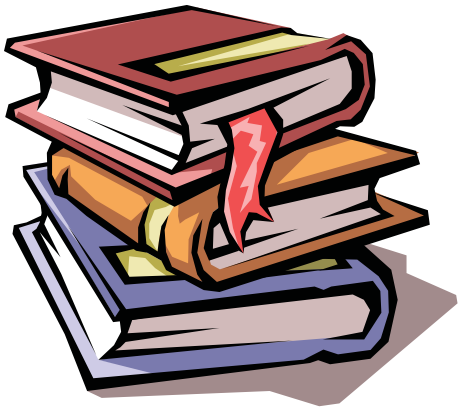


# So You Want To Be A School Board Member?

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A Guide for Candidates



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## WHAT MAKES A GOOD BOARD MEMBER?

*Becoming an effective school board member takes time. Many of the qualities that make great board members are acquired through experience and training.*

*Yet, as you consider running for the school board, think about your ability to meet these characteristics:*

- ✓ The conviction that public education is important.
- ✓ A commitment to public involvement.
- ✓ The ability to make decisions.
- ✓ Belief in the democratic process.
- ✓ Willingness to devote time and energy to your new position.
- ✓ Ability to accept the will of the majority.
- ✓ Courage of your convictions.
- ✓ Respect for district employees.
- ✓ Ability to communicate well with others.

*Board members are ineffective when they:*

- Become involved in school administration.
- Allow personal feelings toward others to affect their judgment.
- Allow personal interests to transcend the best interests of the district.
- Neglect board duties.
- Can't make decisions and are unable to take firm stands.
- Represent the interests of a special group or geographic area rather than the interests of the entire district.
- Adopt an arrogant or paternalistic attitude toward district employees or the public.

## WHAT DOES A BOARD MEMBER DO?

One of the most important jobs a school board member has is to join in setting goals and establishing policy for the school system. All board decisions should logically follow the delineated objectives.

A look at an agenda for a board meeting confirms the fact that the board member is expected to make decisions on a wide range of problems. Some decisions are strictly routine (such as approving the minutes of the last meeting). Others are somewhat more complex (for instance, should "Contemporary Algebra and Trigonometry" be adopted as an eleventh grade mathematics text?). Some decisions are the result of numerous sub-decisions (should the board adopt the proposed budget for the coming school year?).

A board member should be a skilled decision-maker but he also must remember that decisions are to be made only by the board acting as a whole. Individual opinions on board matters can and should be defended vigorously but once the board as a unit has made a decision it should be accepted gracefully and implemented wholeheartedly.

Another essential board member job is participation in the selection of the superintendent of schools. The right superintendent can mean a school system where children learn, where administration and teaching staff work together harmoniously, where parents are satisfied and supportive. The wrong superintendent can spell disaster.

Effective board members establish good working relationships with the superintendent of schools. Although it

has been frequently said that the board makes policy and the superintendent carries out policy, it is difficult to draw an exact line between policy and administration. Often a superintendent will recommend policy which the board, after consideration, may accept or reject. Once a policy is adopted, the superintendent is responsible for its administration.

The board should refrain from becoming involved with the day-to-day operation of the schools. It should, however, follow up on the administration and operation of the schools and require periodic reports for purposes of evaluation.

Perhaps the most important work a board member can do is to help build public support and understanding of public education and to lead the public in demanding better education. This means communication; it means serving as a link between the school system and the public, it means interpreting the schools to the public and the public to the schools. It also means helping to establish a climate for change when change is necessary.

## IMPORTANT BOARD MEMBER PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER:

*Putting your name on the ballot to run for your local school board is a decision not to be taken lightly. Successful school board members have certain traits and behavior principles that contribute to their success.*

*Following are nine principles of a successful school board member:*

- 1. The child comes first!** Other concerns such as negotiating contracts, the selection of building sites, construction, purchasing equipment and setting bus routes at times have a way of appearing to be more important. These concerns should be viewed in light of how each affects the children of your district, their education and training.
- 2. School boards are community members who establish rules for how the district is run.** The board hires the best administrative team available and makes that team responsible for the district's day-to-day operation.
- 3. School board members function as a board; not individually.** This is, perhaps, the hardest lesson for a board member to learn and accept. As an individual, you have no authority. Your vote, along with the votes of the other board members, has tremendous power. But alone, outside an official meeting (unless delegated authority by the board) you are just an ordinary citizen with no more influence than other citizens. Adhering to this principle will save you and your fellow board members many headaches.
- 4. The board sets the policies.** For schools to reach the objectives the public expects the board establishes written policies for student and staff conduct and makes sure the superintendent and staff work within the framework of those policies. Carrying out board policies is the responsibility of the superintendent and those under his/her authority. To ensure that there is a clear understanding of the board's policies and that the division of responsibility is clearly defined, the board and superintendent should decide together "Who has authority for what."
- 5. Know your schools.** To vote intelligently, a board member needs to know a great deal about the schools and trends in education. Have the superintendent arrange opportunities for you to visit the schools and talk with principals, teachers and other employees. Remember, you are just a citizen learning about your schools so you can better function in board meetings. You are not there to find fault or to do formal evaluations.
- 6. School board members are the people's representatives in the school program.** The public expects board members to have most of the answers concerning school problems. A great many people do not

