

SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBER ETHICS

(Massachusetts Association of School Committees Code of Ethics)

Preamble

The acceptance of a code of ethics implies the understanding of the basic organization of school committees under the Law of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The oath of office of a School Committee member binds the individual member to adherence to those state laws, which apply to school committees, since school committees are agencies of the state.

This code of ethics delineates three areas of responsibility of School Committee members in addition to that implied above:

- (1) Community responsibility
- (2) Responsibility to the school administration
- (3) Relationship to fellow Committee members

A School Committee member in his/her relations with this community should:

- Realize that his/her primary responsibility is to the children
- Recognize that his/her basic function is to be policymaking and not administrative
- Remember that he/she is one of a team and must abide by, and carry out, all Committee decisions once they are made
- Be well informed concerning the duties of a Committee member on both a local and state level
- Remember that he/she represents the entire community at all times
- Accept the office as a Committee member as an unselfish means of service with no intent to "play politics" in any sense of the word, or to benefit personally from his/her activities

A School Committee member in his/her relations with his school administration should:

- Endeavor to establish sound, clearly defined policies which will direct and support the administrative chain of command and refuse to act on complaints as an individual outside the administration
- Act only on the recommendations of the Superintendent in all appropriate matters of employment of school personnel
- Remember the Superintendent has responsibility for discharging his/her professional duties. Your role is to hold him/her responsible for acceptable results
- Refer all complaints to the administrative staff for solution and only discuss them at Committee meetings if such solutions fail

A School Committee member in his/her relations with his/her fellow Committee members should:

- Recognize that action at official meetings is binding and that he/she alone cannot bind the Committee outside of such meetings

- Realize that he/she should not make statements or promises of how he/she will vote on matters that will come before the Committee
- Uphold the intent of executive sessions and respect the privileged communication that exists in executive sessions
- Not withhold pertinent information on school matters or personnel problems, either from other Committee members or from members of other committees who may be seeking help and information on school problems
- Make decisions only after all facts on a question have been presented and discussed

Good article from the American School Board Journal (Aug 2009): Your First 90 Days on the School Board

www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2009/August/Your-First-90-Days-on-the-School-Board.aspx

I. Obtaining New Information:

- Watch the committee on TV or attend meetings -there is no substitute for experience and watching how other members react and interact
- Ask the Superintendent to send your information to the MASC. They will then send you an invitation to register on their web site www.masc.org. There is information available on the web site to the public, but there is much more once you are registered
- Once you are registered, review MASC materials - read as much as you can. – www.masc.org.
- Get on the MASC listserv. The conversations among school committee members across Massachusetts are very informative, both in terms of the issues of concern to different districts, as well as the range of opinions on every topic
- Attend MASC mandatory training as soon after the election as possible. You will learn: school finance • open meeting law • public records law • conflict of interest law • special education law • collective bargaining • school leadership standards & evaluations • school committee roles & responsibilities
- MASC Conference in Hyannis every November is a great source of information as well as an excellent way to meet and talk with school committee members from other districts. It can also be used for mandatory training. Register through the Superintendent
- Get a good understanding of open meeting law (esp. e-mails and phone calls) and conflict-of-interest. Start at www.Mass.Gov or www.MASC.org and search for “Open Meeting Law 2010”.
- The MSC Policy Manual and By Laws are available at <http://melroseschools.com/msc/policymanual.cfm> There are also tables of contents to guide different user groups through the policies. Spend some time familiarizing yourself. Make notes and ask questions. The MASC makes available copies of some district’s policy manuals. See www.masc.org/policy/online-policy-manuals or search the web for others
- Read Melrose Public School documents: strategic plan, collective bargaining agreements, budget documents, MCAS and NCLB reports, Administrative procedures etc. Most are available on www.MelroseSchools.com

- j. Also on that web site are Melrose School Committee documents, for example read agendas and minutes for the past year
- k. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (aka DOE) website – navigate and investigate: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/>. You will be able to find the official Melrose profile and compare and contrast assessments to other districts of your choosing
- l. Massachusetts General Laws are available at <http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/Search>. While it is a definitive source, it is sometimes difficult to be sure you are reading the latest version of the law
- m. What is the school committees' jurisdiction-what issues will be discussed and why. Also see the document MASC Roles and Governance Guidelines for School Committees..., available on our website at www.melroseschools.com/msc/welcome_about.cfm
- n. Learn about how other cities and towns work - read about their past meetings and comments. Much is available online via search
- o. Absorb the master calendar. What is the cycle of action items? Available at [Melrose School Committee Calendar Overview](#)
- p. Read books and articles on education – what's old? What's new? Especially good is *The Essential School Board Book* by Nancy Walser (Harvard Education Press, 2009)
- q. At the beginning of the school year, consider requesting permission from the Supt. to contact the MVMMS and MHS principals to obtain a sample schedule, then follow it on Open House night to get a window into the secondary education process

