



New York State  
School Boards  
Association

# NEW SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER *Handbook*

*A Guide to* SURVIVING  
YOUR FIRST YEAR





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## **NYSSBA Staff**

Timothy G. Kremer, *Executive Director*

Jay Worona, *Deputy Executive Director and General Counsel*

Barry J. Entwistle, *Director of Leadership Development and Field Services*

Darci D’Ercole-McGinn, *Deputy Director of Leadership Development and Field Services*

Linda Bakst, *Deputy Director of Policy Services*

David Albert, *Director of Communications, Marketing and Research*

Maura Bonville, *Deputy Director of Marketing*

Lisa Cooper, *Senior Graphic Designer*

Barbara Bennett, *Communications Associate*

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## Introduction

*New School Board Member Handbook – A Guide to Surviving Your First Year* provides new school board members with some of the basics of school board service. It answers questions that new board members commonly ask when they begin school board service. It's written in a question-and-answer format for quick reading, and includes a glossary of common education terms and a list of commonly used acronyms that new board members will find helpful.

*New School Board Member Handbook* draws on the deep well of knowledge and expertise of the New York State School Boards Association. It includes references to NYSSBA's premier handbook, *School Law 35th Edition*, as well as the varied programs and services NYSSBA offers members.

We hope you'll find *New School Board Member Handbook* a helpful reference as you begin your school board service. We hope you'll rely on the New York State School Boards Association for assistance at any time during your term. Please contact us at 800-342-3460 or 518-783-0200, or visit our web site at [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org).

# 1 Beginning Your School Board Service

## 1:1. I've been elected. What now?

Congratulations! You've joined the ranks of more than 5,000 locally elected officials in New York dedicated to helping your community's students succeed and ultimately become productive citizens. You hold positions as:

1. An individual school board member.
2. A member of a board made up of other members.
3. A member of the district governance team composed of school board members and the superintendent.

As a school board member you are a representative of the community. You are a leader of the district. You are a steward both of your district's children and its tax dollars. You are an advocate of public education and an educated public.

## 1:2. What are some of the powers and duties of the board?

The New York Education Law defines a school board's general powers and duties. Generally a school board oversees the district's affairs (students' education), personnel and properties. The board has specific responsibilities to approve curriculum, employ a superintendent and submit a proposed budget to the district voters for their approval.

## 1:3. What exactly do school boards do?

A school board:

- Sets the district's direction with performance-based goals.
- Ensures alignment of strategies, resources (including the approved budget), policies, programs, and processes with district goals.
- Assesses and accounts for student achievement using comprehensive data, thorough deliberation, and open communication.
- Conducts performance evaluations of the superintendent to continuously set standards of improvement.
- Leads the district, accentuating and reinforcing the positive while correcting the negative.

Keep in mind the school board's job is to focus on the ends, while the superintendent focuses on the ways and means to attain the ends. In other words, the board oversees the education of students and is responsible for school district operations, but does not directly run the district's day-to-day operations.

## 1:4. Now that I'm a board member, what does my community expect of me?

As a new board member, you will be asked to make decisions on major issues that affect the students and citizens of your community. You will be asked to vote publicly on matters that you may know little about. As with every new job, it takes time to learn the ropes. You need to take that time to learn about your job and the issues at the same time you are performing your job.

Some of the activities you will be expected to do are: attend board meetings, participate on committees, attend school functions, keep yourself informed about issues, pursue developmental opportunities for yourself, and interact with your fellow board members and the superintendent. These activities require a significant amount of time, but it is time extremely well spent when you consider that you are helping to shape the future of the children in your community.

#### **1:5. I'm overwhelmed. How do I learn my job?**

With help. Within your first year of office, you will be required to complete two kinds of mandatory training. New York State law requires newly elected school board members and BOCES board members to complete six hours of fiscal oversight training and a new member orientation training on the powers, functions and duties of boards of education. To satisfy the mandatory training requirement, NYSSBA offers the New School Board Member Academy, which includes both requirements, Essentials of School Board Governance and the Fiscal Oversight Fundamentals, at regional workshop events throughout the state. Fiscal Oversight Fundamentals and Essentials of School Board Governance courses are also offered online. Even if you haven't yet been sworn in, your superintendent can register you as a board member-elect for these and other NYSSBA leadership development trainings through our website. On our website under Training Events, check the School Board U and webinar pages for additional trainings, or visit the NYSSBA online store, click on Webinars and then the specific training desired.

Most importantly, don't hesitate to ask questions. Nobody expects you to have all the answers, and most boards and superintendents welcome the opportunity to get you up to speed.

#### **1:6. How much time can I expect to spend on school board responsibilities?**

The time required to complete your school board responsibilities will most likely vary by time of year. It will depend on how many meetings are scheduled, which committees you serve on and what issues are going on in the district at the time. For example, if the district is going through a building project, hiring a superintendent or conducting negotiations, the time needed for board meetings may be more extensive. On average, however, you can anticipate spending about six hours a week on board service (NYSSBA Member Services Survey, 2011).

#### **1:7. How do the school board's responsibilities differ from the superintendent's?**

The school board is the district's board of directors and is responsible for establishing goals, setting policy and overseeing resources for the school district. The superintendent – the district's chief executive officer – works for the school board and is the person who translates the policy into action. Consistent with the goals established by the school board, the superintendent and staff make the day-to-day decisions that affect the operation of the school district, deploying resources, assigning staff and documenting results.

#### **1:8. Where, or who, do I go to for information?**

The board president usually can answer your questions on protocol or procedure, as well as issues facing the board. The superintendent is also a good source of information. Other board members, both current and past, are also good resources. NYSSBA is also a good source for information and advice, and has staff specialists ready to answer your questions. Visit NYSSBA's website ([www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)) for in-depth information on many school policy, legal and legislative issues.

**1:9. Are school boards required to have officers? What are their duties?**

A school board is required by law to elect a president and may, at its discretion, elect a vice president.

The board president sets the tone on how the school board will function. This officer is a leader of the board who envisions, plans, organizes, motivates and builds bridges; a presider who articulates agendas, maintains order and announces results; and a communicator who listens and speaks on behalf of the board.

The vice president often works closely with the board president and superintendent, and will preside at board meetings when the president is not there and assumes the office of president in the event of a vacancy until a new president is elected.

**1:10. How do I translate all the educational jargon and acronyms I hear at each board meeting?**

There are a lot of abbreviations and acronyms for educational terms. This guide includes a glossary of common education terms as well as a list of commonly used acronyms you may encounter throughout your school board services (pages 25 - 31). For jargon or acronyms that are not included here, consider asking your superintendent or other board members.

**1:11. What is the board's role when there are problems with an administrator?**

The only employee who answers directly to the school board is the superintendent. Accordingly, if there are concerns about an administrator's performance, the board should raise these concerns with the superintendent in executive session. It is the superintendent who has the responsibility to handle these issues. Take care not to cross the line into micromanaging the relationship with this administrator. It's the superintendent's job to lead and manage the employees in the district.

School boards may also have a review process established that enables board members to provide input to the superintendent regarding the other administrators. The superintendent takes your collective input into account, but it is ultimately the superintendent who completes the final evaluation of the administrator.

If there is a problem with the superintendent, on the other hand, the board needs to address the problem through the annual review process or through informal feedback via the board president.



# 2 Can We Talk?

## **2:1. Is it all right to call the superintendent?**

You need to establish a productive working relationship with your superintendent. To do this, you will have to talk to that individual. If you have questions, it is better to call the superintendent and discuss them before the board meeting rather than surprise him or her at a public meeting. If these questions are concerns or relate to negative feelings from the community, the superintendent will appreciate knowing about these in advance of the board meeting so that he or she can come prepared to address them. It is appropriate to call the superintendent, set up a meeting to discuss questions, or even email him or her for simple questions or requests.

