

Understanding *Your* School Board

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1. Who is responsible for public education in Michigan?

American education is primarily a function of the states. In Michigan, the Constitution directs the Legislature to “maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools.” By law, the state is divided into approximately 560 local school districts, each governed by a school board. The Revised School Code and other laws establish school districts and regulate boards of education.

Michigan’s Constitution also provides for a State Board of Education, which is responsible for supervising public education. Many laws authorize the State Board of Education to prescribe rules affecting local school operations.

2. How are school districts established?

Under Michigan law, there are two basic types of school districts, local and intermediate. The local school district is independent of other units of local government and its boundaries frequently vary from townships or cities served by the school district. It is responsible for elementary and secondary educational programs in the community.

Michigan’s 57 intermediate school districts, commonly called ISDs or regional education service agencies, provide specialized services, including vocational and special education programs, to groups of local school districts.

3. Who is responsible for the educational program of a school district?

Each school district is governed by a board of education. Under state law, school board members are state officers who carry out the state’s educational obligations at the local level. Every school board member must take an oath of office promising to uphold all laws.

4. What is the primary function of the board?

The primary function of the board of education is to oversee the education of people in the community. Educational programs conducted at the elementary, middle and high school levels are most familiar. Many local and intermediate school districts also operate preschool and adult education programs for large numbers of people.

5. **What are some of the powers and duties of a local school board?**

Under Michigan law, a board of education has the ultimate responsibility for school district operations. Among other things, the Revised School Code gives each board of education general powers to:

- Educate students.
- Provide for the safety and welfare of students.
- Acquire and dispose of school property.
- Determine matters relating to school employees and contractors.
- Control the expenditure and receipt of school funds.
- Make joint agreements and cooperative arrangements.

Specific provisions in the Revised School Code also assign responsibilities to school boards in areas such as:

- Setting the curricula and courses taught in the schools.
- Employing a superintendent, other administrators, teachers and support personnel.
- Levying local taxes to run the schools and adopting a budget.
- Deciding whether or not to furnish transportation for pupils.
- Negotiating with employee unions regarding salaries and other conditions of employment.

6. **Is the board of education responsible for private schools or charter schools?**

The Revised School Code assigns no responsibility to the board of education of a local or intermediate school district for the operation of nonpublic schools. A separate statute provides for state supervision of private, denominational and parochial schools.

Charter schools, called public school academies in Michigan, are governed by private appointed boards of directors. A local or intermediate school district is responsible for overseeing the operations of a public school academy only if the district grants the charter to the academy. If a public school academy receives its charter from a college or university, the school district has no oversight obligations for that academy.

7. How are members of the board of education selected?

Members of a board of education for a general powers school district are elected by the voters of a community for terms of either four or six years, as provided by the school district's bylaws. Most school boards have seven members.

Trustees of intermediate school boards generally are chosen indirectly by representatives of the local boards within the intermediate district. Only four intermediate school districts have boards elected by the voters.

8. When are school board members elected?

Local school board elections are held annually or biennially on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in either May or November. Intermediate school board elections generally are held on the first Monday in June, every other year.

9. Who is eligible to serve as a school board member?

Any person registered as a voter in the school district may run for election to the school board. Men and women who become school board members may be taxpayers, parents, business people and community leaders. They may be young or senior citizens and come from all races, creeds and ethnic groups. In short, school board members are people representative of the community they serve.

10. How do school boards make decisions?

A board of education can act only during legally called board meetings. Individual board members, acting on their own, have no legal authority to act on behalf of the board. An action of the board is not valid unless voted at a meeting by a majority vote of the members elected to and serving on the board.

When making decisions, school boards seek the advice and counsel of the district's administrators, teachers and other employees, as well as input from the community and specialists with knowledge about the topic under consideration.

11. What is the most important consideration in making a board of education decision?

School board members are trustees, responsible for a trust established by the community. The most important beneficiaries of this trust are the public school students in that community. Even though board members are directly accountable to the people they represent, their primary obligation is to ensure that students' needs are identified and met.

12. Are school boards limited in their decision-making authority?

Yes. School boards in Michigan have only the powers given to them by the legislature. Even though the Revised School Code gives districts general powers, those powers are not unlimited.

In addition, boards of education are bound by provisions of the state and federal constitutions and laws designed to protect the rights of people.

For example, our state constitution requires every school district to provide for the education of its pupils without discrimination as to religion, creed, race, color or national origin and prohibits the expenditure of public funds to support private schools. Boards of education also are bound by laws such as the property tax act, election code, teacher tenure act, state school aid act, child protection law and employment laws. Finally, school boards must comply with court decisions interpreting these laws.

13. Can people attend school board meetings to see what the board is doing?

Yes. School boards must meet in compliance with the Open Meetings Act and make public records available pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act. Citizens are welcome at all board of education meetings, except a few legally specified circumstances calling for closed meetings.

Since nearly all business is conducted at open meetings, community members not only may attend and observe the school board at work, but may also make comments during the public participation portion of the board meeting.

14. Are there other ways of obtaining information about school board actions?

Many school districts publish newsletters describing school programs and activities. Reports of school board meetings are sometimes published in local newspapers or broadcast on radio and television. Some school board meetings are aired on local cable channels.

Minutes of all open board meetings are available to the public. District budget and financial records are public documents. Salary records of school employees must be available to the public. In addition, school boards must have school improvement plans and make annual education reports, which are available to the public.

Inquiries about school district programs, curricula, finances, student events and activities should be made to the office of the building principal or district superintendent.

15. How can a person influence the decision a school board makes?

An individual can express his or her point of view to the school board through communications and letters to the board. The ultimate indication of support, of course, is the citizen's vote at school elections.

In addition, boards often appoint advisory committees to make recommendations about curriculum, school activities, district finances and building needs.

If you are interested in serving on an advisory committee in your district, contact the superintendent's office.

16. Are there groups that "lobby" a local school board?

Just as individuals may express their concerns to the board, organizations such as parent-teacher associations, parent-teacher-student groups, booster clubs and others may convey their ideas to the board of education. These groups often help the school board and employees accomplish specific projects. Participation in an organization is a good way of learning about school programs and needs.

Sometimes a school board must make an unpopular decision about a building program, curriculum change or tax increase. Maintaining communication with residents who have differing points of view can help the board of education balance the conflicting concerns.

17. Are school board members paid for serving on a board of education?

The answer varies from district to district. Some school boards have adopted a compensation schedule paying members up to \$30 per meeting for not more than 52 meetings each year. In other districts board members volunteer their time and receive no compensation.

18. Are local school boards needed?

The United States Supreme Court has said education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Our system of local school districts and boards of education epitomizes representative and participatory government—citizens elected from their community making decisions about educational programs based on community needs, values and expectations.

Local school boards also allow for community participation in that decision-making process. School boards not only represent the public, but also translate the needs of students into policies, plans and goals that will be supported by the community.

19. How can more information about our public schools be obtained?

For additional information about your local public school system, contact the superintendent's office of your school district. The intermediate school district serving your community also has information available.

This publication is a service of the Michigan Association of School Boards, 1001 Centennial Way, Suite 400, Lansing, MI 48917-8249.

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Address questions regarding this publication to
Brad Banasik, Legal Counsel at
e-mail: bbanasik@masb.org

MASB LeadStrong
Michigan Association of School Boards
1001 Centennial Way, Suite 400
Lansing, MI 48917-8249
517/327-5900; Fax: 517/327-0775
www.masb.org