

A School Board's Guide to Identifying, Recruiting, and Mentoring Future School Board Members

As a member of the board of education, you understand the important role you play in your community. A responsibility of every current board is to ensure future boards are ready to lead, so that the work of governing education in your community is achieved with continuity and effectiveness. Identifying, recruiting, and mentoring future board members is an important part of the board's work to meet that responsibility.

The Illinois Association of School Boards has prepared this resource to help school districts develop an effective process for identifying and recruiting prospective school board candidates, and mentoring them through candidacy and beyond. As you read it, consider your motivations and skills as a member of the board of education, and think about what your board service means to you, and who in your community bears the qualities of a school board member.



Nearly 6,000 people serve as school board members for the 850-plus public school districts in Illinois. Approximately 1,200 new members are elected every other year. That's why the school board must be forward looking, starting long before the candidate petition process begins. Prepared leadership **today** will help to develop prepared leaders for **tomorrow**.

The nearly two million Illinois school children 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.

Boards of education want to identify, recruit, and mentor people who understand and care deeply about the district's mission. These individuals should not only have the required skills but should also care enough about the district's mission to make a significant investment of their valuable time.

Consider

1. Why do you serve as a school board member?

Identifying

School boards are comprised of individuals representative of their communities, and from different backgrounds and experiences. However, you'll also want to look for future school board members who exhibit these characteristics.

- A thoughtful, sincere, and deliberate approach to the position.
- A constructive attitude towards teamwork.
- 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.
- Ability to represent the entire community and not special interest or partisan political groups.
- Temperament to respond accordingly and appropriately through challenging events.
- Willingness to listen thoughtfully to others.
- Willingness to express one's own opinion and participate in discussions in an open, honest manner, while encouraging and respecting the free expression of opinions by colleagues.
- The maturity to respect the confidentiality of privileged information and to take no private action that would compromise the board or administration.
- Willingness to model continuous learning by taking advantage of professional development opportunities.
- Willingness to abide by and support the Code of Conduct as adopted by the local school board.
- The ability to identify, recommend, and encourage prospective candidates and mentor new board members to become effective school leaders.

When you tell someone, "I think you should run for school board," be prepared to tell them why.

Consider

2. What traits make you an effective school board member?

How and Where to Find Qualified Candidates

Maintaining school board excellence in governance is an important concern for any community. Lay the groundwork for an effective school board candidate identification and recruitment strategy by considering these suggestions:

Great boards attract great people. Board members can make board service more attractive by focusing on being effective. Highly qualified candidates prefer to be on boards that are well run and that focus on the primary work of clarifying the district purpose, direction, and goals; and monitoring district performance.

Assess board needs. Assess what attributes are already present on the board, and where the gaps are. Consider what attributes are needed to achieve board objectives. What skills do current board members offer in these areas? What skills will depart with the departing board member(s)?

Focus on diversity. To bring in new perspectives and new voices, think about whether the board composition reflects the community it represents. When dealing with the whole community, it benefits the district and the students to have representation from across the community. Should the future board include younger people? Older people? People of color? Those who speak a different language or have a different ethnic background? Consider diversifying by geographic, economic, and education criteria.

Be positive. There is 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 board can do this at board meetings, at community functions, in district newsletters and websites, and at other venues.

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
- School financial supporters
- Local business owners
- School volunteers
- Members of other volunteer or service organizations
- Staff or associates of other education providers, institutions, and entities
- Members of multicultural organizations
- Members of local religious institutions
- Alumni

Focus on governance. 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 to challenge the board's authority to change its decision.

Get them to come to you. Let the community know about vacancies. Create opportunities to learn about board service by

- Advertising midterm vacancies or retiring terms
- Hosting information days where others can learn about board service
- Developing and distributing informational materials 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 are on display.

Invite or encourage their attendance, so candidates can observe board processes and the “big picture” of the governance role and board/staff relations. Set up a time for potential board members to meet with the board president to ask questions about board work.

Create opportunities for citizen involvement. Some boards have citizen advisory committees, councils, or task forces that provide specialist advice and research when needed. These citizen work groups offer excellent service and learning opportunities for prospective board

members. This work also enables the existing board to see potential candidates in action and at the same time exposes them to the concept of board work. It also allows both the individual and the board to evaluate their potential at a relatively low risk level.

Think ongoing process. Keep the identifying/recruiting process active throughout the year, even when there are no current vacancies. Remember, it’s only two years between board elections (also see School Board Election Timetable).

