

A
PARENT'S GUIDE
to
School Board
Advocacy



INTRODUCTION

Every parent rightfully has an obligation to provide the best possible future for their children. That includes, but is certainly not limited to, **being actively involved in the long-term education of their families**. Since nearly 80% of all students in the United States of America attend public school, the majority of parents have a direct stake in the outcomes of their local school districts.

Even if you, as a parent, do not send your child to a public school, the decisions made by the school board can and will affect your property taxes, community values, and outcomes for the neighborhood. **School board members undoubtedly make important decisions that affect our lives and education.**

School boards set policies and make decisions on a wide range of issues that impact your child, including curricular and extra-curricular programs, disciplinary standards, and how the district spends its funds.

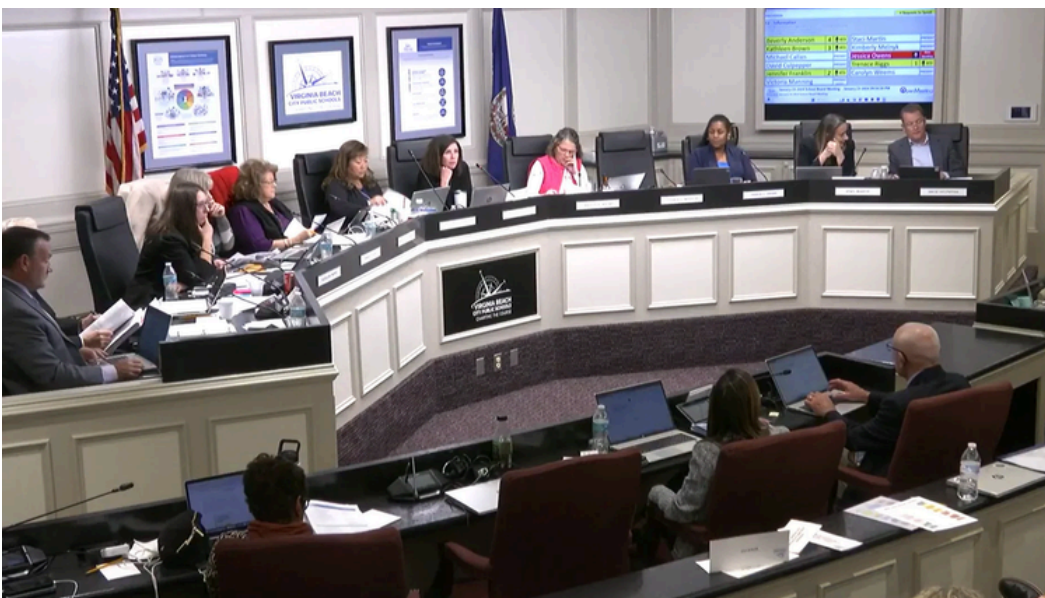
Only the school board can change district policies or adjust funding for new or old programs. School administrators, including the superintendent, manage many of the day to day issues that come up. However, the school board sets the strategic direction for the district.

This pamphlet provides a description of how school boards function as well as simple steps to make your voice heard on the board level.

TALK TO YOUR BOARD?

There is no better way to inform the school board of the community's opinion than **being engaged with them on a consistent basis**. School board members cannot be in the schools every single day – so hearing from students, parents, and family members is essential as part of their oversight of the district. They need to know what is or is not working, which services need to be fixed, and hear what the community's priorities are for their children's education.

School board governance involves making decisions that impact the entire school district and often indirectly impact the community as a whole. Whether setting budgets, approving curricula, or making hiring decisions, **these actions must be well-informed** and considerate of both short and long-term consequences – which means these boards need the full picture from parents.



Pictured: School Board Meeting, Virginia Beach.

HOW DO SCHOOL BOARDS WORK?



While the structure and certain authorities of school boards can vary slightly between states, municipalities, and districts, **most school boards are locally elected by the citizens** within their school district and serve as the policy-making governing board.

The School Board appoints a Superintendent, the Chief Executive responsible for managing the district's day-to-day operations. In some instances, the Superintendent is elected by the voters but still reports to the elected school board.

