

Partners in Education: The School Board and the PTA

Partnership, teamwork, and cooperation—these are the building blocks of education leadership. Nowhere is this partnership more urgently needed than between school boards and parents.

School boards are responsible for taking the lead in identifying the community's education needs and meeting those needs through local school policy. When parents and teachers join together in PTA, they can become better informed, better organized, and more effective partners in working with school boards to achieve quality public education.

The School Board's Role in Education

The school board is legally responsible for policies that govern the operation of the school district. The school board's main functions generally are:

- Policy making in all areas of school programs and functions;
- Choosing and evaluating the superintendent, and approving selection procedures for other personnel;
- Overseeing the educational programs and business operations of the district (the school board has ultimate responsibility for the activities and services of the schools, according to the laws of various states);
- In some states, exercising fiscal authority (the right to tax and the right to adopt the budget); in other states, sending their adopted budgets to their local governing bodies who have final authority;
- Long-range planning and goal setting for educational programs;
- Approving curriculum in accordance with state law, state department of education regulations, and local goals; and
- Representing the public as the employer of school personnel in any collective bargaining process.

School Board Structure and Meetings

While school boards vary greatly in size and type, it is important to know the following:

- The geographic area and name of your school district(s)
- The organizational structure of the school board(s) and the responsibilities of each part of the structure
- How to get an item on the school board's agenda for discussion
- How to address the school board and voice your PTA's position on issues
- Which decisions the school board has the authority to make, and which are made by a school-based management council or other school and parent committee

10 Questions to Ask Your School Board

1. How many members does the school board have and how may they be contacted?
2. What are the legal responsibilities of school board members?
3. How long is their term of office?
4. How often and where do they meet?
5. Are school board meetings open to the public or aired on a cable station?
6. Does the board have the authority to levy school taxes?
7. Does it reserve time on its agenda for public hearings?
8. Does it have written policies on such matters as involvement of the PTA and use of volunteers?
9. Does the school board policy agree with PTA policy on parent involvement?
10. What is the relationship of school-based management council(s) or other school and parent committees to the school board?

How the PTA Cooperates with the School Board

School boards do a better job when they are challenged and supported by an informed and involved community, which is why PTA bylaws encourage participation in the decision-making process to develop school policy. In addition, the PTA can be a valuable partner to the school board in the following areas:

Communication

- Establish regular two-way communication with the school board.
- Appoint a PTA liaison to attend school board meetings and collect copies of agendas and reports.
- Keep the PTA membership informed of school board actions and policies through reports in newsletters, meetings, and special programs.
- Establish a PTA spokesperson. To avoid confusion, it is important that the PTA spokesperson voice the consensus of the PTA, not personal views or opinions.
- Present PTA positions on issues such as tax increases.
- When appropriate (and following official procedures), report PTA concerns, as well as parents' reactions to school policies and community problems, to school officials (principal, school board, or superintendent).

Participation

- Encourage the school board to develop and implement a formal, written parent involvement policy.
- Make sure PTA representatives sit on special school board advisory committees and task forces.
- Ask a school board member to help plan and/or attend PTA conferences, workshops, and open forums.

- Invite school board members to participate on PTA committees and attend PTA programs.
- Encourage parents to attend school board meetings by letting them know relevant meeting details—time, location, and agenda.
- Call public attention to important school issues being decided by the school board.

How the School Board Cooperates with the PTA

- Appointing a PTA member to advisory committees
- Sending notices of all school board meetings to local PTA unit
- Attending PTA council, district, and/or local meetings whenever possible
- Asking for PTA input on issues of importance to the local school district (i.e., decisions on school boundaries, budgetary matters, etc.)

Duties of the PTA-School Board Liaison

- Introduce himself or herself to school board members at the first board meeting, and explain his or her role as PTA liaison.
- Attend school board meetings regularly, and then report to the PTA.
- In advance of meetings, study agendas and reports.
- Encourage parents to attend school board meetings.
- Know PTA policies, structure, and position statements.
- If acting as PTA spokesperson, follow correct procedures (PTA and school board) for state PTA positions on issues.
- Attend PTA council, district, and regional workshops for school board liaisons, requesting workshops if none are available.
- Alert the PTA unit, council, and district to issues that may require PTA study and action.
- Let the school board know that the PTA wants to serve on advisory committees.
- Share *Our Children* and other appropriate PTA publications with every school board member.

School Board Elections and the PTA

School board members are either elected or appointed to serve a specified number of years. It is important for PTAs to be involved in either process. To do so, find out when regular or special school board elections are occurring and:

- Alert community members to the coming elections (or appointment) of school board members, encouraging them to be informed and to vote;
- Publicize the duties of a school board member and the qualifications of the candidates; and
- Sponsor community meetings where all school board candidates are invited to speak.

Remember: PTAs do not support or oppose individual candidates for public office—PTAs support issues and principles.

Leadership on local boards of education is of vital interest to all citizens. PTA members may serve on school boards as long as they do not seek PTA endorsement or use their PTA office to promote their candidacy.

Evaluating School Board Candidates

All citizens should carefully evaluate each candidate for the school board, considering whether or not the candidate is:

- A firm supporter of public education;
- Familiar with the schools in the district and with basic current issues in education;
- Informed about board functions, policies, and responsibilities;
- Someone with leadership qualities;
- Willing and able to spend the time necessary to serve effectively;
- A hard worker and a clear and independent thinker who works well with others;
- Aware of goals and concerns of parents, students, businesses, and other community groups;
- A skilled communicator with a good sense of humor; and
- Able to represent the whole community on all education issues.

A Final Word

As an organization devoted to the well-being of all children and youth, the PTA provides parents, teachers, and students the means to participate and work effectively with the school board, and to be informed about the community and the needs of children. This partnership improves the quality of education in communities throughout America.