Recruiting School Board Candidates

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More than 4,000 men and women volunteer to serve as school board members for the 600+ public school districts in Michigan. While many board members serve multiple terms, the turnover rate is considerable. There are nearly 700 new members elected every even year. That’s why it’s important for the school board to be forward looking, long before the candidate petition process begins.

The Michigan Association of School Boards has prepared this publication to help school districts develop an effective process for recruiting prospective school board candidates. This material is intended to support, not replace, the work of the local school board in the ongoing process of identifying, recruiting and mentoring future and new school board candidates. This material includes the following information:

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The mission of the Michigan Association of School Boards is to provide quality educational leadership services to all Michigan boards of education, and to advocate for student achievement and public education.
Serving on American school boards is a vital and important aspect of our democracy. The governance of our local school boards by democratically elected men and women remains at the heart of our democracy and public education system. Every two years board members are elected by voters to serve four- or six-year terms on local school boards. These elected members are charged to sit in trust for all of their local communities. Our public schools are the ties that bind this diverse and pluralistic society into a nation. Only our public schools are prepared to serve, without reservation, all students in America and continue to enable Americans to be active participants in one of the world’s oldest existing democracy.

So what is the “job description” of a school board member? What does he or she actually do? To understand what a school board member does also requires knowledge of what a school board members does not do: no single board member has any power outside of a legally called school board meeting. When a legally called school board meeting occurs, the school board sits in trust for its entire local community. Subject to some exceptions, a school board has all powers granted by the Michigan School Code, along with those that are necessary for the maintenance and development of the schools that the board controls.

The board must also adopt and enforce all necessary rules for the management and governance of its school district. The board, however, can and does delegate many of its powers and duties to the superintendent through its board policies. With limited exceptions, each board must employ a superintendent who shall have charge of the school district’s administration.

Michigan School Code directs that a school board shall make all decisions pertaining to the employment of the superintendent and direct through policy the superintendent in his or her charge of the administration of the school district. When a school board delegates its powers and duties in this way, it should ensure that the superintendent understands the board’s policy directives and must be prepared to support the superintendent’s recommendations. The school board will monitor this process as it evaluates the superintendent’s performance.

In addition to duties enumerated in the Michigan School Code, good governance imposes the following responsibilities on the board:

1. The board clarifies the district’s purpose
2. The board connects with the community
3. The board employs a superintendent
4. The board delegates authority
5. The board monitors performance
6. The board takes responsibility for itself

For more information on these responsibilities, please refer to the Board Duties Under the Revised School Code, which is available for purchase in our Online Store at www.masb.org.
Why Board Members Serve

When MASB asked current Michigan school board members why they serve on school boards, they gave many reasons:

- “I can make a difference for the children of our district.”
- “I serve to be fully accountable for what our school provides and doesn’t provide.”
- “I serve to be a voice in my community.”
- “I serve because I want to see my district not only survive, but thrive in these hard economic times.”
- “I serve to shape the lives of our future.”
- “I serve, not only for the children, but for the taxpayers and the community. Good schools lead to good jobs and a secure community.”
- “I serve because I like the challenge of finding ways to save money.”

School board members are important!

More than 1.5 million Michigan schoolchildren enrolled in public schools depend on school board members who understand the importance of public education and are willing to serve their communities and sit in trust for those interests.
While most school boards will be comprised of individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, individual school board members can be more effective when they exhibit:

- **A thoughtful, sincere and deliberate approach to the position.** The effective school board member seeks first to understand the issues, knowing that their decisions have a tremendous impact on their communities.

- **A constructive attitude toward teamwork.** The effective school board member understands that he/she has no legal authority as an individual. It's only around the board table that decisions are made and a board member exercises any authority.

- **The willingness to spend the time necessary to be well-informed on the issues** coming before the local board and to remain reasonably knowledgeable about local, state, national and global education.

- **The ability to represent the entire community** and not surrender to special interest or partisan political groups. The “entire community” includes citizens who may not have a direct relationship with its public schools.

- **The temperament to respond accordingly and appropriately through challenging events.** Board membership is an immense responsibility, so the public actions and words of its members will impact the district, its image and integrity.

- **The willingness to listen thoughtfully to others.** Although board members can't be expected to agree with everything colleagues and constituents say, they’re expected to listen respectfully to their opinions and concerns.

- **The willingness to express one’s own opinion and participate in discussions openly and honestly** while encouraging and respecting the free expression of opinion by colleagues.

- **The maturity to respect the confidentiality of privileged information** and to take no private action that would compromise the board or administration.

- **The willingness to model continuous learning** by taking advantage of professional development opportunities, such as those offered by state and national school board associations.

- **The willingness to abide by and support the board operating procedures** as adopted by the board.

- **The ability to identify, recommend and encourage prospective candidates** and mentor new board members to become effective school leaders.
Maintaining school board excellence in governance is an important concern for any community. Lay the groundwork for an effective school board candidate recruitment strategy by considering:

- **Great boards attract great people.** Board members can make board service more attractive by focusing their attention on ensuring their boards are effective organizations. Highly qualified candidates will want to be on boards that are well run, and that focus on their primary work of clarifying the district purpose, direction and goals, and monitoring district performance.

