



New Jersey School Boards Association

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Bruce Young of Carlstadt is New Jersey's 2017 Board Member of the Year



Bruce Young

It was more than 26 years ago that Bruce Young of Carlstadt decided to get involved in his local school board. “I had two young children and I wanted to get involved to ensure the best education possible for them – and for all the kids in Carlstadt,” says Young.

From that simple beginning, which will sound familiar to countless New Jersey board members, Young has built an impressive volunteer career.

He has served on both the Carlstadt Board of Education, which oversees the K-8 district, and the Carlstadt-East Rutherford Regional High School Board of Education. Between the two boards, he has been chairman of committees such as finance; negotiations; policy; and buildings and grounds. In addition, he served as president and vice president of each board.

“It’s been my pleasure to work with Bruce for several years,” commented NJSBA President Dan Sinclair, a member of the Lakeland Regional Board of Education in neighboring Passaic County. “His contributions over more than two-and-a-half decades have been centered upon a strong desire to meet the needs of every child.

Young has also been active at the county and state level. He is currently president of the Bergen County School Boards Association (BCSBA), and was vice president for four years.

As president of BCSBA, he has committed himself to visiting any and all of the 77 boards in all Bergen County school districts that invite him to their meeting. “I’ve gone to about 15 or 20 so far,” he says. He speaks to them about the resources available at county meetings and from NJSBA.

He has also implemented a Bergen County board presidents’ breakfast where issues, best practices and concerns are shared. “Bruce has become a true leader, a mentor and a valued asset to others outside of his county,” noted Judith Bassford, the president of the Passaic County School Boards Association, who nominated Young for Board Member of the Year.”

At the state level, he has been on the NJSBA Board of Directors as an alternate representative, and has been on the Association’s Legislative, Finance and Strategic Planning committees.

After more than two decades as a board member, Young is a seasoned veteran of the board table. But when he began, he had some fairly typical misconceptions. “When I first joined the board, I thought I was going to change the world – or at least the district,” he said. “But then I learned that I have to convince eight other people, or at least four people, that my idea is the right idea.”

His education came both through experience at his own board, and through NJSBA. “I did the weekend training 26 years ago, and over time I had the opportunity to learn more, getting involved with NJSBA, and going to different classes and seminars.” Young has avidly pursued professional development as a school board member, earning Certified Board Member, Master Board Member, and Certified Board Leader status from NJSBA’s Board Member Academy.

Passing a referendum in Carlstadt to update facilities is one of the board achievements that Young is most proud of. “We had aging schools that were over 100 years old; the ventilation system was an open air shaft,” he said. However the district had failed to pass various referendum proposals – to renovate and to add on to a school – multiple times.

The district decided to reach out to local citizens to better gauge what the community wanted, and conducted a survey. The result was that the community wanted a single school. A \$28 million referendum passed and a new 110,000 square foot school to serve more than 500 students in grades pre-K through eight. In 2008, the building achieved LEED Silver certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

The consolidation into one school served educational goals, as well, according to Young. When the district’s two school combined into one, curriculum was standardized, and, the additional staff and students provided for flexibility in assigning classes. For example, a child who needed to transfer to a different class no longer needed to transfer to a different school.

Carlstadt, like most districts, is facing the financial difficulties of a tight budget, while grappling

with challenges like the cost of keeping technology updated and integrated into the educational program, and with high special education costs.

Young Resigns One Seat, Takes Another For several years, Young served simultaneously on two boards of education – Carlstadt (the K-8 district) and Carlstadt-East Rutherford, the high school district commonly called “Becton,” for the name of its high school, Henry P. Becton Regional High School.

At Carlstadt-East Rutherford, Young was part of the board which helped secure funding from the Federal Aviation Administration and the Port Authority to soundproof the Becton high school, which improved the learning environment for students.

He left the Becton board in 2011 after an illness. After several years of only serving on the Carlstadt board this year, Young ran again for a seat on the Becton board, and was elected in November.

But there’s a complication.

In 2007 a statute was enacted that prohibited individuals from serving in two elected positions simultaneously; that law has been interpreted as barring a person from serving on an elementary school board and a high school board at the same time. (Individuals who were currently serving on more than one board when the statute was enacted were “grandfathered” in and permitted to continue serving.)

In 2016, Jeff Fischer, a member of the Haledon board in Passaic County, ran for and was elected to a seat on the Manchester Regional board. Fischer challenged the 2007 statute in Superior Court in Passaic County, arguing that the legislative intent of the statute was to prevent an individual from security salary and pension benefits simultaneously through two publicly funded, elected positions. In New Jersey, of course, school board membership is uncompensated, making the prohibition not applicable. In November 2016, a Superior Court judge ruled for Fischer, allowing him to serve.

However, Superior Court decisions are applicable only to the county in which they are issued, so the Fischer decision applies only to Passaic County.

Bruce Young briefly considered filing the necessary papers to try to obtain a similar decision from Bergen County’s Superior Court, but instead decided to resign his seat on the Carlstadt board as of Dec. 31, 2017, in order to join the Carlstadt-East Rutherford board. “I wanted to focus on the high school district at this point in time,” he says.

Deep Community Roots Young grew up in Carlstadt, and lived in Wood Ridge and then East Rutherford before returning to live in Carlstadt. After a career working with commercial clients at Trane Air Conditioning, he retired, and now works part-time as a local zoning officer (“which makes you the most hated person in town,” he jokes).

In addition to his school board work, he has been active in several other local volunteer organizations, including the Carlstadt Senior Citizen Club, Carlstadt Softball League, as secretary and treasurer for the District 36 GOP, as well as a VFW and American Legion member.

Young and wife Susan have been married for 47 years, and have two grown daughters, Carly and Lindsey, as well as a 10-month-old grandson, Hunter.

“People ask me how long I’m going to keep doing this – being on a board,” he says. “I tell them as long as I’m enjoying it, and so far, I’m still enjoying it.”

NJSBA Executive Director Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod fittingly described Young’s character and the reason he was chosen as Board Member of the Year. “Simply stated, Bruce represents the best attributes of each and every school board member in New Jersey,” said Feinsod. “He is a quality human being. In a state where some 5,000 school board members every day display extraordinary skills in leadership, enthusiasm for public education, and aspirations for their students, Bruce Young stands out for his commitment and tireless dedication to the children of Carlstadt, Bergen County, and New Jersey.”

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