## **2:2. If I disagree with board members or the superintendent, what is the best way to let them know how I feel?**

Always treat your fellow board members and the superintendent and administrators with respect. However, don't be afraid to disagree on an issue. In fact, a discussion about an issue that reflects two or more views usually results in a better decision than if everyone agrees with the first solution offered. Be certain you debate the issue, not the person. Demeaning comments or angry discussions do not facilitate effective decision making.

## **2:3. How do I approach my superintendent or board if I have a suggestion for a change?**

If your suggestion needs to be discussed by the entire board and voted on, it should be added to an upcoming board agenda. Review your district policy or board operations manual on agenda setting to understand how to do this. Contact the superintendent or the board president to discuss your idea and have it either put on the agenda or referred to committee.

## **2:4. Is it all right to talk to district administrators and staff?**

In addition to the superintendent, you will come in contact with district employees, including administrators, teachers and other staff members. While there's nothing wrong with talking to district staff, keep in mind that complaints should follow the chain of command. For example, teachers report to principals; principals report to the superintendent; the superintendent reports to the board. If you have a request for information, you should ask the superintendent unless he or she indicates otherwise.

## **2:5. Can I talk to board members outside the board meeting?**

Yes, the state's Open Meetings Law generally permits you to converse with your fellow board members outside of board meetings. As with the superintendent, you should try to establish productive relations with each of the other board members. Talking with them in social situations or at school sporting events, for example, will give you an opportunity to learn about them outside of the school board. Be careful, however, that you do not discuss any school board matters if you have a quorum – a simple majority (more than half) of the total number of members on your board. This would constitute a meeting in violation of the Open Meetings Law. You should ensure that such informal chats do not substitute for full deliberation in a public meeting.

**2:6. What can I say, or not say, to parents and friends about school issues?**

School board business that is discussed in executive session or relates to confidential matters (such as an employee personnel issue or student discipline issue) should never be discussed with anyone other than another board member or the superintendent. A good rule of thumb is to discuss only items that have been made public at a school board meeting. Adhering to this rule of thumb will go a long way in maintaining trust with the superintendent and the other board members, and protecting staff and the public.

**2:7. What information is considered confidential?**

Most employee personnel issues or information contained in student educational records are considered confidential. Also, the information discussed in a closed board meeting, more commonly known as an executive session, is confidential. A board may call an executive session only on the following subjects:

- Matters that will imperil the public safety if disclosed.
- Any matter that may disclose the identity of a law enforcement agent or informer.
- Information relating to current or future investigation or prosecution of a criminal offense that would imperil effective law enforcement if disclosed.
- Discussions involving proposed, pending, or current litigation.
- Collective bargaining pursuant to Article 14 of the Civil Service Law.
- The medical, financial, credit, or employment history of a particular person or corporation, or matters leading to the appointment, employment, promotion, demotion, discipline, suspension, dismissal, or removal of a particular person or corporation.
- The preparation, grading, or administration of exams.
- The proposed acquisition, sale, or lease of real property or the proposed acquisition, sale, or exchange of securities, but only when their value would be substantially affected by publicity.

**2:8. I have children in school. How can I talk with their teachers now that I'm on the school board?**

This is a tricky area. No matter what you say about “speaking as a parent, not a board member,” it’s difficult for some teachers to separate your role on the school board from your role as a parent. It’s not surprising that some teachers may be somewhat intimidated by your role as a board member. Some married board members have indicated that their spouses frequently take the lead in speaking to their children’s teachers.

Make sure you’re not using your position as a school board member to secure special treatment for your child. Your child should be treated the same as other students and be subject to the same rules and requirements. If there are issues you wish to discuss with a teacher, you should follow the normal procedures for contacting your child’s teacher to discuss them.

Keep in mind you should not relinquish your parental rights now that you’re a school board member. You are always a parent first and a board member second.

**2:9. As a board member, may I visit the schools?**

You have the same right as a parent or community member to visit the schools in your district, so long as you follow whatever procedures your district has for visitors. As a school board member, you may also visit the schools in an official capacity, only with the board's authority, for specific purposes such as building inspections.

As a school board member, you should use school visits to build good working relations with building principals and staff, to celebrate in the positive accomplishments of the schools, and to show your pride as a member of the board. Look for opportunities to visit when a school is hosting a special event or recognition program for students and staff. In any event, be sure to tell the superintendent and/or principal in advance of your visit.

**2:10. How do I respond to a community that questions the school board's decisions?**

It's normal to hear questions about the board's decisions. You will at times find yourself dealing with controversial, complex issues, and the board's final decisions may be unpopular. Explain the thought process that went into the decision and why the board arrived at the conclusion it did, even if you personally disagreed. Be sure to answer honestly and without emotion. One of your roles as a school board member is to be an advocate for the district. Being asked about board decisions provides an opportunity to promote the positive activities that are occurring in your schools while at the same time responding to community questions.



**2:11. How do I respond to questions from the media?**

Your board has probably already adopted, at least informally, a policy for responding to the media. Particularly on issues of great sensitivity, a single spokesperson – usually the president – may be designated to speak for the board. If the media is waiting to do an interview following a board meeting, then it is appropriate to refer the question to the president or the superintendent.

Individual board members should be free to explain their votes or comments they may have made at a public meeting. If you are contacted by a local reporter and you're not prepared or don't have the relevant information, don't say, "No comment." Instead, tell the reporter you'll get an answer and get back to them. Ask what kind of deadline they have, and then promptly follow through.

In all situations, be honest – never lie! Talk in plain English, in short, quotable sentences, but stay on message. Answer the question that was asked. Don't feel compelled to offer more information than needed to answer the question. Be friendly and warm. If you are on camera, remember that body language is as important as what you say.

**2:12. How should I respond to parental complaints?**

First, be familiar with your board policy on public complaints. The best way to respond to parental complaints is to be a good listener. This allows you to ask questions to understand the situation better. Be careful, though, that the parent does not interpret your questions or comments as an indication of future board action. Once parents have shared their complaints with you, try to give them guidance on how to get their concerns addressed through proper channels, perhaps by referring them to the public complaint policy. It's safe to say that most of the complaints you'll hear are administrative in nature and not policy issues. As such, they don't belong on the board's table.

It is not your responsibility to solve each parent's problem. By all means listen to them, but then make sure they know to contact the school staff to have their concerns addressed.

You owe the superintendent and staff the opportunity to respond and to support them if they are properly following board policy.

**2:13. Can I use email or social media to communicate with my board colleagues?**

School board members may use email to communicate with each other only if they are not using it to discuss board business or influence votes on issues in advance of a meeting or as a means of avoiding open meeting requirements. The same holds true with social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter. You should be particularly careful to avoid sequential email communications or social media conversations. While you may email or "direct message" another board member with a question, it is not appropriate to engage in online discussions. Nor is it appropriate for a majority of board members to email one another prior to a board meeting as this will likely affect the board's discussion at the meeting. It would also preclude the community from hearing the board debate important issues.

Be forewarned, if you are using a school email address, all emails can be requested by the public or media under the Freedom of Information Law. Your online communications may also become public as well, even with privacy settings set to "friends only." If you don't want your conversations to become front-page fodder, then don't have them online.

# 3 Time For Meetings

## **3:1. What should I expect at my first board meeting?**

If you have never participated in a board meeting, you may be overwhelmed at first. There are basic rules of parliamentary procedure that should be followed, but each board operates in its own way. There will be a meeting agenda and protocol.

Talk with the board president before attending your first meeting to ask basic questions such as:

- Where should I sit?
- How is the agenda set up?
- How long do the meetings usually take?
- When should I speak?