- **Identify the gaps.** Assess what attributes are already present on the board, and where the gaps are. What attributes are needed to achieve your objectives? What skills do current board members offer in these areas? What skills will depart with the retiring board member(s)? Where are the gaps?

- **Focus on diversity.** If you want to bring in new perspectives and voices, think about whether your board composition really reflects the community it represents. If you’re dealing with the whole community, it’s only reasonable to have representation from across the community. Should you be including younger people? Older people? People of color, language or different ethnic background? Or consider diversifying by geographic, economic and education criteria.

- **Think broadly.** Your next great board member might come from:
  - Citizen work groups, including advisory committees, councils and task forces
  - Members of professional and trade associations related to your organization
  - Donors and strong school financial supporters
  - Local business owners
  - School volunteers
  - Members of volunteer/service organizations
  - Staff or associates of other education providers, institutions and entities
  - Members of multicultural organizations
  - Members of local religious institutions
  - Alumni

- **Identify and contact people who care deeply about the district’s mission.** These people shouldn’t only have the required skills but should also care enough about the district’s mission to make a significant investment of their valuable time.

- **Be positive.** There’s no greater way to promote board service than by recognizing its altruistic benefits, i.e., the value of the board’s role, the importance of creating and leaving a legacy, and the benefits of good schools to the community. Your boards can do this at board meetings, at community functions, in district newsletters and websites, and other venues.

- **Turn foes into friends.** Although not every opposition leader wants to be or should be a board member, consider prospects from well-spoken activists who are eager and able to speak to community issues and public policy debate.
• Get them to come to you. Let the community know about vacancies or create opportunities to learn about board service by:
  • Advertising your mid-term vacancies or retiring terms with the fact you’re looking for new board members.
  • Holding information days where others can learn about board service.
  • Creating and distributing a board newsletter.
  • Developing and distributing brochures about the board.
  • Preparing talking points for board member presentations to local clubs and events.

• Encourage prospective candidates to attend board meetings. Seeing is believing and potential candidates have an excellent learning opportunity by attending board meetings, committees and other related events where board activity and interaction is on display. Invite or encourage their attendance, where candidates can observe board processes and the “big picture” of the governance role, board/staff relations, etc.

• Create opportunities for citizen involvement. Some boards have citizen advisory committees, councils or task forces that provide advice and research when needed. These citizen work groups offer excellent service and learning opportunities for prospective board members. This work enables the existing board to see potential candidates in action and at the same time exposes them to the concept of the board’s work. It allows both the individual and the board to evaluate their potential at a relatively low risk.

• Think ongoing process. Keep the recruitment and prospecting process active throughout the year, even when there are no current vacancies. Remember, time goes by fast between board elections, so don’t wait for a controversy to “grow” a candidate. While legitimate candidates may emerge from the public over a controversial issue or highly debated board decision, chances are these could be “single-issue” prospects whose motive for running may be to champion a cause or challenge the board’s authority in order to change its decision. The result is often a split board and frustrated new board members.
Talking With Potential Candidates

After identifying a potential candidate with the abilities or skills that would be suited for school board service, how do you ask someone to run for the school board? The best advice is to be forthright and completely honest about the demands and rewards of the job. Stating the benefits is the right place to start. But be prepared to address a prospective candidate’s concerns and questions about board service. Here are some examples of how to handle such issues:

- Yes, it takes a lot of study to become an effective board member. HOWEVER, everything you learn will prove helpful in other aspects of your life. School board membership will make you a more rounded person and a more effective citizen. Fortunately, there’s a lot of help available—orientations, professional development, expert advice and resources, and most importantly, a chance to network with colleagues and veterans.

- Yes, the board is confronted with some difficult and controversial decisions that can generate a lot of emotion. HOWEVER, nothing worthwhile comes easy. You’ll feel good about making a substantial contribution to your schools and community.

- Yes, board members occasionally encounter people who, with special interests, causes or even personal grudges, tend to use their elected positions to grandstand or push personal agendas. HOWEVER, most people involved in public education are at the high end of the spectrum. In addition, there’s a special bond that grows among members of a school board who go through tough times together; they learn to see life’s routine problems in a broader light and perhaps to take themselves a little less seriously.

- Yes, serving on a school board does take time and energy. HOWEVER, the amount of time devoted to board work varies widely among boards and board members. Most board members find they must change their schedules in some way, but it’s usually a change for the better. Board service gives the individual a real sense of purpose.

- Yes, it’s true that an individual board member has no authority to hire a coach, throw out a library book or buy new equipment for the chemistry lab. HOWEVER, the board member has one-seventh of the votes and is free to offer evidence and persuasive arguments to the other six members. It’s a democratic process that’s more cumbersome than a dictatorship would be, but it’s good for everyone in the long run.
• Yes, you may not have children currently enrolled in the district. HOWEVER, it’s important that all of the voices in the community be heard. All district residents have a stake in the success of our schools. Having the perspective of a nonparent on the board can be extremely useful as the board engages in an ongoing conversation with the community regarding the district’s mission, vision and goals.

