

The Role of the Board

Citizen oversight of local government is the cornerstone of democracy in the United States. The role of the trustees who sit on locally elected school boards is to ensure that school districts are responsive to the values, beliefs and priorities of their communities. Boards fulfill this role by performing five major responsibilities. These are setting direction; establishing an effective and efficient structure; providing support; ensuring accountability; and providing community leadership as advocates for children, the school district and public schools.

These five responsibilities represent core functions that are so fundamental to a school system's accountability to the public that they can only be performed by an elected governing body. Authority is granted to the board as a whole, not each member individually. Therefore, board members fulfill these responsibilities by working together as a governance team with the superintendent to make decisions that will best serve all the students in the community.

In more detail, boards govern their schools by:

Setting the direction for the community's schools

Of all the roles and responsibilities of governing boards, none is more central to the purpose of local public school governance than ensuring that a long-term vision is established for the school system. The vision reflects the consensus of the community, the board and the district staff as to what students need in order to achieve their highest potential. The vision should set a direction for the school district, driving every aspect of the district's program.

Establishing an effective and efficient structure for the school district

The board is responsible for establishing and maintaining an organizational structure that supports the district's vision and empowers the professional staff. Although the board does not implement policies or programs, board members are responsible for:

- employing the superintendent and setting policy for hiring of other personnel;
- overseeing the development of and adopting policies;
- setting a direction for and adopting curriculum;
- establishing budget priorities, adopting the budget and overseeing facilities issues; and
- providing direction for and accepting collective bargaining agreements.



Providing support

After establishing the structure, boards — through their behavior and actions — have a responsibility to support the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board. This involves:

- acting with a professional demeanor that models the district’s beliefs and vision;
- making decisions and providing resources that support mutually agreed upon priorities and goals;
- upholding district policies the board has approved;
- ensuring a positive personnel climate exists; and
- being knowledgeable enough about district efforts to explain them to the public.

Ensuring accountability to the public

As community representatives, boards are accountable to the public for the performance of the community’s schools. Boards establish systems and processes to monitor results, evaluate the school system’s progress toward accomplishing the district’s vision and communicate that progress to the local community. In order to ensure personnel, program and fiscal accountability, boards are responsible for:

- evaluating the superintendent and setting policy for the evaluation of other personnel;
- monitoring, reviewing and revising policies;
- serving as a judicial and appeals body;
- monitoring student achievement and program effectiveness and requiring program changes as indicated;
- monitoring and adjusting district finances; and
- monitoring the collective bargaining process.

Acting as community leaders

Board members have a responsibility to involve the community in meaningful ways in setting a direction for the district and to communicate clear information about district policies, educational programs, fiscal condition and progress on goals adopted to achieve the vision. As the only locally elected officials chosen solely to represent the interests of children, board members also have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of those children. Boards are advocates for students, the school district’s educational programs and public education. Board members build support for public education in the local community and at the state and national levels.

Boards perform these responsibilities in a series of job areas, including Setting Direction for the District, Human Resources, Policy, Judicial Review, Student Learning and Achievement, Finance, Facilities, Collective Bargaining, Community Relations and Advocacy. CSBA’s “Maximizing School Board Governance” publications discuss the board’s role in each area further.

How board members and the board as a whole perform their critical role is as important as the role itself. There are standards of behavior for both individual trustees and governance teams essential to effective governance. CSBA developed Professional Governance Standards reflecting the consensus among hundreds of board members, superintendents and other educational leaders throughout California. These principles are integrated throughout the “Maximizing School Board Governance” publications. By working together in ways that reflect these standards, trustees on an effective board will better serve their communities and the children entrusted to their care. They will be able to powerfully perform the five governance responsibilities in each job area so district efforts result in improved student learning and achievement.

For more information about CSBA’s Professional Governance Standards, visit www.csba.org/pgs