Ask for an orientation if you haven't yet had one. You should also receive your board packet containing the agenda and any supporting information several days before the meeting. Be sure you go through the material carefully and take the time to call the superintendent or board president to ask questions about anything you don't understand.

Remember, this is a meeting of the board of education. Staff and community members are invited to attend and participate. But this is your board's opportunity to conduct business. As such, the board should remain in control of the meeting at all times.

## **3:2. Where should I sit?**

Many boards have their rooms set up in a consistent configuration for board meetings, with name plates for each person at the table. Some boards have assigned seats that do not change from meeting to meeting. Other boards mix the seats up each time. And others do not have name tags or assigned seats. To feel comfortable prior to attending your first meeting, you might want to contact the board president and ask if there are any "traditions" that you should know about in advance of the meeting, including where you should sit.

## **3:3. What is considered an acceptable dress code at board meetings?**

Your board decides how formal or informal the meeting should be. A good rule of thumb, though, is to dress appropriately for a business meeting, as board meetings are business meetings. Remember also that the public may attend as well as the media. Your dress should reflect the professional approach that your school board takes in overseeing the operations of the school.

## **3:4. How does being on TV affect board members?**

Any time you are being filmed or are in the public eye, it is normal to be more self-conscious and nervous. Some, but not all, boards broadcast live or tape their meetings for later broadcast on a local cable access station. Naturally, the first time you participate in a taped board meeting you may find that you are less articulate and forget some of what you want to say. After you attend a few meetings, though, you should become comfortable and even forget the camera is on. Periodically reviewing a tape to see how the board is presenting itself is a good idea. Board members are often surprised by their unconscious body language that may or may not accurately communicate their feelings.

**3:5. How professionally must a board meeting be run? What is considered too lax or too formal?**

All board meetings need to follow some set of “rules of order,” often based on parliamentary procedure. The method that your board selects should be identified in a policy. Some boards elect to follow *Robert’s Rules of Order*. Other boards may specifically elect to not follow *Robert’s Rules*, but prefer a basic version of parliamentary procedure. Your school board can be as relaxed or as formal as it chooses, as long as a policy identifies the method you will employ, and this method does not violate the Open Meetings Law.

If your board elects to follow *Robert’s Rules of Order*, school boards must follow New York state law where it differs from *Robert’s Rules*. For example, under *Robert’s Rules*, action can be taken by a majority present or voting. Under state law, an action can only be taken with a vote by the majority of the entire board, regardless of vacancies or absences.

**3:6. How often does my board meet?**

The Education Law requires school boards to meet at least quarterly. Most boards, however, meet once or twice a month. Most boards are also required to hold an annual organizational meeting in July to elect and appoint officers for the coming year. Individual board members can also call a special meeting to address a particular item.

**3:7. What are the legal requirements for school board meetings?**

School boards must meet in compliance with the Open Meetings Law and make public records available consistent with the Freedom of Information Law. Basically, the Open Meetings Law requires that all school board meetings, including most committee meetings, be open to the public. Proper notice must be given to announce regularly scheduled meetings as well as special meetings. Minutes of the meetings must be taken and include specific information required by the Open Meetings Law.

**3:8. What is the Open Meetings Law?**

The basic intent of the state Open Meetings Law is to strengthen the right of all New York citizens to know what goes on in government by requiring public bodies to conduct nearly all business at open meetings. For more information about the Open Meetings Law, see *NYSSBA’s School Law, 35th Edition*, 14:21-14:26.

**3:9. How can a board have good exploratory discussions given the restrictions of the Open Meetings Law?**

The Open Meetings Law does not preclude good exploratory discussions. You may find it awkward to talk about some topics openly, but the board is obligated to conduct all discussions in open session except during the limited and narrow situations that permit executive sessions. All official board votes must be conducted in public at an official meeting of the board.

**3:10. Can board members meet socially or as a group at training conferences without violating the Open Meetings Law?**

Yes. Social gatherings and conferences, including retreats, are not considered school board meetings, even if a quorum is present, so long as the board members in attendance do not discuss school business or arrive at decisions about an issue.

**3:11. What role does the superintendent play at school board meetings?**

The superintendent is a key person at all school board meetings. The superintendent and president plan the meeting agenda together, but the superintendent makes certain the meeting room is set up as required and all tools that are needed are available, such as audio or visual recording equipment, easel, overhead projector, microphone, etc. Each item on the agenda is introduced by the president; however, for discussion or action items, the superintendent or a designee is often asked to explain the issue. The superintendent's opinion or recommendation should be solicited before a vote is taken.

**3:12. How do I get involved in board committees?**

The president is responsible for assigning board members to committees if your board uses them. If you have an interest in a particular committee, let the president know of your interest prior to identifying committee assignments. This is usually done at or shortly after the organizational meeting in July.

**3:13. Who is responsible for setting the agenda?**

The superintendent and board president are responsible for setting the agenda according to most boards' policies. In some districts, the vice president also participates in the pre-agenda meeting. This enables them to be prepared for the board meeting, as well as suggest topics to be covered. It is helpful to familiarize yourself with the policy on agenda-setting in your district.

**3:14. How can I get my issues onto the board agenda?**

The best way to get an item onto the board agenda is to follow your board policy and protocols – usually by contacting the board president, or some districts contacting either the board president or superintendent, prior to the pre-agenda meeting. If you have an issue that comes up after the agenda has been distributed, you may still be able to have it added to the agenda the night of the meeting, depending on your district's policies. Be careful not to spring any surprises, though. If a decision is not needed immediately, it is better to have the topic added to the agenda for a subsequent meeting, giving your colleagues sufficient time to prepare for discussion.

**3:15. Does public comment only pertain to agenda items?**

Although school board meetings must be open to the public, there is no requirement that the public be allowed to speak. This decision is left up to the individual board. If the board decides to allow public comment, as most do, it may set rules that restrict topics and the duration of each presentation. For more information on public comment periods, please see *School Law, 35th Edition*, 14:31-32.

**3:16. What if a member of the public complains at a board meeting?**

The grocery store isn't the only place board members will hear complaints. If an individual raises a complaint during a board-established public comment period, it's best to listen to the individual and then say that the board will take the issue under advisement. You can expect the board president to take control of this situation. Your board should refrain from engaging the individual in public debate during the meeting.

**3:17. What is a consent agenda?**

A consent agenda is an item listed on the regular agenda that groups routine items under one agenda heading. Routine items (such as paying bills, approving minutes of the last meeting, approving the agenda, etc.) can thus be approved by a single unified motion and vote of the board. The purpose of the consent agenda is to expedite business and streamline the meeting. There is no discussion of items on a consent agenda. If clarification of an item is necessary, then you should request that the item be removed from the consent agenda and considered by the board as a separate motion.

**3:18. Can I ask questions during the board meeting?**

Absolutely! Hopefully, you have taken time to review your materials in your board packet and have asked for any clarifications from the superintendent or board president prior to the meeting. Certainly as the discussion of an item ensues, other questions may occur to you that you have not previously asked.

**3:19. How may I ask questions at a board meeting and still adhere to the “no surprises” rule?**

If you think your question may be controversial, let the superintendent or president or both know ahead of time. They can help you decide if there is a better way to address the issue. If your question is to clarify an issue or if it is prompted by the discussion, then it is appropriate to ask it at the board meeting, as long as you don't broach topics properly discussed in executive session. If you have a question that may require collecting data or information not already in your board packet, you might let the superintendent know prior to the meeting so that he or she can come prepared to answer your questions.

**3:20. How is voting done at a board meeting?**

All votes taken at a school board meeting are a matter of public record and must be recorded in the minutes. Secret ballots are not permitted. In some situations, school boards must use roll call votes (where your name is called and you must state your vote) to take board action. If a roll call vote is not required, the vote must be taken in such a way that a person attending the meeting or reading the minutes can see how each board member voted. This can be done by roll call vote, show of hands or any other method by which each board member's vote is made known to the public.