understand the limitations of a board member's authority. Counsel those who come to you with complaints to use the appropriate chain of command for solving problems - teacher, principal, superintendent, board. Never promise that you will resolve their concerns. You must sometimes accept a reality that is contrary to your own opinions. Effective boardsmanship means being able to voice the minority opinion when voting on an issue, then supporting the majority vote in the community.

7. **Being an effective board member means participating in regional, state and national meetings.** Such meetings offer you the opportunity to meet other school board members, get a broader view of local issues and learn about state and national concerns that will affect your district.
8. **Abiding by code of conduct and board member ethics.** A sure-fire way to permanently damage your own and the board's reputation is to violate your board's policies on member conduct and ethics. Refusing to disclose information that should be public makes the board appear to be hiding something. On the other hand, members who disclose confidential information about students, staff, pending legal issues and the many other confidential matters that come before the board will not only damage your reputation but expose the district to possible litigation. Some board members have relationships with special interest groups to the detriment of the overall district good. Playing favorites is counter-productive and debilitating. Others have been known to speak out in public in opposition to previous board action. The time to speak up and state your position is before the board votes...not after!
9. **Enjoy your work as a school board member.** While board membership does not offer any economic compensation, it will challenge your creativity, your wisdom and your courage. There are so many exciting challenges - from student and staff successes to balancing the school budget - your interest will never lag. There is great satisfaction knowing you are providing the educational opportunities for the children of your district.

**The Idaho School Boards Association is here for you, to be your partner and provide support as you serve your community as a school board member. Call us anytime.**

## BOARD SERVICE MEANS TIME, COMMITMENT

As you consider running for your local school board, think about what being a board member means to you, your family and your community. If you are elected, you will help shape the education of tomorrow's citizens and leaders. Your work will direct the superintendent in running probably the largest business in your community. Your actions will affect the families of hundreds of students and employees, now and for years to come. School board service is both rewarding and frustrating. The long, unpaid hours you'll spend searching for solutions to complex problems often go unnoticed. Solutions to complex problems never please everyone.

On the other hand, these frustrations are offset by the satisfaction of watching students receive their diplomas, by the reports of students achieving academic success and by the knowledge that your work is helping children.

As an elected official, you must represent all students, staff and citizens by working with fellow board members to craft policies for the good of your entire community. Single issue politics just doesn't work. School board authority rests with the entire board, not each member individually. Consequently, whatever decisions are made can only come from a majority of school board members.

Once elected, your education has just begun. The "learning curve" for education leaders is steep - and ongoing, so plan to spend time in workshops and conferences. Imagine inheriting the reins of a huge corporation with no training. Training is essential to running a complex education system. ISBA will equip you with the education and leadership development you need.

If you are interested in serving your community, please seek election to your school board. We wish you the best of luck and are ready to serve you when you are elected.

## HOW MUCH TIME DOES BEING A GOOD BOARD MEMBER REQUIRE?

- ▶ School board service involves a substantial time commitment. And remember, there's no salary.
- ▶ Boards typically meet in the evening once or twice a month. Before the monthly meetings, you need to plan time to read and study the materials provided so you can make informed decisions. Then there are various committee meetings, work sessions and appearances on behalf of the district. During collective bargaining, you may find yourself immersed in a process that can take countless hours.
- ▶ ISBA encourages you to take advantage of the resources and training opportunities we offer throughout the year. Our workshops will keep you up-to-date on school issues and provide an opportunity to meet board members from throughout the state.
- ▶ One experienced board member said, "I was surprised at the amount of reading and committee time that board service requires. Time nobody else knows about."
- ▶ Another board member explained, "If someone polled all board members about what they wish they had known about school board service, I suspect the answer would be time, time, time."

