



# ELECTION

## Leader to Leader

Use these insights for educating people about school board work, and encouraging community leaders to accept the challenge of school board service.

### Why Leader to Leader?

The Leader to Leader initiative supports departing school board members in encouraging citizens with excellent leadership qualities to run for local school board seats.

As an experienced and trained veteran leaving your school board, you can:

- Identify individuals in your community who would make good school board candidates;
- Talk with these individuals, providing information about school board service and your school district. Encourage them to think about running for your local school board. You may also want to give them a copy of CASB's "Candidates Guide," which contains election deadlines and other helpful information;
- Meet with representatives of your local news media to encourage them to cover school board elections in their news and opinion stories.

### Essential qualities in a school board candidate

Veteran school board members know them well. Some of the key characteristics of the highly effective

candidates and school board members are:

- Vision and the ability to see the big picture;
- Desire to balance competing values that affect education in the community;
- Ability to listen to all sides of an issue before making an informed decision;
- Excellent communication and human relations skills;
- Sound judgment and confidence;
- Desire to contribute as a member of a team;
- Ability to disagree agreeably.

Beyond these qualities—and perhaps the most important—excellent school board candidates demonstrate a sincere desire to provide a quality education for all children.

### Suggestions for seeking and encouraging candidates

- Look for people who are active in school-related organizations, such as parent associations, accountability committees and citizens committees or task forces.
- Look for people who are active in community service groups and those with experience on governing boards, in particular. Such groups might include the Chamber of Commerce, city

councils, civic organizations, service clubs, youth organizations and other groups.

- Don't overlook people because of age. Look for talented young people who are eager to learn and retired citizens who have been active community leaders.
- Don't rule out the "non-joiners" who probably make up the majority of your community. There are people out there with great untapped potential. Sometimes they just need to be asked.

### What to say to potential candidates

- Most people will ask about the amount of time required. Try to be reasonably accurate in stating the time your school board devotes to meetings and related work. One national survey showed that the average board member devotes about 45 hours a month to board work. What is the average for your school board?
- Don't address only the demands. Point out the positive aspects of board service.

## Responding to typical concerns

Here are some points you may want to use when a potential candidate has concerns or questions:

- Yes, it takes a lot of study to become an effective board member. However everything you learn will prove helpful in all other aspects of your life. School board service will make you a more well-rounded person and a more effective citizen.
- Yes, the board is confronted with some difficult and controversial decisions that can generate a lot of emotion. However, nothing worthwhile comes easy. You'll feel good about making a substantial contribution to your schools and your community.
- Yes, serving on a school board does take time and energy. However most board members find that a little planning and organizing creates open time. Some board members find they must reorder their priorities. Some have to cut back on their hobbies. Others find they have less time to relax. A few find they must ask their employers for release time—and that's a contribution that some employers are happy to make.
- Yes, it's true that an individual board member has no authority to hire a coach or throw out a library book or buy new equipment for the chemistry lab. However, the board member has a vote and is free to offer evidence and persuasive arguments to the other members. Democracy is often cumbersome and frustrating, but it sure beats all other models of governance!
- There are many other issues and questions that a prospective candidate might raise, of course. The goal should be to find a candidate who will approach board service with a clear understanding of the demands and expectations—plus a constructive attitude toward the challenge.

## Information to share

- The “gold mine” of candidate information on the CASB website, [www.casb.org](http://www.casb.org), in particular, the downloadable “Candidates Guide” and the CASB GreatGoverning blog.
- Your governing team’s framework for effective governance (purpose, values, protocols...).
- A summary of key issues the board has addressed over the last year.
- The district’s strategic plan or vision, mission and goals.
- The school district budget and most recent financial audit.
- The district’s annual report.
- Describe the kind of relationship you want to have with your fellow board members.
- How should the board go about engaging parents and other taxpayers in the district?
- What do you believe should be the board’s relationship to local, city and county officials? How should the board achieve this?
- How important are school district employees as a constituent group?
- How would you know when your school district has achieved its major objectives?
- What is the best way for a board of education to be sure it stays on target?
- How important is school board member training?
- What legacy would you like to leave as a result of your time on the school board?