**3:21. Do most school boards vote in a rotating order or consistent order, or doesn't it matter?**

The manner in which your meeting is run is determined by your school board. How you vote – in a rotating order or the same order each time – doesn't matter. A rotating order allows for a different member of the board to be the first and last to vote. The Open Meetings Act simply requires that the public must be able to determine how each board member voted.

**3:22. When does the board president vote?**

The board president votes each time a vote is called. Some people think that the board president only votes to break a tie as the chair generally does under *Robert's Rules of Order*. This is not true. The board president is expected to vote as a member of the board, in whatever sequence the board is following. Whether the vote is rotated each time or each member votes in the same sequence, the board president votes in the same way as the other board members.

**3:23. Can a school board member vote by proxy at regular or special board meetings?**

No, it is not permissible for a board member to vote by proxy. The Open Meetings Law requires that a board of education take action on a motion only when that motion is voted on by a majority of the members who sit on the board at a lawfully convened meeting.

**3:24. Can I abstain from a vote?**

Yes. Understand, however, that while an abstention means neither a "yes" or "no" vote, it can have the effect of a "no" vote in that it makes it more difficult for the proponents of a motion to win a needed majority. Our courts have ruled that board members cannot abstain from voting simply because they have philosophical problems with what they are being asked to vote upon, such as teacher tenure.

**3:25. What if I disagree with a board decision?**

If you don't agree with a decision that the board has made, you may express your position for the record. But it is still your responsibility to support the board's final decision. The time to disagree is during the discussion and your vote, which is public record. If you are asked about the decision, explain why the board voted the way that it did. You may say why and how you voted; however, you should not do it in a way that undermines the board's majority decision. As long as your comments remain factual and do not evaluate the board action, you are showing support for the decision. You should also direct questions to the board's spokesperson if one has been assigned to that particular issue.

**3:26. Can a board president offer motions?**

Normally the board president calls for the motions on agenda items. The president is a member of the board with the same voting rights, no more and no less. Although it is permissible for the president to offer a motion, it is preferable for other members of the board to offer and second a motion.

# 4

## Working With The Board

### 4:1. Should I ask for a mentor?

Many boards will have a designated person who mentors the new board member. Serving as mentor may be a defined responsibility for one of the officers, such as the vice president, or it may be a rotating position. A mentor will orient the new board member prior to his or her first board meeting. The mentor will also check in with the new board member periodically during the year to explain key activities, such as the process for evaluating the superintendent or the budgeting process. If you find your board does not have a person designated as mentor, you might suggest it, particularly if you prefer working this way.

### 4:2. When are issues serious enough to bring to the board?

You are the link between the school district and the community. You should be aware of issues confronting other districts that could become an issue in your district. You must also filter what you bring to the board for consideration to be sure it truly requires board attention. If you are hearing concerns from community members, you might want to ask other board members whether they're hearing the same concerns. An issue or activity that is counter to board policy should be brought to the attention of the president or the superintendent. When in doubt, feel free to discuss concerns with the superintendent and the president at any time. They can help decide if the board needs to be proactive about a particular issue.

### 4:3. What is the committee structure, function and role?

School boards operate in various ways. Some boards operate as a committee of the whole where all issues or activities are addressed by the entire board together. Members of boards that choose this method of operation generally receive the same information at the same time, and have the authority to deliberate on each issue. Other boards function with a well-defined committee structure where board members serve on several committees, and a committee first addresses issues or activities before the issue comes to the full board.

Board members are appointed to standing committees by the president and serve one-year terms. Ad hoc committees or task forces can also be established to deal with a one-time issue, and their length of term is often less than one year. A task force is a good approach to invite staff and community members to offer their insights and/or special expertise on a particular issue.

The committee structure works best when the board fully trusts all the board members and is willing to accept the work and recommendation of this smaller subset of the board. This does not mean the full board cannot ask questions and become informed prior to voting on a motion at a board meeting; in fact, all need to become informed in order to vote responsibly. Rehashing the entire work of the committee, though, defeats the committee's purpose. Boards that use a committee structure feel it saves time and allows each board member to delve more deeply into fewer areas. Some boards find they are able to deal with more issues with this approach, and each board meeting is more reasonable in length. Possible standing committees include: policy, finance, curriculum, public information, students and athletics, buildings and grounds, and personnel. None of these committees are required by law.

Keep in mind that committees or task forces report to the board, not to the community or media. They should not take on life of their own. One last point to be aware of is that committees can be subject to the Open Meetings Law requirements even when there is no quorum. See *School Law, 35th Edition*, 14:24, for further clarification.

#### **4:4. How can I survive the politics?**

Don't think of it as surviving politics; instead, view it as cultivating relationships. You are now part of the largest body of elected officials in the state. School governance is founded on the belief that a group of very different people representing various constituencies in their district can make better decisions than any one person alone could. That diversity is the board's strength.

With this in mind, it's best to be open-minded about the opinions of your fellow board members. Your goal should not be to convert them to your point of view, but rather to determine the best solution to an issue by working together to try and accommodate all views. You want the students to be the "winners" – not one board member or another.

#### **4:5. How can I best assimilate into the team?**

You may be joining a board with members who have been together for a number of years. As the "new kid on the block," it will take you time to become part of the team. Talk with your new colleagues. Respect their expertise. Listen and observe. Ask questions. Do your homework. Make recommendations. Time and experience will help you become a contributing member.

#### **4:6. What should a board do when it is not working well as a team?**

Open communication is critical to the proper functioning of your board. If you feel your board is not functioning well, it may be appropriate to suggest a workshop where the board reviews its ground rules that establish how it will function. If these ground rules are not effective, then consider adding to or clarifying them. Consider developing a specific set of guidelines or a board protocol or code of conduct. You may want to hire a facilitator to assist your board in improving the board's working relations. NYSSBA can help here with a Custom Board Retreat tailored to your board's specific situation.

#### **4:7. How do school boards make decisions?**

School board members are trustees, responsible for a trust established with the community. When making decisions, the board should seek the advice, where appropriate, of the district's administrators, teachers, employees, community members and experts such as the school district's legal counsel, financial advisor or auditor. With this information, the board can act only during legally called board meetings. Therefore, it is important that board members do their "homework" prior to attending a board meeting so that they can discuss the issue and be prepared to take action at the meeting.

#### **4:8. What is the most important consideration when making a decision?**

The primary consideration is the tangible impact the decision will have on your district's students. If you understand the facts and relevant data and you keep the needs of all students in mind when making decisions, you will undoubtedly make good decisions. Remember, your first responsibility is to every student in your district. Keeping this in mind will greatly assist you in making the right decisions despite pressures that certain constituent groups may exert.

**4:9. What can or can't school board members reveal to each other?**

School board members will learn information that is confidential and should not be discussed outside of a board's closed session with friends and family. This does not limit discussions among school board members at appropriate times in conformity with the Open Meetings Law. Board members should feel they can discuss issues among each other that are before and within the jurisdiction of the board.

**4:10. When I'm in the minority on the board, how can I influence the other board members to consider my point of view?**

You can practice patience, respect the majority, and develop your skills. Genuinely listen to your colleagues. Don't interrupt. Wait to be recognized, then make your point, but don't deliver a monologue. Argue from fact, not emotion. Concisely identify the problem or the potential opportunity. Use facts to make the point that it is a districtwide problem or opportunity. State your recommendation and explain how it helps attain a district goal. Finally, be prepared to compromise.

**4:11. Should the board of education set goals for itself each year?**

Yes, it is a good idea for a board to have goals for the effectiveness and efficiency of board operations and evaluate them on a yearly basis. In this way, you have a scheduled forum for discussing the proficiency of your board and how to improve it.

