to file a Certificate of Organization and Designation of Campaign Treasurer and Depository form with the Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC). Candidates may be required to complete other ELEC forms. The deadlines to file various campaign-contribution forms are listed in the flier, "Important 2011 School Election Dates," enclosed in NJSBA's School Board Candidate Kit.

FAQ

WHAT CANDIDATES WANT TO KNOW ABOUT BEING

What are the main responsibilities of board members?

The board of education adopts policies under which the school district operates; oversees the budget; approves the curriculum; hires and evaluates the superintendent; represents the public during contract negotiations; and serves as a communications link between the community and the school system. School board members must remember that they have no authority except that which results from participation in decisions of the board during an official meeting. Actions, promises or commitments made by individual board members are without legal basis and have no binding commitment upon the district. Board members should be aware that they are elected to represent the entire district in all matters pertaining to education, and not any one segment.

How much time does it take to be a school board member?

A survey by the National School Boards Association found 63 percent of board members spend 11 to 50 hours a month on board duties – with some dedicating even more time to the position. As a school board member, you will provide oversight of one of the largest operations in your community. By accepting this responsibility, you effectively agree to attend regular and special board meetings, to review the board packet in advance of meetings, and to keep yourself informed about the issues on which you will make decisions.

What is the relationship between the board and superintendent?

The function of the school board is not to run the schools, but to see that they are run effectively. The board establishes school district policy and goals and communicates those goals to the superintendent. The superintendent is accountable to the board,

and all other staff members are accountable to the superintendent. Teamwork between the board and superintendent is essential. Board members should look to the superintendent for leadership and guidance on educational procedures.

What is the relationship between board members and teachers?

The board is responsible for adopting the policies, rules and regulations that define the responsibilities of teachers (as well as other school employees), and for approving all employment contracts. Observation and evaluation of teachers is the job of the superintendent and those supervisors to whom he or she delegates the responsibility. The board's role is to set standards, or expectations, in the form of policies that detail the criteria the superintendent should use in recommending and evaluating staff members.

Board members should treat teachers and other staff members with respect, and must always observe the chain of command, recognizing that the appropriate channel for board/staff communications is through the superintendent. Board members should also keep in mind that the board can appoint, transfer or remove employees only upon the recommendation of the superintendent.

Who decides how district money is spent?

The school budget is the district's financial plan, and reflects all program needs. The board's budgeting responsibilities include discussing these needs and setting the parameters for budget development. The superintendent then works with other staff members to draft a budget that meets board goals and student needs, complies with state regulations, and stays within the district's financial resources. The board adopts the budget after a public hearing. After the budget is finalized, the superintendent is responsible for administering it. The board provides financial oversight by signing off on the bill list to approve expenditures throughout the year.

ELEC is the regulatory agency regarding campaign contributions. Board candidates may contact ELEC or go online to obtain the Compliance Manual for Candidates, which provides full instructions and reporting forms. Questions and requests for information should be directed to ELEC at (609) 292-8700, or visit its website at www.elec.state.nj.us.

Campaign Materials

Candidates and committees subject to the New Jersey Campaign Contributions and Expenditures Reporting Act are required to include “Paid for by” language in all campaign materials. “Paid for by” language must include the name and address of the committee, individual or group, and clearly state that the entity financed the communication. Examples of “Paid for by” language may be found in ELEC’s Compliance Manual.

Appointed School Boards

Most school boards in New Jersey are elected. However, some school districts (called “Type I” districts) have board members appointed by the mayor during April or June. Members of county vocational school boards are appointed by the County Board of Chosen Freeholders in October. Most Type I districts have either five or seven members; some have nine members. Appointed board members’ terms of office depend on the size of the board.

Steps leading to appointment vary. For example—

- You may indicate your desire and ability to serve on the board to the mayor or to the county freeholders.
- Community organizations may recommend you to the mayor or freeholders.
- Your involvement in other community activities may demonstrate your willingness to assume a leadership role.

A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Below are frequently asked questions from school board candidates.

Who hires and evaluates a district’s superintendent?

The selection of a superintendent is considered to be one of the most significant decisions a school board makes. A systematic procedure for selection should be used, requiring months of careful planning and well-organized steps in screening the most qualified candidates. In addition, state law requires that boards evaluate superintendents annually. An effective evaluation process is based on the achievement of specific, agreed-upon goals between the board and the superintendent.

When are executive sessions permitted?

All meetings of the school board are open to the public, except for specific topics that may be discussed in “executive,” or closed session. Executive sessions are limited to matters deemed confidential, including matters that by law must remain private, such as student records; pending litigation; topics involving attorney-client privilege; discussion of land purchases; negotiations strategies; and personnel issues.

The purpose of an executive session must be announced prior to going into closed session. Only the specifically announced subject may be discussed. Minutes must be kept and approved at a subsequent meeting, and then released to the public when the need for confidentiality no longer exists.

Will I have a say in deciding what is taught and which textbooks are used?