II. Building Relationships

- a. Meet with committee members - talk about how to fit in with new group, discuss time management issues, interest (not sure what this means) and how meetings run
- b. Meet with superintendent and other people involved in School Committee-obtain an understanding as to what roles each person will play
- c. Obtain materials from outgoing members-review past MASC training materials and review laws involving school committee, review minutes from past meetings, prior calendar and dates for meetings, read past MASC conference or training materials. Get advice and suggestions
- d. Meet with Principals and other members of the Leadership Team to learn their roles and the issues each has. (Contact the Superintendent to arrange any meetings with School Personnel.)
- e. Go to PTO meetings to learn parent's issues at each school. (Most PTOs are happy to have you come to listen, but if you are not a parent at that school it is polite to contact the PTO ahead of time. Be aware that you should not speak for the committee or make statements about what you will be doing as a committee member.)
- f. Sub-Committees-review roles/responsibilities for your group, meet with chairperson of the committee and discuss what, why and how you function
- g. Prioritize-budgeting time, balancing time availability and meetings.
- h. Suggestions for being a quality committee member (see <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/CA/298>)

- i. Have a mentor (or many) on the Committee and ask them questions. (Keep asking.)
- j. Check in with state elected officials and talk to them about what is happening in education at that level
- k. Network - attend various school events and information sessions, talk to people and listen to their concerns/comments/questions. Refrain from intruding on events where parents are focused on their own children's results, such as Parent Teacher Conference nights. You will be invited to many events, and should attend as many as you can
 - Volunteer for ad-hoc duties like search committees, councils and negotiation teams
 - Attend information sessions like K-1 introduction and middle school step-up night to listen
 - Attend school events like awards nights, school concerts and ceremonies
 - Participate in city panels and discussions when there is an educational component
 - Online calendars will give ideas for everything from art shows, concerts, honors presentations, and athletic events. Youth sporting events are not necessarily listed online, but people are generally very happy to see Committee members
- l. See and be seen (and remember that when you are having dinner at a local restaurant on a Saturday night, you may end up in a school-related conversation with another patron – that's what you and your significant other signed up for)
- m. Ask. Listen. Thank people for their input
- n. Read the local print and on-line news so you know what people are interested in and what the press is saying about those things
- o. Cultivate a group of school parents and non-parent taxpayers whom you trust to be your eyes and ears and talk to them frequently. Ask them what the hot buttons are or what their opinions are on various topics

IMPORTANT NOTE: When you are talking with parents or members of the public, there will be times when someone conveys to you an issue that they are having with their child. Your job is to either refer that person to the appropriate administrator (teacher/principal/superintendent/PPS director etc) or take their contact information and pass it on to the administrator. You must be careful not to promise to look into the matter, or promise a specific resolution, since that is not your role. This is one of the most difficult things that Committee Members do.

III. Think about what you want your role to be

- a. 1st order of business will be voting for new committee Chair. There is a preliminary vote at the last meeting in December with the new members present, and an official vote at the first meeting in January. This sets the tone for the year. The Chair has the ability to set agendas, speak for the committee, assign all subcommittee chair and vice chair positions, and assign the seating chart.
- b. After the election, the incoming Chair will talk with you about the sub-committees and where your strengths and interests might fit. Consider your time availability, experience and

personality. The Chair will consider the same for other members and make his/her appointments.

- c. Review SC roles and responsibilities [MASC Roles and Governance Guidelines for School Committees...](#)
- d. In every decision, think first about what is best for students.
- e. Think about why you ran – what did you want to see happen? Who best can help you accomplish this?
- f. What items are in your control and what is the administration's responsibility? (Don't micromanage but ask lots of questions.)
- g. Draw up a list of priorities and a general timeline. How long will things take? Who will need to be involved? Will it take multiple meetings? How much input will you seek from others?
- h. Hard lesson – education moves very slowly. Celebrate little victories. Really celebrate the big ones.
- i. Don't give up if something is a true and honest goal for you and you know it is for the benefit of students. Just because it doesn't go anywhere now doesn't mean it can't later. Try again another time using an alternate approach.
- j. If you will be chairing a subcommittee, you will also be responsible for the content on that subcommittee's web page. All changes, both removal requests and new document postings should be sent to the Superintendent with clear instructions as to appearance and content. Then you should check the web page over the next day or two until the page is updated to make sure it looks as you expected.

