

# Qualifications & Characteristics of a School Board Member



## Are you considering school board service?

Nearly 6,000 individuals step forward to serve as school board members for 850 public school districts in Illinois. Although many board members serve multiple terms, there is turnover in every election cycle, and every other year nearly 1,200 new members are elected or appointed. The Illinois Association of School Boards welcomes you, as a prospective candidate or appointee, to consider the following qualifications, description, motivations, and preparation for effective school board service.

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## School Board Member Qualifications

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

- A United States citizen;
- A resident of the state of Illinois and of the school district for at least one year preceding election;
- At least 18 years of age;
- A registered voter; and
- Not a school trustee.

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. 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 a child sex offender as defined in

Section 11-9.3 of the Criminal Code, or convicted of an “infamous crime.”

To become a school board candidate one must

1. File a Statement of Economic Interests with the county clerk and obtain a receipt; these forms are available from the county clerk.
2. Obtain and complete a nominating petition signed by at least 50 registered voters or 10% of the voters, whichever is less; and a Statement of Candidacy. Nominating petition forms and Statements of Candidacy are available from the county clerk or county board of election commissioners.

These completed documents and the county clerk’s receipt for the Statement of Economic Interests must be filed with the county clerk no earlier than 113 days before the election and no later than 106 days before the election during normal office hours. If a candidate receives or expends \$3,000 or more in an election campaign, reports must be filed with the county clerk in compliance with the Illinois Campaign Disclosure Act.

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## School Board Member Job Description

The governance of local school boards by democratically-elected individuals remains at the heart of two vital United States structures: the public education system and democracy itself.

Our public schools interweave this diverse and pluralistic society into a nation and guide this nation to its future. Only our public schools are prepared to

serve, without reservation, all students in America and to enable everyone to be active participants in our democracy.

School board members sit in trust for their local communities. Every two years, board members are elected by voters to serve two- to four-year terms on local school boards. So what is the “job” of a school board member? What does a school board member actually do?

To understand what a school board member does 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.

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 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. 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 at iasb.com\*](https://www.iasb.com/).

## Why School Board Members Serve

In 2018 and 2020, IASB asked incumbent school board members about their service:

- They say the single most important reason (44%) voters elected them was for their "knowledge and experience." Others (20%) said they were chosen because voters believed they would "represent all citizens of the district."
- Two-thirds (67.2%) said valuing public education was their first or second most important motivation for running.
- The most rewarding aspects to school board service were said to be student growth and academic improvement (chosen as a top-three factor by 64% of respondents), followed by "Sense of accomplishment in protecting our district's financial resources" (60%), and "Making tough choices that ultimately improved our schools" (51%).
- Most (54%) believe their goals for school board service have been achieved or progress is underway.

- More than half (58.9%) have served more than one term.
- 42% of respondents plan to run for re-election; a similar percentage was undecided.

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.



Only our public schools are prepared to serve, without reservation, all students in America and to enable everyone to be active participants in our democracy.

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## Characteristics of Effective School Board Members

School boards are comprised of and enriched by individuals from different backgrounds and experiences. However, individual school boards do the work more effectively when school board members 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 possesses no legal authority as an individual. It is only around the board table that decisions are made and a board member exercises any authority.
  - A 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 groups. The “entire community” includes citizens who may not have a direct relationship with the public schools.
  - The temperament to respond accordingly and appropriately through challenging events.
- Leadership is an immense responsibility; the public actions and words of school board 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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## Preparation for service on a school board

What do school board members need to know? A person who plans to run for the school board should acquire a basic understanding of the local district, including:

- Goals (improvement efforts underway)
- Structure (who does what)
- Finance (short-term and long-term status)
- Government (state laws and regulations and local school board policies)
- Board procedures (how business is conducted)

The board member also must understand the proper relationships of the school board to the state, the community, and the superintendent — and the proper relationship of the individual board member to other members of the board. Because he or she casts only one vote, the board member who hopes to bring about change must do so within the existing legal



and organizational framework. Many a good idea has died because it was not properly presented to the full school board or because some part of it presented avoidable legal difficulties.

School boards establish a wide variety of policies and standards describing what the districts are expected to accomplish in such areas as curriculum, transportation, building maintenance, staff development, student services, labor relations, human rights, and community

relations. Many of these policies and standards are routine and the board can reasonably rely on the judgment of the superintendent and staff. Some are not so routine, however, and produce disagreements in the community or even among the staff. School board members are not experts in all these areas of policy; they must rely on the superintendent to help them. However, the board member must learn enough in all of these subjects to ask questions, evaluate the answers, and vote with conviction.

The place to start in preparing for school board candidacy is by attending meetings of the board. Learn

how the board functions. To learn more about the schools, talk with members of the board and staff. The board candidate should make an appointment with the district superintendent to acquire factual information about the district and to discuss issues facing the board. The candidate also should read as much as possible about the nature of school board work and the laws affecting schools. Reading material is available in most school district offices. The Illinois Association of School Boards sponsors briefings for candidates prior to each election. Additional resources are listed below.

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## Further reading

Many of the following items may be available in your school district office. If not, obtain them from the sources indicated.

### School Elections

State of Illinois Candidate's Guide. Published each year by the Illinois State Board of Elections and available for downloading at [www.elections.illinois.gov](http://www.elections.illinois.gov). Explains how to nominate candidates for public office, including school board candidates, and procedures for complying with the Illinois Campaign Disclosure Act. The guide for odd-numbered years is usually available late in the preceding summer.

### School Boards at Work

[\*The Effective School Board Member\*](#). An introduction to the work of boards of education in Illinois, including their duties and responsibilities. Published and sold by IASB.

[\*IASB's Foundational Principles of Effective Governance\*](#). The obligation to govern effectively imposes some fundamental duties on the board. Published by IASB and available online.

[\*Illinois School Board Journal\*](#). Covers issues facing school boards in Illinois and across the nation. Emphasis is on public policy and improving governance. Published by IASB for members and subscribers, also available online.

[\*Illinois School Law Survey\*](#). Answers, in plain English, to more than 1,300 legal questions in 27 chapters, includes digital version. Published and sold by IASB.

[\*Coming to Order: A Guide to Successful School Board Meetings\*](#). Explains how to plan and conduct meetings that comply with the law and serve the interests of both school and community. Published and sold by IASB.

[\*Essentials of Illinois School Finance\*](#). A training manual and reference for school business managers and budget makers as well as a reference for anyone who needs to understand the essentials of Illinois school finance. Published and sold by IASB.

Items published and sold by IASB are available through the [Bookstore button at www.iasb.com](#).

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