## Questions for interviews and conversations

The following is a menu of questions that may be used by community organizations or the news media to interview potential school board candidates:

- Why do you want the position of board member in this district?
- Describe the school board’s role as it relates to the superintendent’s role in the district.
- Is there anything that you would like to add that would help us to better understand you?

## Sample article

Feel free to use all or parts of the following article under your name in district newsletters, blogs and business or community organization publications. Other options might include a letter to the editor or opinion-editorial piece.

### What to look for in a school board candidate

By [Your Name]

In this very challenging era for public schools, here and across the nation, highly effective governing is needed as never before. As you consider candidates for our school board, here are some qualities I believe to be crucial:

#### Strong interpersonal skills

If only one set of skills were available for an individual to select in order to be an effective school board member, I would advise the selection of solid interpersonal skills and attributes, including communication, trustworthiness, honesty, confidentiality, consistency and other such traits that allow interpersonal relationships to blossom.

Concern for the entire school district, not for a special interest or a narrow philosophy. Let's face it: most of us have a "favorite" concern about schools. It may be sports, fine arts, technology, special education or something else. And that's okay. A passionate voice on the board for a particular program can be a real strength for a board.

However, an elected school board member must also have a broad view of the district he or she is elected to govern. Every program offered by the district has value, or it should not be offered. Good board members recognize that, and try to build them all to their highest level of quality.

Sometimes individuals may also run for the school board to represent a particular political or philosophical point of view. School board elections are non-partisan, but groups or organizations with a political agenda are often active in board elections.

Of course, this is okay, and it may even be good politics. In fact, such organizations, be they teacher associations or pro-voucher groups, should be applauded for their interest. Yet, the best school board members are not so tied to a "cause" that they cannot fairly serve the entire school district. Voters should learn as much about school board candidates as possible in order to understand the philosophies of the people they elect.

#### Willingness to learn

State law requires very few qualifications for service as a school board member. Some individuals are elected with more immediate knowledge and skills than others. But in my experience, no member, regardless of occupation, intelligence or personal skills, knows all he/she needs upon election. Those school board members who approach their jobs with a commitment to fill those knowledge and skill gaps more effectively serve their school district and community.

#### Commitment to teamwork

Individual school board members have little power. But, by working well together as a "corporate body," with the superintendent and with other groups shaping public schools, virtually anything is possible for a school board as a whole.

Am I saying that every vote should be unanimous, that differences should not be voiced or that the board/superintendent relationship always should be perfect? No, I am not. I am saying that reasonable adults should work toward a common vision and be able to disagree agreeably without creating lasting divisions that assure loss of public confidence.

### **Commitment to engaging the community**

As any current school board member will tell you, school board service is much broader, much more challenging—and even much more rewarding—than solving a single problem. School board service involves balancing a complex set of community values that affect education. This requires listening, collaboration and give-and-take within the school district and within the community as a whole.

Time. Serving on a local school board requires lots of it. No longer is it reasonable to expect board service to take only one night per month. Public education has become far too complex, and community expectations far too great, for the leisurely pace of yesteryear. Today's board members say they can easily spend 45 hours per month on school issues: staying abreast of issues, attending regular board meetings, work sessions and community meetings—not to mention personal phone calls and other contacts made. But most will say it's time well spent.

Serving on a local school board can be one of the most rewarding challenges any citizen could hope for. The system works best when able and committed people step forward and serve their communities. If ever there was a time when quality leadership was needed, it is now.

For more information on encouraging community leaders to accept the challenge of school board service, contact CASB's Randy Black at [rblack@casb.org](mailto:rblack@casb.org), 800-530-8430 or 303-832-1000.