



New Jersey School Boards Association

Requirements of the NJ School Ethics Act

ATTENTION PROSPECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES

The New Jersey **School Ethics Act** (*N.J.S.A 18A:12-23*) requires local board of education members to

- File Disclosure Statements.
- Adhere to a Code of Ethics.
- Undergo training in the responsibilities of school board membership.

State Board of Education code (*N.J.A.C. 6A:28-1 et seq* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:32-3.2*) clarifies school board members' responsibilities under the School Ethics Act. The basic requirements, as stated in the Act, are listed below.

DISCLOSURE

Each year by April 30 (or within 30 days after taking office), school officials including board members must disclose sources of income and the employment or contractual relationship of relatives with the school district. The disclosure statements are public records, kept by the county superintendent and the local school board secretary. The School Ethics Commission has access to the disclosure statements through the county office.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

The Act's financial disclosure provisions require the reporting of only *sources* of income above a certain amount, but not the actual dollar amounts. Board members must report the sources of income for themselves and the members of their immediate families (spouse, civil union partner, and dependent children living in their household).

The financial disclosure statement must include—

- Sources of income exceeding \$2,000 for each family member during the prior calendar year. (Interest or securities income need not be reported unless the family member retains more than 10% of the ownership or control of the financial institution or business organization.)
- Sources of fees and honoraria earned by each family member during the prior calendar year, which totaled more than \$250 from a single source. (Fees and honoraria are payments for such services as personal appearances, speeches or writing.)
- Sources of gifts, reimbursements or prepaid expenses valued at more than \$250 from a single source that were received by each family member during the prior calendar year. (Gifts from relatives need not be reported. Relatives include spouse, children, parents or siblings of the board member.)
- Names and addresses of all business organizations in which

the board member or a member of his or her immediate family had an interest during the prior calendar year. (Interest in a business is defined as ownership or control of more than 10% of the profits, assets or stock of the business.)

PERSONAL/RELATIVE DISCLOSURE

The law also requires board members to disclose the following:

- The name and position of any relative (spouse, civil union partner, child, parent, sibling) or person related to the board member by marriage and employed by the school district in which the board member serves.
- The nature of any contract between the district and the board member or his or her relative or person related to the board member by marriage.
- The name of any business that has a contract with the school board and with which the board member or relative has one of the following relationships: (1) The board member or relative is employed by the business; or (2) The board member or relative receives compensation from the business; or (3) The board member or relative has an interest in the business. (Interest in a business is defined as ownership or control of more than 10% of the profits, assets or stock.)

PROHIBITED CONDUCT

The School Ethics Act also establishes ethical standards of conduct which serve as guidelines for the activities of school officials, including school board members. The standards are summarized below:

- a. School officials or immediate family members cannot have an interest in any business, or engage in any business, transaction or professional activity that is in substantial conflict with official school duties.
- b. School officials cannot use or attempt to use their positions to obtain unwarranted privileges, advantages or employment for themselves or anyone else.
- c. School officials must excuse themselves from any matter in which their objectivity might reasonably be expected to be impaired because of the financial involvement of themselves, an immediate family member, or a business in which they have an interest. School officials must also excuse themselves from any matter where they have a personal involvement that creates a benefit to the school official or an immediate family member.
- d. No school official shall engage in any employment or service, whether compensated or not, which might reasonably be ex-



pected to prejudice his or her independence of judgment in the exercise of official duties.

- e. No school official may solicit or accept anything of value if given or offered for the purpose of influencing his or her official actions. This provision also applies to the official's immediate family members and to business organizations in which he or she has an interest. School officials, however, can solicit and accept campaign contributions if they reasonably believe the contributions are not given to influence their official actions.
- f. School officials cannot use or allow the use of their public office or any confidential information for personal financial gain or for the financial gain of either an immediate family member or business with which he or she is associated.
- g. A school official or business organization in which he or she has an interest cannot represent anyone other than the board in any matter pending before the board or involving the board. Labor union representational responsibilities are permitted.
- h. If a school official is a member of a particular group, he or she can vote on a matter that benefits that group so long as he or she is not benefited to a greater extent than other members of that group.
- i. An elected board member can request information for a constituent so long as there is no remuneration attached to oneself or one's immediate family.
- j. School official and immediate family members may represent themselves in any proceeding in the school district that involves their personal (family) interests. (For example, this provision would permit a board member, acting as a parent, to contest his or her child's placement in a special education program.)

CODE OF ETHICS

In addition, the School Ethics Act requires school board members to abide by the following Code of Ethics for School Board Members:

- a. I will uphold and enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes shall be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.
- b. I will make decisions in terms of the educational welfare of children and will seek to develop and maintain public schools

that meet the individual needs of all children regardless of their ability, race, creed, sex, or social standing.

- c. I will confine my board action to policy making, planning, and appraisal, and I will help to frame policies and plans only after the board has consulted those who will be affected by them.
- d. I will carry out my responsibility, not to administer the schools, but together with my fellow board members, to see that they are well run.
- e. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action that may compromise the board.
- f. I will refuse to surrender my independent judgment to special interest or partisan political groups or to use the schools for personal gain or for the gain of friends.
- g. I will hold confidential all matters pertaining to the schools which, if disclosed, would needlessly injure individuals or the schools. In all other matters, I will provide accurate information and, in concert with my fellow board members, interpret to the staff the aspirations of the community for its school.
- h. I will vote to appoint the best-qualified personnel available after consideration of the recommendation of the chief administrative officer.
- i. I will support and protect school personnel in proper performance of their duties.
- j. I will refer all complaints to the chief administrative officer and will act on the complaints at public meetings only after failure of an administrative solution.

TRAINING

The School Ethics Act requires all school board members to complete a training program conducted by the New Jersey School Boards Association on the skills and knowledge needed to serve as a board member. The School Ethics Act requires training to be completed during the first year of the board member's first term in office. A separate section of state law, the Accountability Act (N.J.S.A. 18A:26-8.2), requires additional training in each of the subsequent two years of the board member's first term in office, as well as within the first year when a board member is reelected or reappointed to an additional term.

NJSBA provides this training through its Board Member Academy.



For details on NJSBA's training programs, go to the "Training and Conferences" section of www.njsba.org or call (888) 88-NJSBA.