Consider

3. Where will you look for prospective school board members?

Recruiting

Some of your potential candidates will have never considered that they could serve on a board of education. Others might be interested, but uncomfortable putting themselves forward or uncertain of how to go about becoming a candidate. Most will be honored that you think they have what it takes to be of service to their communities in a distinguished and time-honored way.

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 about the demands and rewards of the job.

Stating the positives is the right place to start. Be prepared to address potential obstacles and a prospective candidate’s concerns about board service with facts, resources, and support.

- **Serving on a school board takes time and energy.** A survey of Illinois school board members determined that a majority said they spend six to 20 hours on board work each month. Most board members find they must change their schedules in some way, but it’s often a change for the better. Board service offers a real sense of purpose.

- **I don’t know how to be an effective board member.** Good news! There is a lot of help available — including orientations, professional development, expert advice and resources, and networking with colleagues and veteran board members. Plus, these skills carry over to other aspects of life. School board membership develops well-rounded people and effective citizens.
- **I don’t like controversy.** Yes, the board is confronted with some difficult and controversial decisions that can generate a lot of emotion. Nothing worthwhile comes easy. An individual board member can be sure of making a substantial contribution to the schools and community by considering the issues, expressing their views, and coming to a resolution as a board. Board members may encounter people who, with special interests, causes, or personal grudges, grandstand or push personal agendas. Yet, most people involved in public education are there for the good of the full community. There is 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.

When you tell someone, “I think you should run for school board,” be prepared to tell them what it’s really like to serve.

- **I don’t have kids in the district.** This is common. All voices in the community need to be heard, because all district residents have a stake in the success of their public schools. Having the perspective of a non-parent on the board can be useful as the board engages in an ongoing conversation with the community regarding the district’s mission, vision, and goals.
- **I don’t know anything about running a school district.** Yes, but the superintendent does. The board hires the superintendent, draws up the job description, and adopts the policies that specify what the district is expected to accomplish and define operating parameters. The amount of authority and flexibility

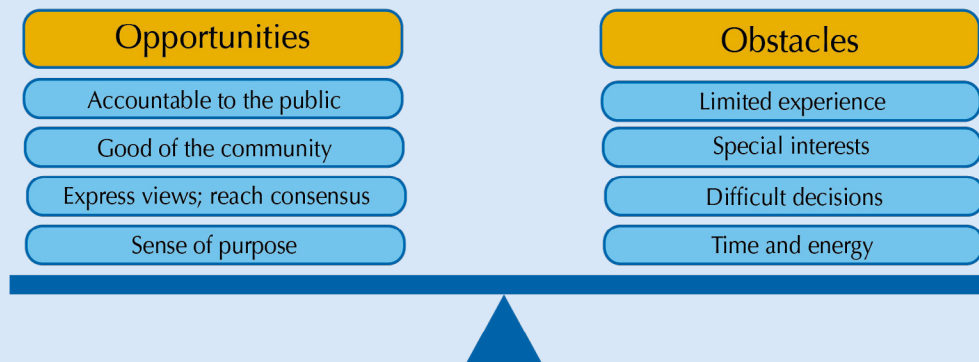
delegated to the superintendent is directly proportionate to the responsibilities associated with the job. The school board still holds itself accountable to the public. The board members know the community’s values for its schools, and can learn governance.

There are 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 opportunities and not obstacles, you should be able to have a productive conversation that emphasizes the benefits and value of school board service.

Consider

4. What are key points about school board service you could share with potential candidates?

Talking with Potential Candidates



Mentoring

The governance of local school districts by democratically elected individuals remains at the heart of American democracy and the public education system. School board members can take pride in being a part of something so important to their communities.

The board of education must adopt and enforce all necessary rules for the management and governance of its school district. The board can and does delegate many powers and duties through its board policies. The board must employ a superintendent to lead the school district's administration.

The real key to **mentoring** is sharing personal anecdotes, experiences, and insights, spending time discussing board services, and attending — and decoding — board meetings with your potential candidates.

After that, these IASB documents are good starting points and can be shared with candidates.

- [How School Boards Work: The Role of the Board of Education in the Community](#)
- [Qualifications & Characteristics of a School Board Member](#)
- [A School Board Member's Approach to the Job](#)

When you tell someone, "I think you should run for school board," be prepared to follow through with them.

