



Parent's Guide to How Local School Boards Work

The purpose of this document is to explain, in plain language, what a school board is designed to do and the role it plays in your child's educational experience. Each state has different rules for school boards, so you should look to find the specifics in your community, but this guide should give you a good start.

The Nuts and Bolts

Who makes up a local school board?

A local school board of education consists of a set number of members, along with the head administrator of the school district – the Director of Schools (called “superintendent” in some areas).

How are school board members chosen for these seats? For how long?

School Board Members are elected from the school district community that particular school board serves. These are your neighbors: relatives, retirees, fellow church members, local business owners – ordinary residents. Terms of office are typically four (4) or six (6) years and elections are staggered so that the full board doesn't come up for re-election all at once.

What are the main functions of a local school board?

The primary duty of the board is to create and approve policy for the school district as a whole (e.g., attendance, discipline, cell phone usage). School boards also make decisions on routine items such as building maintenance, adopting budgets, and approving changes to the school calendar. Like any governing body, a school board must have basic operations in place to accomplish their work: elected officers, regularly held meetings, official meeting protocols, etc. Most boards use Roberts Rules of Order procedures to conduct their meetings.

How does the role of the school board differ from that of the Director of Schools (or superintendent)?

While the board sets policy for the district, the director of schools is responsible for managing the schools according to those policies. The Director also uses more detailed administrative rules and procedures (that should comply with board policy) to lead schools in the district. The board hires and is charged with evaluating the performance of the Director of Schools to ensure he/she is effectively working towards carrying out the vision and goals it has set for the district.

In some states, the community elects its Director of Schools. In many states, the Director of Schools position is an administrative one, filled by the local school board.

How often do school boards meet and are these meetings open to the public?

Laws vary by state, but most meet monthly. These meetings must be open to the public, per the Open Meetings Law. There are two kinds of meetings, work sessions and formal meetings.

Where can I find information on these meetings?

Most school districts post meeting agendas, related documents and minutes on their website for the public to access.

How do I know which member on my local school board represents me? Where do I find out information about these people?

In many school districts, Board Members represent the whole community. In others, Board Members may represent a particular geographic area. You can find information about school board members on each school district's website under "Board Members."

Can school board members be recalled or removed?

Yes. The process for this is spelled out in State law under the sections addressing the recall of local elected government officials. There are specific steps to follow, starting with a petition signed by registered voters. Check out your .gov website

I attended a school board meeting recently and the board moved through the agenda very quickly. Why didn't they discuss or debate all of the agenda items?

School boards sometimes have a "work session" meeting outside of their regular meetings where they review and discuss issues in detail, but don't actually vote on them. Also, school boards at times form committees where certain members of the board work with the director of schools or other central office staff to study a specific issue. These members then make recommendations to the full board for a vote. So, by the time the board meets for its regular "agenda" or "business" meeting where it votes on issues, many agenda items have been vetted or already studied.

I saw a section on the agenda called "consent agenda." What is this?

A consent agenda is used most often to save time by moving the board's business along. Items listed under the consent agenda have been shared with the members in advance to review and are typically administrative, routine, and/or non-controversial items. The consent agenda is usually placed near the top of the meeting agenda and the items listed below are all voted on in a single motion. Occasionally, the consent agenda is misused, including controversial topics the Board wants to pass "under the radar".

Getting Involved with the Local School Board

How can members of the community take part in a local school board meeting?

School boards usually allow time on their meeting agendas for public comment. Each board can set its own protocol for this, but individuals typically sign in before the meeting starts and then approach the podium when their name is called during the “Public Comment” period on the agenda. Speakers are usually given a time limit so no single person dominates the meeting. This public comment period is not intended as an opportunity to debate with Board members, but rather to share information, concerns and/or leave the board with questions to reflect on. It’s not meant to be a cross-examination or “question-and-answer” session. It is an excellent way, however, to give voice to a topic and “go on record.”

If I am having a specific problem with my child’s school, should I take it before the school board?

The school board should really be the “court of last resort” a parent uses *after* they have tried to resolve their problem by working up the district’s chain of command. For instance, if a parent has a problem with a teacher, the parent should first address it with the teacher. If the issue is not resolved, the parent should request time with the school principal, and then the Director of Schools (superintendent). If the school remains unresponsive and/or a resolution is not reached, then an appeal to the school board is the next step.

I have just learned my child's school district is planning to...and I am furious. What should I do?

Find like-minded parents and brainstorm. If you need more information from the school, submit a Freedom of Information Request. Information about how to make state-specific FOIA requests and other excellent resources and examples of how to address the school board are available at <https://uspie.org/critical-race-theory>. This link is specific to fighting Critical Race Theory, but all the resources at this link can be adapted to address any problem with your local school board.