

Who Does What in Public School Governance

The Role of Board Members and Superintendents



New Jersey School Boards Association
Serving Local Boards of Education Since 1914



Understanding the role of, and interaction between a board of education and its chief school administrator is fundamental in effectively addressing the issues and concerns of a school district.

The Board Member as Representative

School board members are state officials, empowered by state law to govern the public schools at a local level. They are representatives of their community with oversight authority derived from the New Jersey Constitution and the legislature. The laws, rules and regulations governing public schools pass through the legislature to the State Board of Education. The State Board's staff, the Department of Education, has the authority to carry out the mandates created by those higher bodies. The board of education develops policies that govern school operation in compliance with state and federal laws and regulations.

The role of a board of education is to see that the school district is well run. The written policies of the board provide guidance and direction to the chief school administrator for making decisions and taking action. Well crafted policies minimize ambiguity between the board and its chief school administrator and promote the smooth operation of the school system.

Board members have no legal authority except when sitting with other board members in a legally constituted meeting. An individual board member cannot make decisions for the board, take action for the board or speak for the board unless the board has authorized them to do so.

Likewise, concerns of individuals in the community which are brought to the attention of a board member cannot be acted upon by that board member, but are referred through established channels, such as board president and/or the chief school administrator. When the chain-of-command is used properly by citizens and board members, communications are improved and the board of education can act as final arbiter on issues which have not been resolved at other steps in the chain.

This brochure explains the inter-related responsibilities of the board of education and the chief school administrator, and the role of each in community relations. We hope this brochure will also help citizens understand school governance and communicate their expectations for board of education members.

Above all, board members are responsible for and to the district's students. Every policy they approve and every action they take must be based on what is best for the education of those students.

Chief School Administrator as Implementer

The relationship between the board and the superintendent is one of the most critical factors in determining how well a school system operates. The board must trust its superintendent, have respect for his/her professional training and experience, be confident in his/her ability to administer the district, and request his/her recommendations on issues under discussion. The superintendent, in turn, should give the board his/her loyalty, his/her best advice on matters under advisement, and provide the most competent management of the schools. In working together, both the board and the superintendent must be clear on their respective responsibilities.

The superintendent's responsibilities are divided into three areas. He/she is the chief advisor to the board of education, the executive officer of the school district, and the educational leader of the community.

As the chief advisor to the board, the superintendent briefs the board on district problems or issues and is consulted for background information, alternatives, suggestions, and recommendations before decisions are made. He/she keeps the board current on district operations, matters which require board discussion and may ask other district staff to attend board meetings to give reports on particular items. As the top education professional, the superintendent continually evaluates and assesses how policies are being implemented, keeping aware of those which are working well, those which need changing, and those areas which need new policy. All issues on an agenda for board action are accompanied

by the superintendent's recommendation. In most instances, he/she is passing on the results of staff input and study/research. He/she acts in this capacity as the liaison to the board for all the district employees.

As the executive officer of the school district, the superintendent is responsible for administering the policies adopted by the school board. He/she is, responsible for running the school system and is accountable to the board regarding how well it is run. By personal action, delegation, and supervisory activities, he/she directs appropriate staff in the following areas:

- Development, expansion and evaluation of the education program
- Recommendations for hiring of new staff and renewal or non-renewal of non-tenured staff
- Recommendations for disciplinary action for those tenured staff members not performing at expected levels
- Development of inservice programs for training and improvement of staff
- Development of sound evaluation procedures for staff
- Preparation of a district budget which provides the best education possible within a community's ability to support it
- Monitoring of all expenditures and the establishment of control systems for purchasing and accounting
- Maintenance of all school facilities and equipment
- Development of safety rules and regulations for staff and students
- Development of all necessary transportation systems
- Awareness of legal mandates relevant to the public schools
- Establishment of good lines of communication to community leaders and citizens

In all of these areas, he/she must provide progress updates to the board including emergent problems as well as what actions the board should be taking to ensure a smoothly functioning system.

Finally, the superintendent is the educational leader of the community. He/she is active in professional education organizations, is familiar with current trends in education and takes the initiative in bringing worthwhile ideas to the attention of the board and the townspeople.

Board/Superintendent Collaboration

To insure that the board and superintendent, in carrying out their respective duties, maintain the best relationship, each partner should follow some basic guidelines.

For the board, these are:

- Not taking action without consulting the superintendent and getting his/her recommendations
- Recognizing the superintendent as the district's educational leader and listening to him/her as such
- Not confusing the role of setting policy for the district with that of running the schools
- Not surprising the superintendent

For the superintendent, these are:

- Keeping the board fully informed at all times
- Implementing policies of the board in the most effective and efficient manner and evaluating the results
- Recognizing the board as the final authority in the school district and conveying that recognition to the rest of the staff
- Not surprising the board

How do the board and superintendent work together in actual decision-making situations? Let's look at two major areas which come up each year—developing a district budget and the hiring and retention of staff—to understand how their roles mesh.