Consider

5. How would you describe the job of a school board member?

School Board Candidate Timeline

With few exceptions, Illinois school boards consist of seven members elected to serve terms of two or four years. Elections are held at the Consolidated Election on the first Tuesday in April of each odd-numbered year. Terms of members are staggered so there are three or four seats contested at each biennial election. Vacancies are filled by appointment (by the remaining board members) until the next election.

The process for each election cycle begins in **late September**, or 90 days prior to the last date of

filing, when prospective candidates may begin to circulate nominating petitions for signatures for the April school board election. The actual date is set annually by the Illinois State Board of Elections (Election Code 10-4).

A decision to run does not have to be made official until **mid-to-late December**, when nominating papers must be filed with the county clerk or Board of Election Commissioners. The filing period lasts one week. The actual dates are set annually by the Illinois State Board of Elections (School Code 9-10 and Election Code 10-6).

While some candidates may know immediately that they will file papers to run for the school board, others may hesitate, 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 three-month window may be the perfect opportunity to approach a qualified but hesitant candidate. A decision, in fact, may hinge on such encouragement and interest.

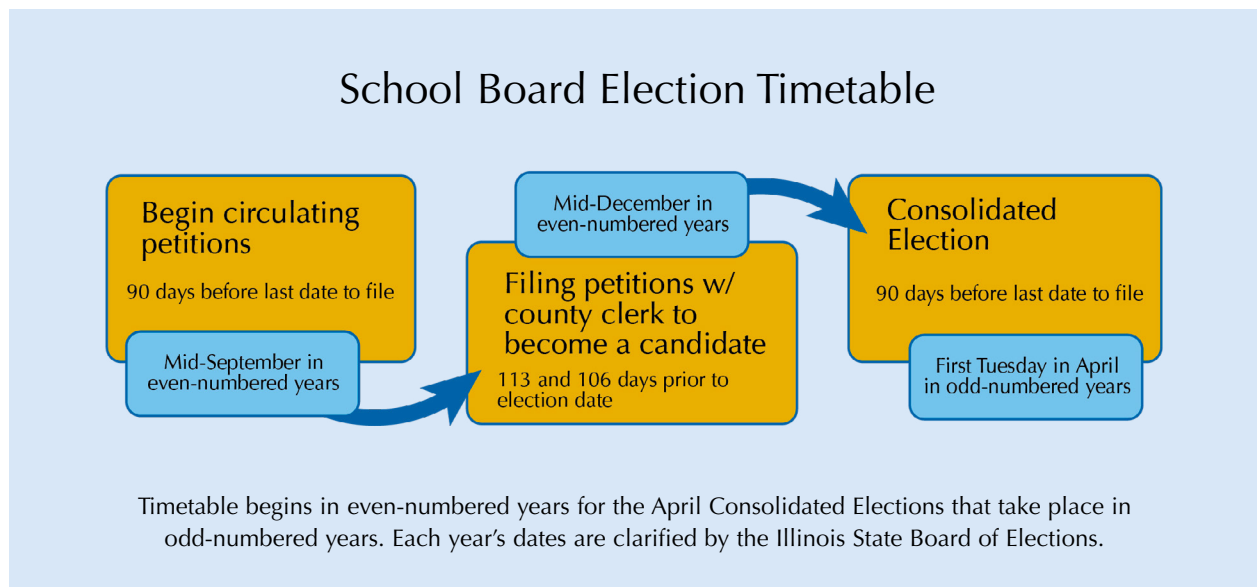
But what about those potential candidates who have not yet thought about school board service? When is it appropriate to approach them?

As the other material in this document indicates, the process of effective recruiting should be ongoing, i.e., throughout the school year and with consideration of the entire community. Taking advantage of the occasions that bring together qualified prospective candidates and incumbent board members requires steady observation of such moments.

The candidates who are approached early will have the time and clarity to think about their reasons for wanting to be a school board candidate, and to learn what it takes to be an effective school board member.

Consider

6. Have you shared key election dates with prospective candidates?



Questions for Boards to Consider

An important aspect of a school board's collective responsibility is to maintain leadership, even as it experiences turnover in its membership. Review your responses to the questions presented in this series and consider how these answers can help facilitate discussion with prospective school board candidates.

1. Why do you serve as a school board member?
2. How would you describe the job of a school board member?
3. What traits make you an effective school board member?
4. Where will you look for prospective school board members?
5. What are key points about school board service you could share with potential candidates?
6. Have you shared key election dates with prospective candidates?

Additional resources relating to school board service and the role of the board are available on the [IASB website](#).