

School Board Candidate's Guide



Becoming a school board member in North Carolina is a high calling for those interested in public service. No greater service can one offer than to help set the course and direction of educating the future leaders of our society. Thus, the duties and responsibilities of being a board member cannot be taken lightly. As you consider such a venture, this guide seeks to respond to questions that you may or may not have considered. There are 115 school districts in North Carolina—100 county and 15 city districts. The vast majority of school boards are elected. Three boards are currently appointed.

Being a School Board Member Candidate

An individual seeking candidacy must be a qualified voter of at least 21 years old and must reside within the district. Board members cannot be employees of the school district they seek to represent. If elected, the candidate must resign from employment with the district before taking office as a member of that board of education.

Three districts in North Carolina have school boards that are appointed: Asheville City, Lexington City and Thomasville City boards of education. For those residing in these cities, consider contacting the appointing body regarding your interest in serving. The remaining 112 school boards are elected. Consult with your county board of elections regarding filing fees and questions regarding the election process.

As a candidate for your school board, it is important and in your best interest to be careful about campaign promises and statements. It is very important to understand the current educational issues in your district and how a school board operates to provide solutions to these issues.

How School Boards Work

School boards in North Carolina are comprised of five to as many as 12 board members, depending on the county in which you live. The board is a corporate body. As such, an individual board member has no authority to act on behalf of the board unless such authority is specifically delegated. Your role as a board member is expressed during board meetings through your opinions and voting. It is important to understand that a school board member must utilize

skilled and informed decision-making abilities in a team atmosphere. Board members represent all students, staff and the community by working with fellow board members to design policies for the good of the entire community. Single-issue politics do not work on the school board.

What School Boards Do

School boards are the policy-making body for school districts. Their function is to set sound educational goals and establish policies for the school system based upon state and federal laws and community values.

In many situations, the board is called upon to conduct administrative hearings and decide matters in a judicial capacity. These include hearing the following types of cases:

- a. Dismissal and demotion of career and mid-contract employees,
- b. Superintendent's recommendation not to renew an administrator's contract,
- c. Suspension and expulsion of students,
- d. Student admission and assignment appeals,
- e. Appeals from final administrative decisions and the board's grievance policy (e.g. gender or handicap discrimination claims).

As a consequence of this judicial function, board members have a legal duty to maintain impartiality. The *Crump v. Board of Education* decision ruled that board members must act impartially and in a fair

manner, when performing their judicial function during a board hearing and resulting deliberations. Members must be able to set aside their prior knowledge and preconceptions concerning the matter at issue, and base their considerations solely upon the evidence presented at the hearing.

Board members are responsible for the hiring and evaluation of the superintendent. The superintendent is tasked with the administrative responsibility of carrying out the policies set by the board. School board members also consider contracts of principals, teachers, and other personnel at the recommendation of the superintendent. Most are hired contingent upon approval of the board. Although some of the board's authority can be delegated to the superintendent, most districts have some sort of board approval, even if it is just on the list of employees.

Education is an extremely complex mechanism in the state and country. The school board must make informed decisions in the following areas:

- Establishing budgets
- Community engagement
- Adopting a school calendar
- Ensuring adequate school facilities exist
- Working with county commissioners
- Advocating for public school education

What is a Good School Board Member

Being an effective school board member requires that you clearly understand what a board member can and cannot do. The role and function of board members often are misinterpreted by the public and, sometimes, by board members. School boards do not manage the day-to-day operations of the school district—they ensure that the school district is managed well by professionals.

1. A school board member must understand that his/her legal authority as a board member is carried out only when the board of education is in session. No one person, unless authorized, should speak on behalf of the board.
2. A school board member avoids administrative decisions. The superintendent is the chief

administrator; the board has no administrative function. There are five words that tend to get board members in trouble, "I'll take care of it!" Concerns and complaints should be handled according to board policies.

3. An effective school board member understands the total community and respects diverse cultures. North Carolina's population is extremely diverse. The effective school board member is committed to public education for all and understands the importance of public education in today's democratic society. You must serve out of a sincere desire to benefit the community rather than for personal glory or to carry out personal objectives.
4. A good school board member remembers that board business often requires confidentiality, especially in processes involving students, personnel, land acquisition, negotiations and the need for security.
5. A good school board member is able to support a board decision when it is made. Regardless of whether you voted in opposition to the decision, you must accept and support the final decision of the majority.
6. A good school board member obtains facts. However, you must remember that the administration is responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the school system. All of its time cannot be used to generate reports for individual board members.
7. A good school board member must be committed to training and improvement. The learning curve for a newly sworn in board member is steep. You must be engaged in self-evaluation as a full board and in-service training for the purpose of providing well-informed leadership and sound decision making.
8. A school board member must be willing to devote the great amount of time it takes to be an effective board member. School board members deal with a variety of concerns and issues. Being a board member requires active participation at school board meetings; interaction and participation at local school functions and community events; advocacy for public education

at the local, state and national levels; and commitment to time for board training. The amount of time is great and every school board member needs to commit to all tasks at hand.