**4:12. Are there term limits for board members?**

No. However, the opportunity to make a change on the board occurs annually during the school board election when community members can choose to run for the board for seats whose terms have expired. A board with both new and seasoned members can provide the best of both worlds: new thinking is introduced while institutional history is maintained.



# 5 Building A Relationship With The Superintendent

## 5:1. What is the role of the superintendent relative to the school board?

Consider the superintendent the chief executive officer of the school district who reports to the board of directors – the school board. The superintendent is the only employee who is employed directly by the board. All other administrators, teachers and staff are hired by the superintendent, pending board approval. While the school board is responsible for setting the vision and goals for the district, it is the superintendent who implements the policies to attain the goals the board sets. The school board tells the superintendent what it wants done; the superintendent determines the best way to do it. The superintendent is also the board's principal advisor – identifying operational needs and recommending policies for board action.



## 5:2. How do I communicate with the superintendent?

You should feel free to communicate in any way you are comfortable. Usually the superintendent is more than willing to meet with you, discuss issues on the phone, or respond by e-mail. The important thing is not how to communicate, but that you do communicate with the superintendent, especially when you have questions about agenda items being discussed at your board meeting.

## 5:3. When and how does the board evaluate the superintendent?

The commissioner's regulations require the board to evaluate the superintendent annually according to procedures developed by the board in consultation with the superintendent.

The superintendent's evaluation should be a comprehensive and objective review of his or her performance during the preceding year. Whatever procedure the board chooses to use, it should be filed in the district office by September 10 of each year. The evaluation should be based on a consensus of the board's assessment of the superintendent's performance relative to the stated objectives for the position. The board should also consult the superintendent's contract to determine if it includes provisions related to evaluation.

The superintendent should be provided with a written copy of the board's evaluation and should discuss it with the board in executive session. NYSSBA offers a superintendent evaluation instrument.

**5:4. As a new board member, how should I approach the superintendent about making a change without being overly aggressive?**

You should feel free to contact the superintendent, or the board president, to discuss your idea and have it either put on the agenda or referred to committee.

If you are tactful and ask thoughtful questions about the way the board currently operates and why, you won't be perceived as pushy. If your suggestion relates to district operations, you should first ask yourself if you are getting too involved in the management of the school district. Even so, if you do it tactfully, the superintendent should not mind discussing how the school district functions and be open to new ideas.

**5:5. How do I gain the respect of the superintendent and other administrators?**

As with any relationship, you have to earn it. Respect the superintendent and district administrators. They're the education experts. Seek their advice. Listen to what they have to say. Ask thoughtful questions. Be open, honest and direct. Take time to learn about the school environment and issues that may be unique to your district prior to making suggestions and trying to effect change.



# 6 Basics Of School Law And Finance

## 6:1. What are the powers and duties of school boards?

Boards of education have no inherent powers and possess only those powers expressly delegated by statute or necessarily and reasonably implied therefrom. The general powers and duties of school boards are outlined in the Education Law, which assigns different powers and duties to different types of school districts, some of which are common to various types of districts and others of which are specific to a single type of district, for example, common, union free, central, small city and large city. See *School Law, 35th Edition*, 5:1 -5:48.

## 6:2. What are the primary legal functions of school boards?

School boards adopt policies, consistent with state and federal law, which govern the affairs of their respective school districts. In addition, school boards are responsible for hiring and evaluating a superintendent of schools as well as the employment and management of necessary professional and support staff. School boards also establish goals that the collective bargaining negotiations team will rely on to make specific proposals and implement negotiation strategies. School boards (except those in large cities) propose budgets for their communities to adopt which, in turn, funds the district's educational system. In addition, when it becomes necessary to bring proceedings to discipline tenured employees, school boards formally "prefer" such charges as set forth in Section 3020-a of the New York State Education Law. Finally, school boards ensure that all of its meetings are conducted in conformity with the State's Open Meetings Law.

## 6:3. What is the legal manner in which school boards make decisions?

School boards, acting in their corporate capacity, are required to transact its business in the same manner as the governing body of any corporation; that is, their acts are required to be authorized by resolutions or motions duly adopted or passed by a majority of the whole board. Therefore, unless the board has taken official action to designate an individual member as the representative of the board for a particular purpose, an individual board member has no more authority than any other qualified voter of the district.

## 6:4. What constitutes a conflict of interest on the part of school board members?

A conflict of interest exists when a school board member is in a position to benefit financially from a decision that members may make on behalf of the district. Board members should be aware of certain conflicts of interest so they don't jeopardize the reputation of the board or the district. The state's General Municipal Law defines those situations and relationships that are deemed to be a conflict of interest. See *School Law, 35th Edition*, 12:6-12:12.



**6:5. May school board members run for or hold an additional public office?**

Although there is no general prohibition against holding two or more public offices at the same time, there may be situations in which two public offices or positions of employment may be in conflict with each other. In such an instance, a school board member would be precluded from holding two such offices or positions simultaneously.

For example, one person cannot simultaneously hold two public offices or positions of employment if one office is subordinate to the other, such that the person would essentially be his or her own boss, or if the functions of the two positions are inherently inconsistent with each other, such as, serving simultaneously as the district's finance officer and as the auditor responsible for the integrity of the district's.

There must be a great likelihood of a division of loyalties or a conflict of duties between the offices, not merely a possibility that such complications may arise on occasion. The doctrine of compatibility of office does not prohibit an individual from being a candidate for election to a second office where that office is incompatible with the first, if he or she intends to resign from the first office if elected to the second. However, if there is a specific provision of law that makes two offices or positions incompatible, such a provision of law may expressly disqualify a person from even being a candidate for a second incompatible office or position. The failure of an individual to resign from an incompatible office prior to election as a school board member would require a school district to nullify the election of such individual to its school board.

Once elected and upon accepting the second office, an individual vacates the first office automatically. Even where two public offices or positions of employment are compatible, a situation may arise in which holding both offices creates a conflict of interest. If this occurs, the conflict can be avoided by declining to participate in the conflicted matter. See *School Law, 35th Edition*, 6:6-6:11.

**6:6. Must school boards fill vacancies on the board when they occur?**

The Education Law generally requires union free and central school districts to fill vacancies. Districts must either call a special meeting in which the taxpayers elect someone or the board appoints someone to fill the remainder of the unexpired term. See *School Law, 35th Edition*, 5:12-5:15.

**6:7. Are school district purchases subject to competitive bidding?**

Yes. All contracts for public works such as services, labor and construction worth in excess of \$50,000 and purchase contracts (commodities, materials, supplies and equipment), in excess of \$20,000 must be competitively bid.

**6:8. May a school board member be removed from office?**

Yes. A board member may be removed from office in one of two ways, either by the commissioner of education or the school board. A school board's authority to remove one of its members from office is separate and distinct from the commissioner of education's authority to remove a board member.

However, a board's decision to remove a school board member from office may be reviewed by the commissioner on appeal. A school board member removed from office may not be appointed or elected to any district office for a period of one year from the date of his or her removal. In general, the commissioner of education may remove a school board member from office for the willful violation or neglect of duty or the willful disobedience of a law or a decision, order, or regulation of the commissioner or rule of the Board of Regents.



However, the commissioner considers removal "a drastic remedy that should be taken only in extreme circumstances." To be considered willful, a school board member's actions must have been "intentional and with a wrongful purpose" to disregard a lawful duty or violate a legal requirement.

Generally, a board member who acts in good faith on the advice of counsel will not be found to have acted with the requisite willfulness to warrant removal from office.

The commissioner has removed a board member, for instance, for behavior that interfered with the board's ability to function in a case where that board member threatened and initiated a physical altercation with another board member during a board meeting. Such conduct breached the board member's "duty to engage in constructive discussion" on matters affecting the governance of the district. The disruptive behavior must interfere with the board's ability to function to warrant removal. For more information, see *School Law, 35th Edition*, 6:38-6:42.

