

School Committee Roles and Governance

Dear Colleague:

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 made significant changes to governance structure of school districts and to the roles and responsibilities of school committees. The law ushered in a new era in the way school committees function. By setting up the school committee with a role similar to a Board of Directors, the law makes you and your colleagues the responsible leaders for hiring your superintendent and setting school district policy including all its various facets such as establishing district goals, objectives and strategic plans; budgeting and oversight of school spending; and collective bargaining, just to name a few areas. As you can see, Massachusetts places in your hands substantial powers to guide the future of public education in your community.

It is our hope that the information presented here will serve as an important resource, answer some of your questions, deal with your concerns, and guide you. We believe strongly that, as you become more familiar with the contents, you will also become more confident about your duties.

We at MASC have found that many veteran committee members as well as new members are not aware of the documents they should have to make their job more easily understood. For your convenience we have separated this information into the following categories:

- A. SCHOOL COMMITTEE-SUPERINTENDENT ROLES
- B. REFERENCE MATERIALS FOR SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBERS
- C. WHAT YOU CAN DO TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR MEETINGS
- D. SETTING ACHIEVABLE GOALS
- E. KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

It would be impossible to include all of the information you will need as you assume your new duties. However, we hope you find everything contained in this packet useful and enlightening, and encourage you to take advantage of all the resources, information and services MASC has to offer.

Remember - you are not alone on this journey. MASC is always here!

The MASC Staff

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Introduction

Congratulations! The campaigning is over and you have won your election. You have just been sworn in as a newly elected school committee member and you are feeling great! However, there is one problem. That little voice inside you is saying: "OK, you did it. Now what?" There are so many questions.

- ❑ What is expected of me?
- ❑ Do I understand my role?
- ❑ What is the role of the superintendent?
- ❑ Legally, what am I responsible for?
- ❑ What is "policy"?
- ❑ Am I the final authority over the budget?
- ❑ Who prepares the budget?
- ❑ What is the budget process?
- ❑ What is Ed Reform and how does it affect me as a school committee member?
- ❑ What goals and objectives should I be developing and who will benefit from them?
- ❑ How do I evaluate myself, the superintendent and, most importantly, the students, to insure that I am fulfilling my commitment to the community?
- ❑ How does collective bargaining impact on the decisions we will make and what is my role in that process?

The answers to these and other questions are important to you as a school committee member. Ask yourself one other question: **How well will I work with the other members of the committee and the superintendent to ensure that the primary focus of our educational leadership is always the student?**

As you deliberate, debate, and discuss, remember one thing; your decisions should always be based on providing the students with the best possible educational opportunities.

A. School Committee-Superintendent Roles

Policy

School Committee:

- Establish and periodically review educational goals and policies for the schools in the district, consistent with the requirements of law and the statewide goals and standards established by the Board of Education. This is the primary role of the school committee. Policies should be reflective of the fact that the school committee has oversight of and responsibility for the school system, the direction in which the system must go, and should establish criteria to determine if its goals and policies are being met.

Superintendent:

- Develop and inform the committee of administrative procedures required to implement committee policies.
- Present policy options along with specific recommendations to the school committee when circumstances require the committee to adopt new policies or review existing policies.

Finance

School Committee:

- Review and approve a budget for education in the district according to a process and timeline developed with the superintendent.
- Work to ensure that necessary funds are appropriated for the district and that a balance is maintained between needs and resources in the distribution of available monies.
- Oversee the operation of the annual school budget.

Superintendent:

- Develop a timeline and recommend to the school committee the system's educational goals and annual school budget
- Oversee the operation of the annual school budget.
- Provide periodic updates to school committee.
- Provide early notice of any potential budget overruns.