Additionally, state and federal law, certain regulatory agencies - such as state and federal departments of education - have varying influences within the governance structure. As you orient yourself with the statutes, rules, and regulations governing public education, **you will quickly recognize layers of inefficient bureaucracy and burdensome red tape** that often plague the overall education system.

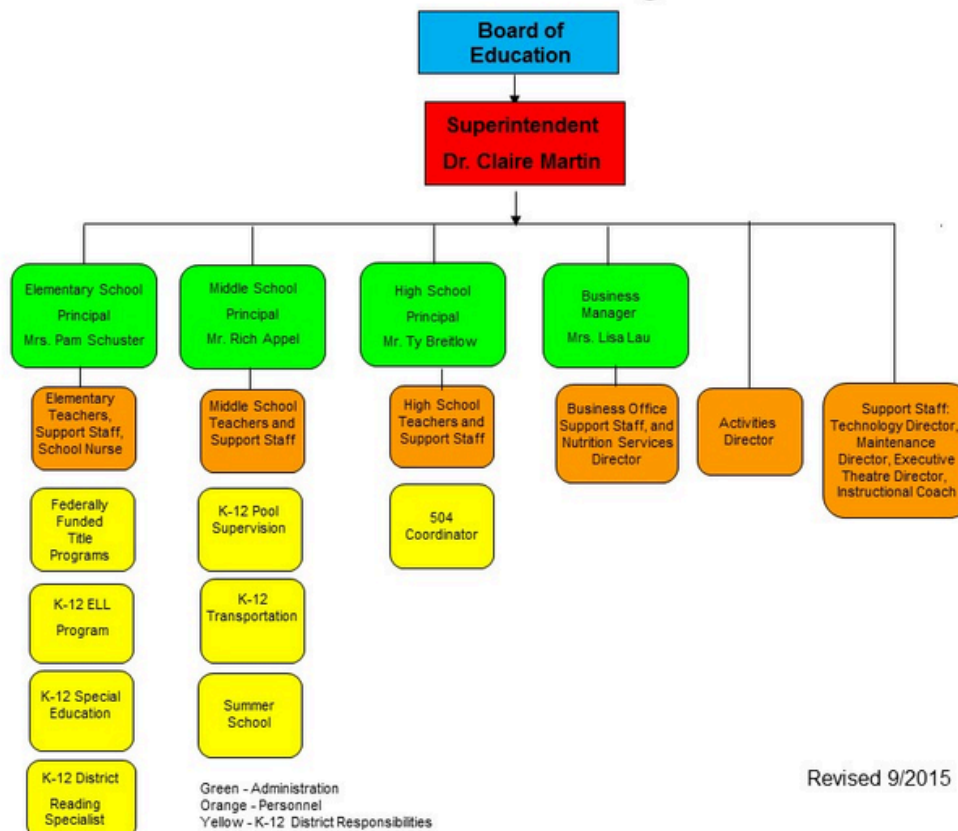
There are three essential components of the board that parents need to understand: **Who the board members are, what their duties are, and how the board functions.** Remember that each school board will work differently depending on the state you reside in, but the broad responsibilities remain the same.

WHO ARE YOUR BOARD MEMBERS?

Nearly every school district in the United States, with some exceptions, is governed by an elected board of directors, commonly called a “school board,” but may also be called a “school committee”. Most school boards are made up of between five and eleven individuals who live within the school district and are elected by voters of the district.

This graphic below demonstrates how the School District of Chilton, for example, is organized. With few exceptions, most school districts are organized in a similar way.

School District of Chilton - Organizational Chart



WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES?



School boards set the district's policies and procedures, as well as the budget.

The **policies provide standards for the behavior of students** and school staff, and they may cover a variety of issues, including: curriculum and grading systems, parent involvement plans, attendance, school discipline, harassment, **freedom of expression, student records and student dress**. Other policies relate to a district's internal operations, such as hiring and firing, vacation time, building maintenance, and so on.

School district policies are typically accompanied by related procedures, which give more information on how a policy will be implemented in each individual school. This power is often delegated to the superintendent, who is the chief executive officer of the school district. If your district superintendent has this responsibility, then make sure you reach out to them as well as the board if there are any issues or concerns.