#### **6:9. Must a school district adopt a code of conduct?**

Yes. All school districts, Boards Of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and county vocational extension boards must adopt and enforce a code of conduct for the maintenance of order on school property and at school functions. The code must govern the conduct of students, teachers, other school personnel, and visitors. The code must be reviewed annually and updated, if necessary, taking into consideration the effectiveness of the code, and the fairness and consistency of its administration.

It also must be filed with the commissioner of education, in a manner prescribed by the commissioner, no later than 30 days after adoption of the code or revisions to the code. For purposes of a code of conduct, the term "school property" means in or within any building, structure, athletic playing field, playground, parking lot or land contained within the real property boundary line of a public school. It also means in or on a school bus, whether owned and operated by a district or by a carrier a district contracts with for the transportation of its students. In connection with a code of conduct, the term "school function" refers to a school-sponsored or school-authorized extra-curricular event or activity regardless of where such event or activity takes place, including any event or activity that may take place in another state. Commissioner's regulations applicable to the development and adoption of a code of conduct incorporate relevant requirements imposed on school districts by New York's Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) that are also integrated within pertinent portions of this chapter. For additional information (see NYS Education Department, Amended Dignity for All Students Act Student Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Prevention and Intervention Guidance for Updating Codes of Conduct, (June 2013), at: [www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/documents/DASACodeofConductGuidance.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/documents/DASACodeofConductGuidance.pdf) and for further guidance on the implementation of other components of DASA is available at: [www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/)). Also see *School Law, 35th Edition*, 52:1-52:9.

#### **6:10. What are the "Sunshine Laws"?**

The state's Open Meetings Law and the Freedom of Information Law (also known as FOIL) are what we commonly refer to as the "Sunshine Laws" in New York. They have been accepted by both public and private businesses as the model for conducting meetings out in the open for all to see. They ensure that governments, including school boards, are accountable to the public that elects them. For more information, see *School Law, 35th Edition*, 14:21-14:26.

# 7

## Doing Your Homework

### 7:1. Is it important that I know every policy in the district's policy book?

Policies are the means by which a school board governs the school district; they guide its administration, staff, students, parents and the public, and they ensure accountability, consistency and fairness. While you can't expect to know every policy as you begin your board service, you'll find it helpful to read through the district policy manual at least once. You'll also find that you become familiar with many policies as you go through the year.

### 7:2. How can I build my skills and knowledge to become a better board member?

First, take advantage of NYSSBA's *School Board U* programs, including the New School Board Member Academy, the Annual Convention, and other regional workshops and webinars. You can find a schedule of NYSSBA's programs on the NYSSBA website at [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org) under Training Events. Local school boards associations also offer events. Second, read *On Board*, NYSSBA's newspaper, and other publications on school board service. Third, watch and listen to your colleagues.

### 7:3. Is board development mandatory?

Newly elected school board members are required to complete two kinds of mandatory training: new member orientation on the powers, functions and duties of boards of education, and six hours of fiscal oversight training. To satisfy the mandatory training requirement, NYSSBA offers the New School Board Member Academy regionally throughout the state.

### 7:4. Do I pay for these programs or does the district?

The district does. It is legal and appropriate for the district to pay for board members' attendance at conventions, conferences, workshops, webinars and other developmental events that enhance the board's knowledge and ability to do the district's business. Payment must be authorized by a board resolution adopted prior to attendance, or the board may delegate authorization to an executive officer. Because leaders are learners, it is prudent to include funds for board leadership training in the annual budget.

### 7:5. What services does NYSSBA offer?

NYSSBA provides advocacy, information, leadership development and custom services for member school boards to help students succeed. We advocate at local, state and federal levels – in government and in the courts. We provide information through our award-winning newspaper *On Board*, NYSSBA's newspaper, and other publications, our website ([www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)), and expert advice. We offer a wide array of leadership development activities, including our Annual Convention, New School Board Member Academy, and regional workshops and seminars on a variety of topics. We deliver special programs and services, including Custom Board Retreats, Custom Policy Manuals, Policy Updates and E-Policy. Visit our web site – [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org) – for an in depth look at how we can help your school board.

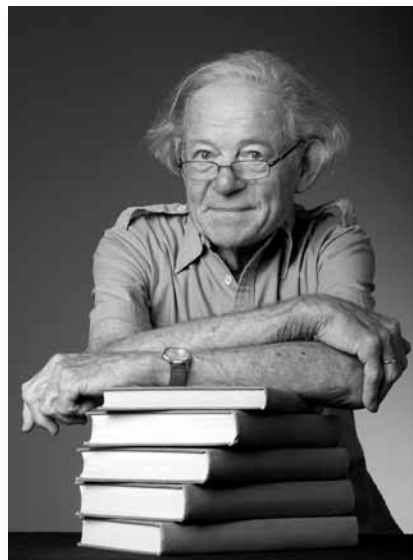
**7:6. How do I manage the volume of reading that I have as a school board member?**

Becoming a school board member is similar to going back to school, in that there are continuing education courses available, and there is “homework” you will have to prepare for board meetings. You’ll have a lot of reading to be fully prepared to discuss and vote on issues.

As every student learns, don’t wait until the last minute to do your homework. If you find you don’t have enough time to review materials prior to your board meetings, ask if it’s possible to get materials earlier. You’ll find as you become more experienced that the material becomes more manageable and easier to absorb.

**7:7. Where can I get comparative information relative to other schools?**

The State Education Department (SED) posts School District Report Cards online at [www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/reportcard/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/reportcard/). SED also issues annually the Chapter 655 Report, which can be found online at [www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/chapter655/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/chapter655/). For more information, visit NYSSBA’s web site at [www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org) or call us at 800-342-3360.



# 8

## Community Connections

### 8:1. With whom in the community should the board connect?

Community members are both the district's "owners" and its clients. They pay for the district's products and services and incorporate its graduates. Keep in mind that people support what they help create. If the district's stakeholders don't help to create the district's vision, goals, standards, plans, budgets, etc., they may feel no ownership of them.

Although your board may not be able to engage every single group and community member, you should identify and engage key internal and external stakeholders. These individuals and groups can help or hinder the district in achieving its vision and goals. Key internal stakeholders may include students, faculty, staff, administrators, volunteers, PTA/PTO, etc. Key external stakeholders may include parents, taxpayers, unions, public officials, business/civic/social/religious leaders, and representatives of higher education, health, social, and youth services organizations.

### 8:2. How should the board engage the community?

Engage key stakeholders by inviting and appointing them to participate in standing and ad hoc committees, advisory panels, focus groups, forums, and surveys to describe a vision for the district, set its goals, plan strategically, align resources with goals, and other actions offering them an opportunity to learn about public education and to influence governance decisions.

You can also engage community members by using a variety of means to inform them about the district, and to learn their interests, priorities, and concerns. Print and electronic media, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and face-to-face conversations all play important roles in this year-round district campaign to inform and to be informed. While accentuating the positive – student successes and district progress – don't neglect the negative. Be the first to let your community know about clouds looming on the horizon, and what you're doing to dispel them. Board members and the superintendent can be effective ambassadors for the district, especially by scheduling dialogues with a cross-section of your community – preferably in their neighborhoods.

Part of your community engagement strategy should also encourage all members of the community to visit their schools. Invite them to extracurricular activities, schedule grandparents' day, offer tours and briefings. In public education, familiarity often breeds support.

All these actions and more should be in your district's public engagement policy.

### 8:3. How do you bridge a gap between community and board?

Most gaps result from poor communication. Remember that communication is a team sport: both parties must have the opportunity to speak; both must actively listen. You should review your school board policy on community engagement. If none exists, develop one.

