

School Board Member's Approach to the Job

The 15 items below serve as an informal job description for school board members. They outline the responsibilities and duties of a board of education member whose job is to serve in trust for the community.

A School Board Member's Approach to the Job

1. Be prepared to participate responsibly. Do your homework, come prepared to work, remember that sometimes the work is to listen, agree and disagree as your values dictate, and accept that the group decision is legitimate even if it's not your personal choice. It is not acceptable to have opinions and not express them.
2. Remember that your identity is with the community, not the staff. It's easy to identify with staff as you probably will have more discussions with them about issues. But you must remember that your job is to serve in trust for the community.
3. Represent the community, not a single constituency. You will understand and/or identify with certain constituencies (parents, neighborhoods or communities, special ed, etc.), but you must remember that being a board member means serving in trust for the entire community. There's no way seven people can provide a spokesperson for every constituency or legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. You can be from a constituency, but you must not let yourself represent it.
4. Be responsible for group behavior and productivity. You are responsible for not only yourself but the group. If the group doesn't do its job, meddles in administration, or breaks its own rules, you personally share that responsibility.
5. Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them. You are obligated to express your honest opinions on issues, and so are each of the other board members. Encourage your colleagues to speak their opinions and listen to them carefully and respectfully. But don't allow yourself to be intimidated by louder or more insistent board members.

6. Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom. If you have special expertise (law, accounting, construction, etc.) remember that you are not personally responsible for decisions relating to that area. Use your expertise to help inform your colleagues (i.e., help them understand what fiscal health looks like vs. fiscal jeopardy) but don't assume sole responsibility for those decisions. Remember that you are not on the board to help the staff or even advise them with your special expertise. Your job as a board member is to govern. If you wish to offer your help as an expert, make sure that all parties know you are acting as a volunteer, not a board member, and remember that asking for or accepting your help is a staff prerogative, not yours.
7. Be aware of community and staff perceptions of the board. If the board is perceived as being unethical, dishonest, secretive, or self-serving, whether justified or not, that will become reality for the community and staff. Consider how stakeholders might interpret your behaviors and decisions. Then act accordingly.
8. Think upward and outward more than downward and inward. There is a great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the district should make in the larger world. This requires ignoring the minutiae or details in order to examine, question, and define the big picture. The latter is a daunting and awesome task, but it's board work — governance!
9. Don't tolerate putting off the big issues forever. As daunting and awesome as the big decisions are, they are the board's to make. (What are our core values and beliefs about education in our community? Based on those, where do we put our resources?) If you don't, you're abdicating your authority. Your inaction is a decision of sorts and if you don't make it, someone else will by default.
10. Support the board's final choice. No matter which way you voted, you are obligated to support the board in its decision. This doesn't mean you have to pretend to agree with it. You may maintain the integrity of your dissent. What you support is the legitimacy of the choice even though you don't agree.
11. Don't mistake form for substance. Don't confuse having financial reports for having sound finances or having a public relations committee for having good public relations. Beware of the trap of having procedures rather than substance.
12. Don't expect agendas to be built on your interests. The board's agenda should not be a laundry list of individual members' interests but a plan for taking care of the governance of the district. Being a community trustee is very different from seeing the organization as your personal possession. The board's job must be designed to ensure that the values of the entire community are faithfully served in the determination of what the district should accomplish.

13. Squelch your individual points of view during monitoring. Your own values count when the board is creating policies. But when you monitor the performance of the superintendent or the success of programs, you must refer to the criteria the whole board decided, not what your opinion was about those criteria. And as you review the criteria, your monitoring should not be based on whether things were done the way you would have done them, but whether they were a reasonable interpretation of the board's policy.
14. Obsess about ends. Keep the conversation focused on values, mission, vision, and goals. Talk with other board members, staff, and the public about these matters first and foremost.
15. Continuously ask of yourself and the board, "Is this board work?" The deliberations of the board must add value. The board must deal with fundamental, long-term issues that require the wisdom and decision-making of a group of seven people who look at the whole — not just at pieces or the issue of the day.

Illinois Association of School Boards

2921 Baker Drive,
Springfield, Illinois 62703-5929
(217) 528-9688

One Imperial Place, 1 East 22nd Street, Suite 310,
Lombard, Illinois 60148
(630) 629-3776

The vision of the Illinois Association of School Boards is excellence in local school board governance supporting quality public education.

Although the IASB website strives to provide accurate and authoritative information, the Illinois Association of School Boards does not guarantee or warranty the accuracy or quality of information contained herein.