

How Much Time Does it Take to Be a School Board Member?

This is probably the question foremost in the minds of prospective board members. What follows is an overview. This is a great question to ask current or former board members as you decide if you have the time to make this commitment of public service.

Time varies according to the length of agenda items and how many other commitments in your work and personal life you are trying to juggle. It also depends on major district projects such as referenda, negotiations, budgeting, building projects or strategic planning that fill up the year.

The Board packet itself probably takes between 30 minutes and two hours to read over. There are two packets a month. The first meeting of the month is primarily an action and information sharing meeting. This meeting is usually 2-3 hours. The second meeting is primarily committees of the whole with discussion and planning taking place. A board member is designated as the chair of the discussion for the following committees: Finance, Policy, and Facilities/Safety/Transportation. These meetings have been 3-4 hours. More time may be needed if you have questions, or need to review additional background information with the District Administrator or other administrators. For the first two to three months, I prefer that new members come in to pick up their board packets and go over them with me. This helps us get to know each other better while building background on issues or topics on the agenda.

Checking email regularly is essential as that is the primary way board members are filled in on what is happening in between meetings. This may take 30 minutes to an hour a week. As a board member you get your own district email address.

Each school has a weekly staff bulletin; these are usually a quick read and consist primarily of staff related events at each building. It is a quick way to see what is happening across the District. Each school also has a monthly parent newsletter. You are already getting those for the schools your children attend, but it is helpful to read all of them. These are all sent electronically.

It is also helpful to check the District website weekly. Again, you may already be doing this as a parent. The calendar is a quick review of what is going on. Many resources including all board policies are on the website.

Board members also have one negotiations assignment. With changes in the collective bargaining law, we will be using our time differently. The support staff (EEAA) contract expires at the end of the 2011-12 school year so they will be the first group where we bargain on base salary only. We are working on an employee handbook that will replace union contracts and provide additional information related to the work environment. Our Teachers (EEA), Custodial (Teamsters), and Food Service (Teamsters) contracts all expire at the end of the 2012-13 school year. Our hope is that the handbook will standardize practices where possible across employee groups. Under the current contracts the working conditions may vary by group.

In addition to the two regular board meetings, there are typically a number of special meetings. Special meetings are called for such things as board retreats (1-2 a year), expulsion hearings (0-3 a year), and the budget process.

Board members are invited to attend the opening session for all staff in August, staff recognition in April or May, graduation in June, as well as special events. Special seating is set aside.

Of course, there are the extras. It is very helpful if board members attend at least one event annually at the school(s) their children aren't attending such as Back to School nights, concerts, athletic events or just a visit to get to know the principal and building better. Staff really appreciates this visibility and it gives you a broader picture of the District. Board members are invited to attend any of the staff development activities offered.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) is a very helpful resource for current as well as prospective members. At least one board member attends the annual WASB convention which is held in Milwaukee the third week of January.

<http://www.wasb.org>

We get a number of publications from WASB on a monthly basis. Because they are available electronically, we can now send them to all board members. They do an excellent job of going in-depth on specific issues, policy development, legal and legislative updates. WASB holds a training meeting for new board members in spring and a regional meeting in fall. They also sponsor workshops on legal issues, employment issues, special education or other topics board members need more in depth knowledge on.

One board member is the District's representative to our Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA#2). This is one meeting a year. Tina Rossmiller represented us this year and is also a member of their board of control which meets a few times a year.

Finally, there is the general contact with the public. Once people know you are on the Board, the time it takes to grocery shop seems to double. It can be harder to focus on athletic events as people engage you in conversation. You may spend more time after school events talking with people as they leave. The number of phone calls you receive at home varies considerably. Some board members report never getting a phone call, others, usually the president or those who already have many personal contacts in the District, may get significantly more. Part of your training as a board member is to follow the policy on communication, listen respectfully and encourage or help them contact the appropriate district employee to resolve their concern.

Being a school board member is a unique position. The learning curve occupies at least the first term. It is very helpful to a district to have board members who are willing to commit from the outset to at least two terms. Boards that have members with several years of experience are usually able to operate more effectively and provide the combination of leadership and continuity that helps school districts serve the learning needs of their students. The current board has worked very hard on their own development and learning about what it means to work together for the good of the entire district. It is a challenging and rewarding job. Thank you for your interest!

Heidi Carvin, District Administrator