Check whether your policy provides a variety of methods for informing the community about the district. Does it use varied means of communication – print media (such as newsletters and board member or superintendent articles in local newspapers), electronic media (perhaps the district website), social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and oral delivery (such as board or superintendent talks with community organizations)? Does it provide various means for the public to inform the board and administration about its interests, priorities, and concerns? Such means include opportunities for participation in district committees and advisory panels, focus groups, polling and social media.

Does the policy seek to involve all elements of the community in district activities – e.g., encouraging volunteers, scheduling tours and briefings, inviting them to extracurricular events and special occasions? NYSSBA's Policy Department can help with policy updates.

Transparency is key. If your district operates separately from the community, gaps will remain. When you bring the community into their schools, and when you bring school information into the community, knowledge and trust will improve as the community senses that “your” schools are “their” schools — and that their schools are in your good hands.

#### **8:4. How can I make sure I represent community sentiment?**

No community is a single, uniform entity. Every community is comprised of various subgroups, such as parents and senior citizens. So, to represent your community, your first task is to identify the groups and subgroups that together compose your community. It's helpful to have a demographic and socioeconomic profile of community members served by your district. With it, you can check whether you really are aware of all community members, and whether your data and analysis truly reflect the total community.

Although individual board members may not be able to speak with everyone in your community about all issues, the board as a whole should be able to acquire valid input from a sound cross-section of community members. Varied approaches can be used. One is to include the public in committees, panels, and forums as mentioned above. Some boards find it useful to rotate their meetings among various locations in the community. A telephone hotline number, dedicated email address or social media tool where citizens can leave comments and questions can also be helpful. Of course, all board members should make opportunities to converse with people throughout the community about district education. Listening is key.

#### **8:5. How does one encourage school board service?**

Promoting school board service as a meaningful way to contribute to your community is an ongoing responsibility of school board members. Your actions, teamwork and enthusiasm for board service will influence people in your community to consider serving on your school board.

Attracting qualified and energetic candidates results from activities taking place year-round, not just at election time. By increasing community participation within the schools, you can identify community members who might be willing to consider school board service. Invite individuals to join ad hoc committees, to volunteer in the classroom, or simply to attend various events at school to strengthen their involvement. In this way, potential candidates can become more aware of the challenges facing your schools and the successes you have enjoyed.

See the *Running for the School Board* brochure. NYSSBA designed this pamphlet to provide a quick overview of school board service aimed at potential school board candidates.

#### **8:6. How can boards increase public participation and support at meetings?**

The first way to encourage public participation at meetings is to review how you treat the public when they come to your board meetings. A pleasant environment, a few social amenities and a procedure by which the public can address the board not only contributes to good decision making, but fosters good public attitudes about those decisions. The cardinal rule in building support for public education is to invite input and treat the public with respect. District policies and procedures should make people feel that they are a welcome part of the board meeting and resulting decisions.

## A Glossary of Education Terms

**Academic intervention services** – Services required of the school district to provide extra help to students who are not yet meeting the learning standards.

**Accountability** – Requiring school districts and states to ensure that schools meet their goals/standards.

**Adequate yearly progress** – The measurement established to determine the progress toward attaining proficiency in state assessments for all students and students in certain specified accountability groups in each public school, school district and charter school.

**Alternative assessment** – Any testing instrument other than standardized, multiple-choice questions, such as short-answer response and extended response, observation, individual or group performance assessment, and portfolios.

**Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR)** – An annual evaluation of teachers and principals that school boards and boards of cooperative education (BOCES) must provide, in accordance with law and the commissioner's regulations. In addition, each school board and BOCES must adopt an APPR plan to be filed in the district or BOCES office and made available for public review by September 10th of each year.

**Appropriation** – An authorization from the board of education or voters to make expenditures and to incur obligations for specific purposes.

**Assessed valuation** – The monetary worth of all property in the district as determined by the municipal assessor.

**Assessment** – Measuring or judging the learning and performance of students or teachers.

**Average daily attendance** – The aggregate days of attendance during a given reporting period divided by the number of days school is in session during that period. An important element in determining state aid.

**Basic Education Data System (BEDS)** – The State Education Department's system for collecting basic information on all the state's elementary and secondary schools.

**Benchmark** – A detailed description of a specific level of performance expected of students at particular ages, grades or developmental levels, typically used to monitor progress toward meeting performance goals within and across grade levels.

**Block grants** – Federal or state funding distributed in a lump sum directly to states or localities to administer and direct programs.

**BOCES** – Boards of Cooperative Educational Services that are formed by a voluntary cooperative association of school districts in a geographical area that band together to provide services, such as special education and vocational programs, to their component local school districts.

**BOCES aid** – State funds to reimburse a district for part of the cost of BOCES services.

**Categorical aid** – State or federal aid which is intended to finance or reimburse a specific category of instructional or support programs or to aid a particular target group of pupils.

**Charter school** – An "independent and autonomous public school" established under state charter school law, eligible for funding from both private and public local, state and federal monies.

**Cohort** – A group of students who share the same statistical or demographic characteristic, such as grade level.

**Commissioner of Education** – The executive appointed by the Board of Regents to enforce laws and policies relating to the state education system.

**Common Core Learning Standards** – A set of national standards adopted by the New York State Board of Regents that define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers in order to graduate from high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.

**Contingency budget** – The budget adopted by the board of education after a proposed budget is defeated.

**Contracts for Excellence** – A state program that requires school districts receiving an annual state aid increase of \$15 million or 10 percent to promise to use the funds to support new programs and new initiatives demonstrated to improve student achievement, such as reducing class size, increasing student time on task, and improving teacher quality initiatives.

**Cooperative service application (Co-Ser)** – A BOCES request to the commissioner of education for approval to operate a service.

**Core curriculum** – The body of knowledge that all students are expected to learn.

**Data-driven (or data-based) decision making** – Analyzing varied forms of data to identify educational strengths and/or weaknesses to plan for and implement improvements in student achievement as well as monitoring trends, and using this information to make decisions about the effectiveness of continuation or changes in district practices, curriculum, programs, procedures and policies.

**Deficit** – The amount by which total expenditures exceed total revenues for the fiscal year.

**Demographic data** – Information describing the students and citizens of a school district; usually includes characteristics such as race, age, gender, income, educational level and profession.

**Distance learning** – A mode of delivering education and instruction via the internet without a student physically attending the class.

**Equalization rate** – The percentage of full value at which taxable real property in a county, city, town or village is assessed as determined by the New York State Board of Real Property Services.

**Executive session** – A portion of the school board meeting that is not open to the public.

**Foundation aid** – A state aid formula which provides that the majority of school aid is distributed by a clear and predictable stream of funding.

**Freedom of Information Law (FOIL)** – A law that gives the public access to government records, as a way to foster increased understanding of and participation in government. The law provides a list of the kinds of records that are exempted. Part of New York's Sunshine Laws; see also Open Meetings Law.

**Fund balance** – The reserves districts have to protect education programs and avoid property tax spikes when state aid is reduced or unexpected contingencies occur.

**GASB** – Governmental Accounting Standards Board, which sets the accounting rules for all governmental entities, including school districts.

**Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA)** – A reduction in state education aid used to decrease the annual state budget deficit.

**Growth model** – An accountability system that tracks student achievement over time.

**Inclusion** – Educating students with disabilities as appropriate in a regular classroom setting along with students without disabilities.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP)** – A written statement outlining the plan for providing an educational program for a disabled student based on the unique needs of that student.

**Learning standards** – The level of knowledge, skills and understanding that students should be able to demonstrate over time as a result of instruction or experience. There are two types of standards, according to the State Education Department: *content standards* (what children should know, understand and be able to do as a result of their schooling) and *performance standards* (acceptable levels of student achievement).