IV. Understand and support the flow of meetings

- a. Get a copy of Roberts Rules of order and read through the appropriate portions
- b. Understand how items get on the agenda
- c. If you are in a position to set subcommittee agenda, balance your agenda items with short-term, long-term and housekeeping items and try to keep in mind other sub-committee agendas so meetings don't go too long. The Committee sets a rolling 3 month agenda, and you will be responsible for keeping this current, so plan ahead
- d. Which items are updates and which need votes in your area?
- e. Get suggestions about how to file meeting and other documents. Agenda items must be forwarded a week before the meeting, and packet items must be finalized by the Wednesday before the meeting
- f. When you get your packet, read it thoroughly and note questions. Ask questions of the responsible party prior to the meeting and get clear and honest answers. Tell that person which of those questions you will be asking in public. If you think of new questions in the meeting, ask them in a respectful way. You don't want surprises but your job is to ask hard questions as well as easy ones
- g. Everyone doesn't have to applaud the efforts of every presenter, or comment on every topic. The public wants to know that there is progress but doesn't want repetition or the appearance that everything is wonderful

- h. Be honest with yourself, the other members, and the public. You won't always agree with everyone and that is just fine – you were elected because you represent the voices of those who can't vote in meetings, so say what you think in a collegial way that tries to accomplish quality goals for the right reasons
- i. Assume that anything you say at a meeting will be quoted and repeated. That doesn't mean you shouldn't say it. It just means that your phone might ring tomorrow because the public loved it or hated it. More dialogue between members and presenters is better than less dialogue but each speaker should be as succinct as possible

V. Specific reminders

- a. Use e-mail prudently –every email that you send or receive that has ANYTHING to do with your position on the School Committee, even if it is from a friend, is a public document
- b. Maintain records of your emails - they can be requested at any time by anyone. It is best to use the Melrose.mec.edu email address that you will be given, because these accounts are automatically archived. One way to do this is to send a copy of all emails to your school committee account routinely. This is a legal requirement, so it is vital that you have a plan and follow through
- c. Have fun with the fun things. You get a nameplate and an engraved pen – cool! You also need to write about yourself for the website – what will you say that is meaningful?
- d. Public person- you are now a public person and more people will want to talk to you. Be careful about quotes, discussion and response to indirect or direct questions. See the note again on page 3 – refer problems and don't promise specific results – promise that someone will get back to them
- e. Remember that you are on camera at all times and everything you say can be quoted in or out of context at any time. Don't be paralyzed by this, but be aware of it
- f. Maintain Privacy! If in doubt, don't pass on information you learned as a committee member. Try to think of which information is public, and which is private. If it is anything about a student or an employee, then it is ALWAYS private – to be kept even from spouses and close friends
- g. Only the School Committee Chair can speak for the committee, so refer questions to the chair unless they are specifically for you
- h. Refer requests for public documents to the Superintendent
- i. In Roberts Rules check out – motions, postponement, reconsideration, personal privilege...
- j. Read and follow the Melrose School Committee Communication Plan

Examples of School Committee Roles and Responsibilities

Budget:

We approve the initial budget and must approve changes to line items throughout the year.

The Superintendent has the responsibility within each line item of the budget to approve the expenditure of funds.

The Committee signs off on every expenditure on a monthly basis. The warrants require 4 signatures. If you want to have time to look over the bills, either go to the Superintendent's office during the day of the meetings, or come to the meeting 30 minutes early. Feel free to ask questions.

Hiring:

We hire the Superintendent.

We approve the hiring of the Business Manager, the Director of PPS and the Curriculum Director, based on the Superintendent's recommendation. (The Superintendent hires all other personnel.)

We evaluate the Superintendent on his personnel choices in his annual review (usually in June/July).

In setting the budget, we approve the structure of personnel in the school system. New positions must be approved by the School Committee.

Curriculum:

We evaluate the Superintendent on the implementation of curriculum.

We approve expenditures for materials that might be needed for the implementation of curriculum, such as for a new elementary math curriculum.

We receive reports about the implementation of curriculum, and we give feedback.

Problems with Teachers:

We can ask the Superintendent to look into issues, and make suggestions to him/her based on the information we receive, but it is up to the Building Principal and the Superintendent to decide what is to be done and to give effect to it.

We evaluate the Superintendent on the running of the district.