• Yes, the school board is heavily dependent upon the knowledge and judgment of the superintendent, and we’d be lost without such a person. HOWEVER, the board hires the superintendent, draws up the job description, and adopts the policies that specify what the district is expected to accomplish and defines operating parameters. The amount of authority and flexibility delegated to the superintendent is directly proportionate to the responsibilities associated with the job. The school board still holds itself accountable to the public, so there’s no cop-out.

There are many other issues and questions that a prospective candidate might raise, of course. The goal should be to find a candidate who will approach board membership with a clear understanding of the demands and expectations—plus a constructive attitude toward the challenge. If you focus on the opportunities and not just the obstacles, you should be able to have a productive conversation that emphasizes the benefits and value of school board service.
With few exceptions, Michigan school boards consist of seven members elected to serve terms of four or six years, as provided by the district’s bylaws. Elections are held biennially on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even years. Check with your board of education office for the exact election date for your district.

Terms of members are staggered so there are usually three or four seats contested at each biennial election. Vacancies caused by death or resignation are filled by appointment (by the remaining board members) until the next election.

A school board member must be, on the date of the election, an U.S. citizen; at least 18 years of age; a resident of Michigan for at least 30 days; a resident of the school district on or before the 30th day prior to the date of the election and a registered voter in the school district where he or she is a candidate.

Candidates have the option of paying a nonrefundable filing fee of $100 to the school district filing official instead of filing a nominating petition. If so chosen, prospective candidates may begin to circulate nominating petitions for signatures 180 days prior to the date of filing. Nominating petitions then must be filed no later than 4 p.m. on the 12th Tuesday preceding the date of the election.

A candidate for election to a local school board or an intermediate school board must file two copies of an Affidavit of Identity. The affidavit must be a written document, signed and sworn before a person having authority to administer an oath, such as a notary public. The affidavit must then be filed together with the candidates filing fee or nominating petitions at the same office where the fee or nominating petitions are filed. Candidates who fail to file an Affidavit of Identity are ineligible to appear on the ballot.

While some candidates may know immediately that they will file papers to run for the school board, others may hesitate in an attempt to determine the level of interest or support for such a run, or to see who else may be running for the same seats. That six-month window may be the perfect opportunity to approach a qualified but hesitant candidate. Their decision, in fact, may hinge on such encouragement and interest. But what about those potential candidates who have not yet thought about school board service? When is it appropriate to approach them? As the other material in this document indicates, the process of effective recruiting should be ongoing, i.e., throughout the school year and with an eye on the entire community. Taking advantage of the occasions that bring together qualified prospective candidates and incumbent board members requires a steady “radar” for such moments.
Additional Resources

The Michigan Association of School Boards has a variety of print materials that support school board governance and school board service. Materials can be found online through the MASB Online Store at www.masb.org.

**Candidate's Guide to School Board Elections**
The 2016 edition is an indispensable reference on school board elections. This guide will help all candidates understand Michigan election law and the Campaign Finance Act.

**Surviving Your First Year**
A handbook for Michigan's newly elected school trustees, this guide answers the most frequently asked questions novices to the board table have about policy, communications, meeting agendas and much more.

**Becoming a Better Board Member**
Newly expanded and updated for the 21st century, this school decisionmakers “bible” has been revised to incorporate Key Work of School Boards concepts and to reflect new governance realities. Chapters address learning board service; exercising leadership; working with the superintendent and staff; understanding collective bargaining, education law, and school finance; communicating with your colleagues and the public; and contemporary issues in education—including charters, vouchers and privatization; student demographics; wellness; school construction and design; education technology; and school security.

**Parliamentary Procedure At-a-Glance**
Every school board meeting must follow parliamentary procedure. This handbook offers an easy flip-tab format for finding quick answers during meetings to procedural questions.

**Roberts Rules in Plain English**
A great beginner’s book, simple to read, easy to understand. Explains the very basic rules of parliamentary procedure, showing how to run a meeting effectively, how to prepare an agenda and how to write resolutions. Includes sample dialogue and exchanges, plus outlines and charts.

**So You Want to Be a School Board Member?**
Dedicated, informed school board members are key to school improvement and success. This practical book explains the role of the board member, from election to taking office. Potential board members are introduced to timely issues they’re likely to face, including school violence, high-stake testing, curriculum reform and school choice. In addition to an overview of issues, the author examines the relational aspect of the job—working with the superintendent, school employees and the community. All superintendents should buy this book for potential board members, and the readable style will attract anyone interested in the job.

**Open Meetings Guide**
The 11th edition has been updated to inform school officials of the latest legal developments involving the Open Meetings Act. There have been a number of court cases that have provided new interpretations of the OMA requirements. These cases address issues relating to committee meetings, illegal meetings and recovering attorney fees for violations. Additionally, this new edition includes a more in-depth review of the legal parameters of administering public comment at board meetings.