Board members are ineffective when they:

- Become involved in school administration,
- Allow personal feelings toward others to affect their judgment,
- Allow personal interests to transcend the best interests of the district,
- Neglect board duties,
- Can't make decisions and are unable to take firm stands,
- Represent the interests of a special group or geographic area rather than the interests of the entire district, or
- Neglect board training.

Board Member Development

North Carolina school board members are mandated by law to receive 12 clock hours of training every two years. This training can be provided by NCSBA. The association sponsors training activities that include an annual conference, a new member orientation, an annual law conference, special issue seminars, legislative workshops and an invitational conferences.

Board Member Ethics

In 2009, the North Carolina General Assembly passed House Bill 1452 (S.L. 2009-403), Local Government Code of Ethics. Included in this legislation is a requirement that all local governing board members, including school board members, receive a minimum of two hours of ethics education covering laws and principles that govern conflicts of interest and ethics standards of conduct at the local government level. The training must be completed within 12 months of each election/appointment.

This legislation also requires the governing board adopt a resolution or policy containing a code of ethics to guide the actions of board members in the performance of their official duties as a member of that governing board. The resolution or policy should

address at least all of the following:

1. The need to obey all applicable laws regarding official actions taken as a board member;
2. The need to uphold the integrity and independence of the board member's office;
3. The need to avoid impropriety in the exercise of the board member's official duties;
4. The need to faithfully perform the duties of the office;
5. The need to conduct the affairs of the governing board in an open and public manner, including complying with all applicable laws governing open meetings and public records.

The clerk to the governing board is responsible for maintaining a record verifying receipt of the ethics education by each member of the governing board.

NCSBA provides training that satisfies the ethics training requirement. In addition, through the Association's policy service, school boards have access to tools and information to guide the board in developing a code of ethics policy. Nevertheless, as a potential board member, you should be able to embrace the concepts presented.

- Attend all regularly scheduled board meetings insofar as possible, and become informed concerning the issues to be considered at those meetings;
- Endeavor to make policy decisions only after full discussion at publicly held board meetings;
- Render all decisions based on the available facts and my independent judgment, and refuse to surrender that judgment to individuals or special interest groups;
- Encourage the free expression of opinion by all board members, and seek systematic communications between the board and students, staff and all elements of the community;
- Work with other board members to establish effective board policies and to delegate authority for the administration of the schools to the superintendent;

- Communicate to other board members and the superintendent expressions of public reaction to board policies and school program;
- Learn about current educational issues by individual study and through participation in programs providing needed information, such as those sponsored by the state and national school boards associations;
- Comply with North Carolina General Statutes 115C-50 and 160A-87 by earning the required 12 hours of training annually;
- Support the employment of those persons best qualified to serve as school staff, and insist on a regular and impartial evaluation of all staff;
- Avoid being placed in a position of conflict of interest, and refrain from using the board member's position on the board for personal or partisan gain;
- Take no private action that will compromise the board or administration, and respect the confidentiality of information that is privileged under applicable law; and
- Remember always that a board member's first and greatest concern must be the educational welfare of the students attending the public schools.

How Can NCSBA Help You

NCSBA is a member-driven association that supports the school governance team—school board members, superintendents, senior administrative staff and board assistants—in its complex leadership role. We help develop, communicate and advocate for the perspective of North Carolina school districts. To assist new board members, the association offers a board member orientation that focuses on the following:

- Boardmanship and responsibility
- Your role as an advocate for public education
- Legal duties and responsibilities as a board and an individual board member
- The open meetings law
- Personnel issues
- A review of common liability issues—you will be sued!
- Budgeting and finance

- Public records and confidentiality issues
- Policy development
- Parliamentary procedure

The seminar gives you a foundation upon which you can begin to build your knowledge base of educational issues. Throughout the year, training opportunities focus on various school governance topics.

NCSBA's Mission

The mission of NCSBA, as an advocate for public school education, is to provide leadership and services that enable local boards of education to govern effectively.

- The best way to educate the populace is through public education.
- The most effective way to govern public schools is through local boards of education which are representative of the community.
- Members of local boards of education make better decision when they are educated about their roles and the issues in public education.
- Legislative and policy making bodies must provide coordinated support to public education.
- School board members must recognize and accept the importance of their roles as educational leaders.
- Local boards of education are responsible for the education of all public school children.
- School board members must make the best decisions for children and the community.

Legal References

North Carolina Constitution:
Article VI, Section 6—Eligibility for Office; Article IX—Education

North Carolina General Statutes:
Chapter 115C—Public School Laws

Please note that there are additional statutes that cover issues affecting education.

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