## A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER SHOULD:

- Understand that the board sets the standards for the district through board policy. Board members do not manage the district on a day-to-day basis;
- Understand that the board makes decisions as a team. Individual board members may not commit the board to any action;
- Respect the right of other board members to have opinions and ideas which differ;
- Recognize that decisions are made by a majority vote and should be supported by all board members;
- Make decisions only after the facts are presented and discussed;
- Understand the chain of command and refer problems or complaints to the proper administrative office;
- Recognize that the board must comply with the Public Meetings Law and only has authority to make decisions at official board meetings;
- Insist that all board and district business is ethical and honest;
- Be open, fair and honest -- no hidden agendas;
- Understand that you will receive information that is confidential and cannot be shared;
- Recognize that the superintendent is the board's advisor and should be present at all meetings, except when the board is considering the superintendent's evaluation, contract or salary;
- Take action only after hearing the superintendent's recommendations;
- Refuse to use the position for personal or family gain or prestige. Announce conflicts of interest before board action is taken;
- Refuse to bring personal or family problems into board considerations;
- Give the staff the respect and consideration due skilled, professional employees;
- Present personal criticism of district operations to the superintendent, not to district staff or to a board meeting;
- Respect the right of the public to attend and be heard at board meetings;
- Respect the right of the public to be informed about district decisions and school operations.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER CANDIDATES

### **Q. What are the legal qualifications for being a school board member?**

A. A member of any board of education must be a citizen and resident of the zone he is to represent; except in a charter district.

### **Q. Do school board members get paid for their services?**

A. A board member does not receive compensation for his services nor may he be interested directly in any contract with or claim against the board.

### **Q. How many people serve on a board? What is their term of office?**

A. In most districts the board consists of five members. A law passed in 1973, makes it possible for any district that changes its boundaries after July 1, 1973, to increase its membership up to nine, at local option. Charter districts have either six or seven; elementary districts (those without a high school) have three. Members are elected for three years on a staggered 2-2-1 basis. Again, charter districts may differ.

### **Q. Who votes for a school board member?**

A. Any person of voting age residing in the same trustee zone as the person running for the board, may vote in that school board election. The three charter districts use different methods. Boise and Lewiston both nominate and elect through a district-wide basis. Emmett nominates by zone and elects by district-wide voting.

### **Q. Are board members protected from civil suits?**

A. Generally a district carries insurance which entitles a board member to be indemnified against the cost of defending any civil or criminal action arising out of the performance of his duties. Such protection extends to criminal actions only if the final disposition favors the member.

### **Q. What happens when a school board member moves to another community?**

A. Whenever a board member ceases to be a bona fide resident of the zone he represents, his membership on the board shall cease. The board then appoints someone to serve until the next election.

### **Q. When are school board elections held?**

A. A law passed by the 1973 Legislature, mandates a uniform election date, the third Tuesday of May. Again, charter districts may differ.

### **Q. Is attendance at board meetings mandatory?**

A. Any board member who fails to attend four consecutive public meetings without good cause may be removed by the board.

### **Q. Who serves as chairman of the board?**

A. The board is required to reorganize at its annual meeting, which is the regular meeting in July. At that time the board selects a chairman, vice chairman, clerk, and treasurer. Some boards keep the same chairman for several years, others change periodically, and some rotate it by a gentleman's agreement, so that everyone has an opportunity to serve; all are acceptable methods.

### **Q. May an employee of a school district serve as a board member?**

A. No, not in the district in which they are employed. In addition, the spouse of a school employee can not serve as a Board Member. (see I.C. 33-507)

## THE BOARD MEMBER AND THE STATE ASSOCIATION (ISBA)

The Idaho School Boards Association was established in 1942 to serve the state's local district boards of education. The 100+ school boards are members and pay dues to support the Association.

*The ISBA's main purposes are threefold:*

1. To keep its members informed and up-to-date on educational practices in school districts throughout the state and nation.
2. To fulfill its self-imposed mandate "to encourage and aid all movements for the improvements of the educational affairs in this state . . ."
3. To help develop public support of education.

The ISBA works tirelessly for adequate support of education and enactment of the legislation that favors the interests of the public schools. Its communications program is designed not only to build support of public education on state and national levels, but also to help local school districts create support in their communities.

The programs of the ISBA include inservice education; consultation with school districts; negotiation services; legislative services; legal services; research services; policy services; public relations; publications, and information services; inter-group cooperation; studies and reports on particular school problems; representation at legislative hearings, conferences, and local, state, and national meetings.

The ISBA exerts influence on education nationally through its affiliation with the National School Boards Association, a confederation of state school board associations, and by testifying at congressional hearings on matters pertaining to education.

The Association maintains headquarters in Boise where it has liaison with the State Department of Education and other state agencies. The Association's official publication, the SLATE, is sent to all school board members and distributed widely throughout the state.

One of the most important services of the ISBA is its orientation program for new board members. The Association sponsors several workshops designed to help new board members understand Idaho education and their roles in operating the local schools.

Participation in such an institute is perhaps the most effective way a new board member can learn about the job quickly.

Also of immense value for board members in keeping abreast of happenings in education is the annual three-day convention at which experts analyze, discuss, and debate problems and issues in education. The convention, which attracts approximately 700 conferees, also features exhibits of commercially supplied goods and services.

The Association sponsors workshops on negotiations, and on various other issues in education when it sees a need to explore them with board members.

The Association invites all board members to avail themselves freely of Association programs and services.