Budget Development

The superintendent performs three functions in developing the budget. First, he/she requests all staff—administrators, teachers, secretaries and custodians—to submit their recommendations for the next budget. (Since this process is begun in the spring, they are actually making suggestions for the school year beginning sixteen months later). Second, he/she meets with the principals and central office staff through the summer and early fall, to review, analyze and prioritize these recommendations, with respect to the district's goals. Third, by December or January, the superintendent is ready to bring to the board, with appropriate supporting information, final recommendations for a budget which will provide the best educational program for students without placing an unreasonable tax burden on the community.

As chief advisor to the board, the superintendent works with board members as they review the budget. He/she must be able to explain the educational rationale for the recommendations, answer their questions, and help them understand the needs of the district in terms of curriculum, staffing, maintenance, transportation, facilities operations, and student activities. The superintendent also continues to update information as their discussions approach the final decision and the board's adoption of the budget.

As the educational leader of the district, the superintendent actively seeks opportunities to discuss the adopted budget with the citizenry. Along with board members, he/she talks with PTA/PTOs and local service organizations about the district's needs. He/she acts as liaison with the county superintendent of schools to make sure that state requirements are also accounted for in the budget and that the budget meets the intent and letter of the school funding laws.

The board's role in this process is to determine how monies should be allocated to carry out its policies for the district (e.g., class size, non-hazardous busing, parameters for negotiations, linkages between curriculum and professional development).

As representatives of their community, board members encourage public input through their budget discussions. The board considers the community's statements, along with the superintendent's recommendations. It looks at the costs involved, the tax burden, and the effect on the citizens' pocketbooks. It then reconciles, to its best judgment, the educational needs of the district's students with the ability of the community to support those needs, as well as state budgetary constraints, including the 2 percent cap on local tax levy growth. When the inter-related functions of the board and superintendent mesh well, the result is an annual budget that serves as a blueprint for the district.

Staff Hiring and Retention

Another important area where the different responsibilities of the board and the chief school administrator come together is the hiring and retention of staff.

Here, the superintendent's responsibility as chief advisor to the board is crucial. As the professional head of the district, he/she

delegates to principals, department chair, and supervisors the responsibility for evaluating their staff. Based on these evaluations, recommendations are presented to the board concerning renewal of non-tenured staff or whether raises for tenured personnel should be withheld because of incompetence.

The administrators rely on the superintendent to support them in their evaluative responsibilities, while teachers rely on the superintendent to protect them from unsubstantiated attacks.

The board receives information from several sources. First and foremost, they have the superintendent's recommendations. As representatives of the community, they also get input from parents and students about teachers. This input is both positive and negative and is received throughout the year. However, it is very important for the maintenance of district morale that the board and the superintendent relate the information they receive to relevant, objective criteria when making their decisions. Special weight must be given to the superintendent's recommendations—after all, administrative staff are the professionals trained in supervision and evaluation. However, parents also have insights which must not be ignored. Their comments, especially when heard repeatedly about a particular staff member, should be shared with the superintendent. Where the superintendent's recommendation does not agree with the other information they have received, board members will ask for further background on the staff member and rationale for the recommendations.

Summary

Board members are their community's representatives. They are responsible for ensuring that the education provided to the students is the best the community can afford. The chief school administrator is the educational expert, responsible for advising the board, managing the staff and keeping the community informed.

In carrying out their separate responsibilities cooperatively, the board and the chief school administrator aid each other in the effective management of the school system. Citizens who understand the differences in the responsibilities of the board and the chief school administrator will be better able to have their concerns addressed.

New Jersey School Board Member Code of Ethics

1. I will uphold and enforce all laws, state board rules and regulations, and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes should be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.
2. I will make decisions in terms of the educational welfare of children and will seek to develop and maintain public schools which meet the individual needs of all children regardless of their ability, race, creed, sex, or social standing.
3. I will confine my board action to policymaking, 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.
4. 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.
5. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action which may compromise the board.
6. 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.
7. I will hold confidential all matters pertaining to the schools which, if disclosed, would needlessly injure individuals or the schools. But, 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 schools.
8. I will vote to appoint the best qualified personnel available after consideration of the recommendation of the chief administrative officer.
9. I will support and protect school personnel in proper performance of their duties.
10. I will refer all complaints to the chief administrative officer and will act on such complaints at public meetings only after failure of an administrative solution.

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