School boards may also have the power to adjust property tax rates for the residential homes residing in the district, approve charter schools, hear disciplinary appeals, and create community advisory committees to review or develop policies for the district. The latter is often a great way to get involved in the function of the school board as a non-elected community member and make your voice heard.

HOW DO SCHOOL BOARDS FUNCTION?



School boards, like other governmental bodies, are often governed by public meetings requirements. They go by different names depending on the state, **but the boards are generally required to conduct its business in open public meetings**, including providing notice within a set period before the meeting, as well as making the agenda and other items available online.

School board meetings are much more than votes. They include discussions between the board members, **as well as testimony from the community on any given agenda item** the board is considering. The public is not given a "right" to speak, however, many boards allow members of the community to comment on those agenda items or add new ones.

The board should also have a procedure that you can follow to bring up concerns about particular employees in a closed session (non public) of the board. However, if there are general concerns or questions, those are applicable for an open board meeting.

Outreach to board members can take many different forms, including: social media, emails, calls, and meetings.

Social media messages or comments may be overlooked, so it's important to follow up with emails or a phone call if you do not get a response.

Here are three tips for writing an effective message to your board member:

1. **Keep it succinct:** These messages should never be longer than one page or 3-4 paragraphs or cover multiple issues. Keep your writing focused. School board members usually have separate full-time jobs.
2. **State who you are and the issue you'd like addressed:** Make sure your board members know that you are a parent or family member of a child in their district. Identify the specific issue you are writing about.
3. **Make it personal:** Tell your school board member why this policy matters in your community and how it affects your family. Don't be afraid to take a firm position.

MEETING YOUR BOARD MEMBERS



School board meetings are public, and speaking in public can be intimidating. **But there are ways to overcome your fears and speak up for children.**

You can always start by trying to set up individual meetings with board members to see where they stand on an issue. But you should also follow up by raising your issue at a school board meeting. School boards are made up of at least five people, so if you have even one or two board members on your side, your presence at a school board meeting can help them gain the support of their fellow board members and the public.

Before you meet with your school board members, it is a good idea to **check district policy first!**

Many **districts have policies describing how parents and others can bring concerns** and suggestions to the board. If you have an individual complaint about a school staff member, the policies may require that you first raise your concerns with the principal and then the superintendent, before bringing them to the board.

If you are interested in changing an existing school policy or proposing a new program, your district's policy might encourage you to bring your ideas directly to the school board. Regardless, it could be a good idea to meet with the superintendent: they are generally responsible for writing the procedures that implement the policies.

PREPARING FOR A BOARD MEETING



Request time on the agenda:

Contact the district office to find out how to get on the agenda for one of the board's monthly meetings. Let them know what issue and policy, by name and number if you can, you wish to discuss. Make sure they know that you are a parent or family member of a child in their district.

Look at the district's policies and procedures:

Find out whether there is already a policy and procedure in place that addresses your issue. You can look in your parent/student handbook or ask your principal or superintendent. You can also look through the district's policy manual yourself. Most school districts have their policies and procedures available on their website. If not, ask the district office where you can find a hard copy of the policy manual.

Make sure you understand the rights of parents and students in the district:

This information can be found in parent/student handbooks as well as district policies and procedures.

Recruit others to attend:

If you are going to a school board meeting, bring along as many other parents, students and community members as you can! Not everyone needs to speak; just being there will let the board members know you care. Plan a carpool, share child care responsibilities or meet for dinner ahead of time so you can all make it there together.

If you have set up an individual meeting with a board member, bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage. Keep it small, and bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the issue. Let the board member know ahead of time how many people will attend the meeting.

PREPARING FOR A BOARD MEETING



Agree on what to say

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If a point is causing tension within your group, leave it out of your presentation to the board

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Be prompt and respectful:

You may have only a few minutes to present your concerns. Introduce yourselves and thank the board members for their time, and then make the most of it by sticking to your topic.

Showing respect toward the board members, school administrators and other people in the audience – even if you disagree with their positions – will make it more likely that your concerns will be heard and taken seriously.

If a board member or other person is responding in anger, do your best to keep your cool and see if you can find points of agreement. Review the things you do agree on – including that you all want to figure out what will work best for the students – and try to narrow down your points of disagreement.

