

Introduction to school boards: Who are they and what do they do?



Who are school board members (or directors)?

Every school district in Washington is governed by an elected board of directors, commonly called a “school board.” Most school boards have 5 members who live within the school district.

School board members (or “directors”) serve 4-year terms. Groups of directors are elected in odd numbered years (i.e., 2 directors elected in 2019, 3 directors elected in 2021).

School board members may be paid, up to \$50 per day or \$800 per year. Not all districts pay their school board members, and many are volunteers.

How can I find out more about my school board members?

There are 295 school districts in Washington, with more than 1400 individual school directors. Most school boards maintain webpages that include biographies of each school board member (or “director”).

What are the school board’s duties?

The school board has the final say on a school district’s policies, procedures, and the district’s budget. The school board also hires and supervises the superintendent, who is the chief manager of the school district. In a nutshell, the school board sets the vision for the district and the superintendent executes that vision.

District policies:

Each school board adopts a set of policies that control its actions and provide standards for students and school staff. School board policies cover a variety of issues, including curriculum and grading systems, parent involvement plans, attendance, school discipline, harassment, freedom of expression, student records and student dress. Other policies relate to a district’s internal operations, like hiring and firing, vacation time and building maintenance.

District procedures:

Most school district policies are accompanied by related procedures. Procedures give detailed information about how a policy will be implemented in the schools. Many districts give the superintendent authority to develop the district’s procedures. If your superintendent is responsible for drafting procedures, be sure to talk to the superintendent as well as the board.

District budgets:

School boards approve the budget proposed by the superintendent. Budget discussions are often a good time to push schools for additional resources that support policy priorities (for example, to push for funding to train teachers in alternatives to suspension, or for additional school counselors to support students).

When do school boards make decisions?

School boards meet frequently to discuss district issues and to make decisions. Under Washington's Open Public Meetings Act, schools boards must conduct their meetings in open public meetings. This includes meetings where the board members discuss information as they are considering how to vote on issues.

There are some exceptions. For example, school boards can conduct an "executive session" when discussing complaints about particular district employees or individual student issues.

If you'd like to influence a school board decision, it's important to connect with individual school board members and to participate in school board meetings.