

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Confirm board members' eligibility, residency

While board members are generally required to live in the district they purport to represent, their eligibility has been increasingly questioned if they split their time between two homes. It's important for the board to discuss how to treat members who rent or own second homes outside the district and whether it should examine how much time they spend there.

For example, the eligibility of a 20-year member of the Anson County Board of Education in North Carolina was questioned after learning that she split her time between North Carolina and Mississippi where she rented property due to a job promotion. Similarly, a Palm Beach County (FL) School Board member's residency was questioned in 2020 when stakeholders learned that she purchased a home in another district under her mother's maiden name. Her eligibility was challenged via voter registration fraud and mortgage fraud. In another Florida county, a lawsuit was recently filed, and an emergency injunction sought to remove an Alachua County school board member when it was discovered she didn't live in the district she was elected to represent. Governor DeSantis declared a vacancy, effectively removing her by executive order.

To avoid such situations in your district: Act now. The start of the school year is a good time to review and revise eligibility requirements for board members. Proactive steps, noted below,

can ensure that your board's mandate that members reside in the district is foolproof. Work with district council to discern whether the policy align with voter registration laws, homestead exemptions, or tax rolls.

Steps to take

1. Examine how the board describes its residency requirements. While boards cannot dictate that member maintain full-time residence in the district, they may require that the member maintain her permanent or primary residence there.

2. Confirm the member is eligible to vote in the district. Ask if he lives in the county where he is registered to vote. Typically, state law doesn't allow members of the public to challenge an elected official's residence, so they might indirectly challenge eligibility through voter registration.

3. Prior to any school board campaign, ensure that your board develops comprehensive eligibility requirements and that it vets each candidate. This might mean that each candidate certifies or signs an affidavit confirming that she meets school board member qualification criteria.

4. Determine how to remove a board member. In some state, board members and members of the public don't have the authority to remove a board member who is determined no longer eligible. That power rests with the state's governor. ■

Explain board role for community members on social media, website

While many parents understand that the school board serves an important role in their children's education, many may not know what that role entails. For instance, they may believe that they should bring complaints about teacher misconduct directly to the board rather than administrative staff.

To bring awareness to the community, consider working with your information technology experts to post a brief summary on the district's website and social media pages explaining what the board's responsibilities are. For example, you may clarify in the summary that the board:

- Hires and evaluates the superintendent.

- Sets the vision and goals for the district.
 - Adopts the annual budget and oversees district finances.
 - Establishes district policies and procedures.
- Additionally, it may be beneficial to explain other board matters, such as how often the board holds a meeting, what qualities make a great board member, how board members are elected or appointed, and what committees do.

This will not only assist parents, students, and school employees in becoming more familiar with the board's role, but also help inform individuals who are or may be interested in becoming a board member in the future. ■

Take the initiative to brush up on board ethics

Proper board behavior is key to the success of a school district. This not only applies to board members' personal behavior, but their behavior when doing board business as well.

While board members may sometimes look to the superintendent for advice on following a code of ethics, they shouldn't expect the superintendent to tell them right from wrong. Instead, new and veteran board members alike should work with the board president to hold periodic professional development

on ethical behavior and decision-making.

It may also be wise for the board to review its current bylaws and policies on conflicts of interest, financial disclosures, and other topics related to board ethics and conduct. In some cases, a board may find that those policies and bylaws may need to be revised or clarified, with assistance from legal counsel, to address hazy issues, such as communications with the public through electronic devices, applications, and social media. ■

Periodically meet with superintendent to boost board effectiveness

A collaborative relationship between the superintendent and the board president benefits the entire school board and the district as a whole. Accordingly, make it a habit to meet with your superintendent on a quarterly basis to analyze your board's effectiveness and discuss what you can do, as a team, to support board members.

During this meeting, for example, you may ask and consider questions such as the following:

1. How can we facilitate the onboarding process for new board members? Who should be involved in this process?
2. How should board members deal with criticism

from the public during public board meetings? Should the board work together to respond to criticisms or comments sent to an individual board member?

3. Is the workload divided evenly among board members? If not, how can we achieve balance to ensure each board member is productive and feels supported?

4. Are there certain issues that spark conflict among board members? Would sending those issues to a board committee prevent future disputes?

5. Are board members appropriately focusing on policy issues and not overstepping their role? ■