

Being a School Board Member

Good school systems begin with good school boards. And the quality of a school board depends, to a considerable extent, on the interest taken by citizens. Just like municipalities, community service agencies and other worthwhile nonprofit institutions, public schools depend on effective citizen leaders for their success.

What is a school board?

The local school board grew out of the town meeting, dating back more than 200 years to the original 13 colonies. Times have changed, but the basic function of school boards today remains the same: to provide local citizen control over public education. This means that the school board should represent the citizens of the school district – not just some of the citizens, but all of them. Because different people have different ideas about schools, this responsibility always presents a challenge.

The Colorado Constitution gives the state responsibility for providing a “thorough and uniform system of free public schools.” It also requires the General Assembly to organize school districts governed by local boards of education. The Colorado Constitution reserves to locally elected school boards the control of instruction in the public schools of their respective districts.

School board members in Colorado's 178 school districts serve without pay and are prohibited by law from having a significant financial interest in any business transacted by the school district, with certain exceptions cited in state law. The regular term of office for most school board members is four years.

What do school boards do?

School boards are local policy makers, and the policies they set have the force of law at the local level. The guidance and control that the board provides through its policies is critical to the successful operation of the school system and to setting a direction for staff. Today's board members say they spend an average of 45 hours each month on board work. This estimate may increase each year because of the changing nature of our society and its schools.

One of the most important jobs of a school board is to employ a superintendent and to hold the superintendent responsible for managing the schools in accordance with federal law, state law and the school board's policies. The board also should set educational goals for the school, based upon state laws and community values. School boards and all of its members should be the leaders in:

- envisioning the community's education future
- assessing and reflecting the educational needs and values of the community
- developing an educational philosophy
- establishing school district goals
- overseeing the school district budget
- adopting policies
- assuring systemic review and evaluations of all phases of the school program
- advocating on behalf of students and schools

As elected public officials, school board members are in a unique position to serve as a link between the school system and the public – connecting schools to the public and interpreting

the public's views of the schools. It is up to school board members to help build support and understanding of public education and to lead their communities in demanding quality education.

Why serve on a school board?

On the surface, being a school board member may seem like a thankless job – struggling with complex problems for long hours and taking criticism when things don't go right.

But scratch the surface and you will find that school board members feel rewarded by the inner satisfaction that comes from ensuring a good education for the youth of their communities.

In fact, serving on a local school board can be viewed as one of the most important volunteer services in the community. Public schools are often a community's largest employing organization, with the mission of preparing its future workforce. Governing an organization of this magnitude is an awesome responsibility.

What are the characteristics of successful board members?

School board members come from all walks of life. The ability to function as one member of a governing board is not determined by age, sex, occupation, race or income. Effective school board members, however, share the following **characteristics**:

- desire to serve children and the community, and a strong belief in the value of the public schools
- ability to work as a member of a team, including an open mind and ability to engage in give-and-take
- willingness to spend the time required to become informed and to do the homework needed to take part in effective school board governance
- respect for the needs and feelings of other people, a well-developed sense of fair play and the ability to listen and communicate well
- recognition that the school district may be the largest business in town and that the board is responsible for ensuring that business is well managed

The **essential qualities** needed for school board success are the very qualities possessed by many who rise to the top of successful organizations:

- vision and ability to see the big picture
- excellent communication and human relations skills
- ability to listen to all sides of the story before making an informed decision
- sound judgment
- confidence
- ability to disagree agreeably
- strong sense of fairness and justice
- desire to be a leader, not a manager

Beyond these qualities, perhaps the most important one for school board members to have is a sincere passion for children and concern for providing a quality education for all.