Staffing

School Committee:

- Appoint the superintendent.
- Appoint the assistant/associate superintendents, school business administrator, administrator of special education, school physicians and registered nurses (unless employees of the Board of Health), legal counsel, and supervisors of attendance, upon recommendation of the superintendent. Consent to hiring based on the superintendent's recommendation should not be unreasonably withheld.
- Set compensation for the superintendent and overall compensation limits for assistant/associate superintendents, school business administrator, administrator of special education, school physicians and registered nurses, legal counsel, supervisors of attendance, school principals, and other administrators not assigned to particular schools.
- Prescribe additional qualifications for educator positions, beyond basic certification.
- Discipline or terminate the employment of the superintendent, in accordance with state law and the terms of the contract of employment.

Superintendent:

- Appoint, discipline and discharge administrators, principals, and staff not assigned to particular schools.
- Review and approve principal's hires of all teachers, athletic coaches and other personnel assigned to a particular school, consistent with district personnel policies and budgetary restrictions. Initiate or review and approve discipline or discharge of staff.

Collective Bargaining

School Committee:

- Act as employer of school employees for collective bargaining purposes.
- Designate a negotiator or negotiating team.
- Receive advice from superintendent about educational consequences of bargaining positions.

Superintendent:

- Serve as a resource in collective bargaining.
- Assure adherence to all collective bargaining agreements.

Performance Standards

School Committee:

- Establish, upon the recommendation of the superintendent, the performance standards for teachers and other employees of the school district.
- Evaluate the performance of the superintendent.
- Conduct self-evaluation of the committee's effectiveness in meeting its stated goals and performing its role in public school governance.

Superintendent:

- Assure the evaluation of personnel and provide training for evaluators in harmony with district policy.
- Develop performance standards for all staff that are in keeping with school committee policy, contractual agreements and educational goals of the district.

Professional Development

School Committee:

- Adopt a professional development plan for all principals, teachers and other professional staff employed by the district.
- Provide and encourage resources for school committee professional development programs that will enable school leaders to have the knowledge and skills required to provide effective policy leadership for the school system.

Superintendent:

- Implement the professional development plan adopted by the school committee for professional staff.
- Ensure that professional development activities are available to all school department employees.

School Councils

School Committee:

- Review and approve an annual school improvement plan for each school in the district.
- Provide and encourage resources for school council professional development programs that will enable council members to have the knowledge and skills required to provide effective educational leadership.

Superintendent:

- Review with principals the role of school councils and relevant activities.

Advocacy

School Committee:

- Engage in advocacy on behalf of students and their schools and promote the benefits of a public school system to the community.
- Work closely, when appropriate, with other governmental agencies and bodies.
- Collaborate with other school committees through state and national school committee associations to let state legislators, members of Congress, and all other appropriate state and federal officials know of local concerns and issues.

Superintendent:

- Engage in advocacy on behalf of students and their schools and promote the benefits of a public school system to the community.
- Collaborate with other administrators through national and state professional associations to inform state legislators, members of Congress, and other appropriate state and federal officials on local concerns and issues.
- Work with local and state officials to garner support for a fair and sound school budget that encompasses jointly developed committee-administration goals and priorities.

Curriculum

School Committee:

- Approve major adoption or revision of curriculum and textbooks upon recommendation of the superintendent. (MASC recommends school committee approval when budgeting and policy implications exist.)

Superintendent:

- Ensure a process for the development and continual refinement of the curriculum.
- Recommend major adoptions of courses or textbooks.

Governance

School Committee:

- Establish educational goals and policies for the schools in the district, consistent with the requirement of law and the statewide goals and standards established by the Board of Education.
- Delegate to the superintendent the responsibilities for all administrative functions.
- Act only as a body as prescribed by law and not as individual members.

Superintendent:

- Serve as the school committee's chief executive officer and preeminent educational advisor in all efforts of the committee to fulfill its school system governance role.
- Serve as a catalyst for the school system's administrative leadership team.
- Propose and initiate a process for long range and strategic planning that will engage the committee and the community in positioning the school system for success in ensuing years.
- Ensure that the school system provides equal opportunity for all students and staff.