The board is required by state law to approve courses of study, including all textbooks and materials. The board should ask its administrators to demonstrate how these curriculum materials will help students achieve the state’s Core Curriculum Content Standards. The board establishes what will be taught, when and where it will be taught, to whom it will be taught, and with what materials. Administrators and teachers manage and carry out the instructional tasks.

Since the decision-making authority is vested in the board and not in the individual members, you will be successful in achieving your personal goals only if you can convince a majority of the members of the board that your proposals have merit. As a board member, you have an obligation to express your views and then to accept and support the board’s final decisions.

Will I be involved in collective bargaining with employee unions?

Since 1968, school districts have been required to negotiate contracts with their employee unions. A board member may be directly involved in collective bargaining if he or she serves on the negotiations committee. The board sets the guidelines used by the district’s bargaining representative (a committee of the board, or a professional negotiator), who regularly reports to and takes direction from the board. Board members participate in negotiations and vote on the final agreement, unless a conflict of interest prevents the board member from participating or voting.

How can a board remove poor employees? What is tenure?

State laws, union contracts and local district policies spell out employment, discipline and release procedures for all employees. The administration and board follow these procedures.

New Jersey’s education tenure laws are particularly significant. Tenure is the right of certain employees to continuing employment after working in the district for three years and a day, and upon meeting certain criteria. Tenured employees may be dismissed for reasons such as inefficiency or unbecoming conduct, but that decision is made by the Commissioner of Education after state-level hearings, which take place only after the local board files “tenure charges” to remove the employee. (It is important to note that since September 1991, newly hired superintendents were no longer eligible for tenure, but work under a negotiated three-to-five-year contract. During the contract, superintendents have tenure protection.)

Serving on a School Board

As a member of the board of education, you will be expected to fulfill certain responsibilities, including—

1. Establishing goals for the public schools based on student educational needs, parent and community aspirations, state and federal standards and district financial resources.
2. Developing a philosophy of education that will become the basis for sound decisions that affect the governance of your community's schools.
3. Developing policies to guide the administration in managing the schools; developing bylaws to direct the board in carrying out its governance responsibilities.
4. Developing a community understanding of educational issues and school policies through the maintenance of effective communications systems.
5. Providing adequate financing for the district's present and future needs.
6. Ensuring quality education by providing adequate facilities and equipment.
7. Establishing conditions that enable the administration to recruit and effectively evaluate professional staff.
8. Engaging in board self-evaluation and inservice training programs for the purpose of providing well-informed leadership and sound decision-making.
9. Establishing a process for the board to negotiate in good faith with its employees, while representing community educational goals and financial interests.
10. Abiding by the oath of office for school board members.

You Should Also:

1. Understand that your responsibility is not to administer the schools, but to work with the board to see that the schools are well run.
2. Understand that education today is extremely complex.
3. Listen to opposing views and be able to defend the board's philosophy and goals.
4. Be willing to invest the many hours necessary to meet your responsibilities.
5. Serve out of a sincere desire to benefit the community rather than for personal glory or to carry out personal objectives.
6. Bear in mind that, as a state official, you have a responsibility to all the children in the state, not only to those in the local district.

The NJSBA

The New Jersey School Boards Association was established by the

state Legislature in 1914 to promote and encourage the best possible public education for every child in New Jersey. Every public board of education is deemed to be a member of the NJSBA by statute.

Association policies are determined by NJSBA's Delegate Assembly, which is made up of school board members selected by their local boards. The Delegate Assembly meets twice a year. Association policy is implemented by the executive director and staff under the guidance of the officers and board of directors. Association committees, composed of interested board members, study particular issues and recommend courses of action to the Delegate Assembly.

Services to boards of education and individual board members include—

- Comprehensive technical assistance and inservice training
- Legislative information, action and liaison
- Consultation, action and information on policy, legal matters, legislation, labor relations, public relations and other school district functions
- A direct services program staffed by experts who offer on-site consultation, assistance and information
- Policy assistance and information
- Publications geared to school board member needs, including *School Leader*, NJSBA's bi-monthly magazine, and *School Board Notes*, New Jersey's weekly education news report

For New Board Members

Required Training

New Jersey law requires that, during the first year of their first term in office, all board of education members complete training in the roles and responsibilities of school board membership. The NJSBA Board Member Academy offers a nationally acclaimed, intensive Orientation Conference that provides training on all areas of school board responsibility. (State law also requires board members to take additional NJSBA training in each of the subsequent two years of the first term in office, as well as within the first year after re-election or reappointment to an additional term.)

Information about these programs is provided through *School Board Notes*, online at www.njsba.org, and through direct mailings to members.

In addition to new and re-elected board member programs, the NJSBA Board Member Academy offers a full curriculum leading to basic and advanced certificates. Programs address topics such as labor relations, leadership skills, effective decision-making, policy-making, budgeting, community relations, school law and legislation.

For information on NJSBA services and training, visit the Association's website at www.njsba.org.