



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT A SCHOOL BOARD

Below are frequently asked questions adapted from NJSBA's "What Candidates Want To Know About Being A School Board Member."

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.

What is the relationship between the board and superintendent? Who makes the final decisions?

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 that 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.

Q. 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.

Q. 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.

Does the Board 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, they will be successful in achieving their personal goals only if they can convince a majority of the members of the Board that their proposals have merit. As a board member, they have an obligation to express their views and then to accept and support the board's final decisions.

Will the Board 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 vote on the final agreement, unless a conflict of interest prevents the board member from 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.

One law, New Jersey's tenure statute, is 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 state Education Commissioner 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.)