**Magnet school** – A school that offers enriched curriculum in one or more subject areas; sometimes used as a means of desegregation.

**Open Meetings Law** – A law that governs the conduct of board of education meetings. Part of New York's Sunshine Laws; see also Freedom of Information Law.

**Parliamentary procedure** – A system of organizing a meeting to ensure an orderly, democratic process; Robert's Rule of Order is most commonly used in New York.

**Performance-based assessment** – Tests which measure students' abilities to perform tasks and solve problems rather than choosing answers from a number of possibilities.

**Rubric** – Used to evaluate student or teacher performance on specific tasks that cannot be scored by machine; specific descriptions, usually three or four, of what a particular task looks like at several different levels of performance.

**Schools Under Registration Review (SURR)** – Schools identified by the commissioner of education as being farthest from meeting state benchmarks for measuring student performance.

**Tenure** – Guaranteed job security, granted by state law to teachers after three years of satisfactory service, which cannot be rescinded except for specified reasons.

**Title I** – A federal aid program to provide schools with a high percentage of low income families with additional funds to improve academic achievement.

**Triborough** – An amendment to the Taylor Law, part of the Civil Service Law, that requires the terms of an expired collective bargaining agreement to remain in effect until a new one is negotiated.

**Value-added assessment** – A type of growth model that focuses on the gains made year to year by individual students, their schools and districts.

**Voucher** – A way to allocate and distribute education money directly to parents to pay for their children's education in a public or private school.

**Wicks Law** – A section of the General Municipal Law that requires school districts to award separate contracts for plumbing, heating/air/ventilation and electrical work.



## Common Acronyms

**ADA** – Average Daily Attendance

**ADD/ADHD** – Attention Deficit Disorder/  
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity  
Disorder

**AED** – Automated External Defibrillators

**AFT** – American Federation of Teachers

**AGE** – Average Grade Enrollment

**AIS** – Academic Intervention Services

**AP Program** – Advanced Placement Program

**APPR** - Annual Professional Performance Review

**ASBO** – Association of School Business Officials

**ASCD** – Association for Supervision and  
Curriculum Development

**AYP** – Adequate Yearly Progress

**BEDS** – Basic Educational Data System

**BOCES** – Boards of Cooperative Educational  
Services

**C4E** – Contracts for Excellence

**CAR** – Comprehensive Assessment Report

**CASDA** – Capital Area School Development  
Association

**CFE** – Campaign for Fiscal Equity

**CIMS** – Comprehensive Instructional  
Management System

**CIPA** – Children’s Internet Protection Act

**COPE** – Cooperative Organization for  
Public Education

**CPSE** – Committee on Preschool Special Education

**CRT** – Criterion Referenced Test

**CSE** – Committee on Special Education

**CTE** – Career and Technical Education

**DARE** – Drug Abuse Resistance Education

**DDDM** – Data Driven Decision Making

**ECS** – Education Commission of the States

**ELA** – English Language Arts

**ELL** – English Language Learners

**EPIC** – Effective Parenting Information  
for Children

**ERIC** – Educational Resources Information Center

**ERSS** – Educationally Related Support Services

**ESEA** – Elementary and Secondary Education Act

**ESL** – English as a Second Language

ETS – Educational Testing Service	NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress
FAPE – Free Appropriate Public Education	NAESP – National Association of Elementary School Principals
FERPA – Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act	NAPT – National Association for Pupil Transportation
FOIL – Freedom of Information Law	NASBE – National Association of State Boards of Education
FTE – Full Time Equivalent	NASSP – National Association of Secondary School Principals
GAO – General Accounting Office	NBPTS – National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
GASB – Governmental Accounting Standards Board	NCATE – National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education
GEA – Gap Elimination Adjustment	NCES – National Center for Education Statistics
GED – General Education Diploma	NCLB – No Child Left Behind Act
HQT – Highly Qualified Teachers	NEA – National Education Association
IDA – Industrial Development Agency	NSBA – National School Boards Association
IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	NYCOM – New York State Conference of Mayors & Other Municipal Officials
IEP – Individualized Education Program	NYCRR – New York Commissioner’s Rules and Regulations
K-16 – Kindergarten-16	NYLA – New York Library Association
LEA – Local Education Agency	NYSAA – New York State Alternate Assessment Program
LEP – Limited English Proficiency	
LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning	
LOTE – Language Other Than English	
LRE – Least Restricted Environment	

NYSAP – New York State Assessment Program	SEA – State Education Agency
NYSTCS – New York State Teacher Certification Examination Program	SED – State Education Department
OCR – Office for Civil Rights, part of US Department of Education	SES – Supplemental Educational Services
OML – Open Meetings Law	SINI – School In Need of Improvement
PAC – Political Action Committee	SRAP – School Requiring Academic Progress
PCEN – Pupils with Compensatory Education Needs	ST-3 – School District Annual Financial Report
PILOT – Payment In Lieu Of Taxes	STAR – School Tax Relief
PINS – Persons In Need of Supervision	STEM – Science Technology Engineering Math
PLA – Project Labor Agreement	STW – School-to-Work
Project SAVE – Safe Schools Against Violence in Education	SURR Schools – Schools Under Registration Review
RCT – Regents Competency Test	SWD – Student with Disability “Classified”
REFIT – Reform Educational Financing Inequities Today	TIMSS – Third International Mathematics and Science Study
RIC – Regional Information Center	TRS – Teachers Retirement System
RTI – Response to Intervention	UFSD – Union Free School District
SARA – State Archives & Records Administration	UFT – United Federation of Teachers
SAT – Standardized Assessment Test	UPK – Universal Pre-Kindergarten
SCAA – State Communities Aid Association	USDOE – U.S. Department of Education
	YRE –Year-Round Education

## Acronyms of Well-Known Organizations

<b>AASA</b> – American Association of School Administrators	<b>NBPTS</b> – National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
<b>AFT</b> – American Federation of Teachers	<b>NSBA</b> – National School Boards Association
<b>ASCD</b> – Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	<b>NYCOM</b> – New York State Conference of Mayors & Other Municipal Officials
<b>ASBO</b> – Association of School Business Officials	<b>NYLA</b> – New York Library Association
<b>CFE</b> – Campaign for Fiscal Equity	<b>NYSASBO</b> – New York State Association of School Business Officials
<b>CASDA</b> – Capital Area School Development Association	<b>NYSCOSS</b> – New York State Council of School Superintendents (The Council)
<b>COPE</b> – Cooperative Organization for Public Education	<b>NYSED or SED</b> – New York State Education Department
<b>ECB</b> – Educational Conference Board	<b>NYSGFOA</b> – New York State Government Finance Officers Association
<b>ECS</b> – Education Commission of the States	<b>NYSMSA</b> – New York State Middle Schools Association
<b>ERIC</b> – Educational Resources Information Center	<b>NYSPTA</b> – New York State Parent-Teacher Association
<b>ETS</b> – Educational Testing Service	<b>NYSSBA</b> – New York State School Boards Association
<b>NAESP</b> – National Association of Elementary School Principals	<b>NYSUT</b> – New York State United Teachers
<b>NAPT</b> – National Association for Pupil Transportation	<b>PERB</b> – Public Employment Relations Board
<b>NASBE</b> – National Association of State Boards of Education	<b>REFIT</b> – Reform Educational Financing Inequities Today
<b>NASSP</b> – National Association of Secondary School Principals	<b>SAANYS</b> – School Administrators Association of New York State
<b>NCATE</b> – National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education	<b>USDOE</b> – U.S. Department of Education
<b>NCES</b> – National Center for Education Statistics	

## Notes



24 Century Hill Drive • Suite 200  
Latham, NY 12110  
(518) 783-0200 • (800) 342-3360  
Fax (518) 783-0211  
[www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)