Communication

School Committee:

- Support the development and promotion of the vision, mission, goals and strategies of the school system.
- Review prior to all school committee meetings the information provided by the superintendent and, when possible, communicate any questions or concerns to the superintendent prior to the meeting to provide an opportunity for a response.
- Consult and confer with the superintendent on all matters that concern the school system as they arise, and on which the school committee may take action.
- Maintain open communication between the community and the schools by scheduling public meetings on a regular basis.
- Support the superintendent in all matters that conform to committee policy.

Superintendent:

- Keep all school committee members informed about school operations and programs. Identify and articulate the needs of the school system to the school committee.
- Develop and promote a plan for achieving the mission, vision, goals and strategies of the school system.
- Provide all school committee members with appropriate background information in advance of each committee meeting.
- Develop and implement a continuing plan for working with the news media.
- Be aware of all aspects of Massachusetts education law and share all changes or amendments with the school committee in a timely fashion.
- Share responsibility with the school committee for open communication and honest discourse. Maintain open communication between the community and the schools.

What Makes a Great School Committee Member

- ❑ They seek first to understand --- then, to be understood.
- ❑ They are open-minded. They keep learning.
- ❑ They remain humble with their authority.
- ❑ They build strong personal relationships.
- ❑ They believe in people. They decide to believe the best about someone first, not the worst.
- ❑ They are courageous. They confront issues, not people.
- ❑ They are compassionate. They share credit and accept blame gracefully. They communicate problems and strive to resolve them amicably.

What Makes a Great Superintendent

- ❑ They are open and honest with the school committee and the community.
- ❑ They develop an ongoing relationship with the committee.
- ❑ They work cooperatively with staff, students, parents, citizens and municipal officials.
- ❑ They confront issues, not people.
- ❑ They make sure that all reports, both legal and otherwise, are submitted in a timely manner.
- ❑ They are able to understand the diversity of the committee, as well as the community.
- ❑ They make communication a number one priority, when it relates to the educational process.
- ❑ They take a leadership role as an advocate for the public school students.

B. Reference Materials for School Committee Members

General Responsibilities and School Committee Relations

1. A personal copy of all school committee policies and administrative rules of the district. (An updated policy manual is a committee member's best reference guide for answering questions and considering issues before the committee.)
2. A school committee organization chart (officers, standing and ad hoc committees, if any).
3. An explanation of how school committee meetings are conducted, including an outline of parliamentary procedures.
4. An explanation of the authority and responsibilities of the committee, superintendent, administrators, and individual committee members.
5. A copy of the school district's improvement plan.

School Finance

1. A copy of the district's budget. (An explanation and overview of the district's priorities and how, when and by whom it is prepared; how educational needs are translated into a dollars and cents plan, where the money goes and how the money is spent).
2. An explanation of the funding process for the school district.

Curriculum and Instruction

1. A copy of the school district's written statement of educational philosophy and mission statement.
2. An explanation of curriculum standards required by state law and implemented by the rules of the Massachusetts Department of Education.
3. The district's technology plan, outlining what instructional technology is needed and how it is integrated into the school improvement plans.

Administration and Staff

1. An organizational chart of the school district's management structure.
2. A copy of the district's collective bargaining agreements, if any, and a brief history of recent collective bargaining activities in the district.

School District Facilities

1. A list showing the number, location and condition of schools and other buildings owned or operated by the district.

C. What You Can Do to Get the Most Out of Your Committee Meetings

As an individual member of your committee, you're not in control of the committee meeting, but there are some things you can do to make the most of them:

- Do your homework! When you get the agenda and back-up materials, read them and be prepared to contribute to the discussion. Plan your questions in advance and jot them down before coming to the meeting.
- If you do not get the information you need, check with the superintendent or your chairperson before the meeting.
- Try to know in advance what is expected of you. Be prepared to make any presentation expected.
- Organize your papers before arriving at the meeting. Bring everything you need.
- Arrive on time.
- Keep the committee's objectives in mind.
- Don't spring any surprises on the committee.
- If you're unprepared, don't fake it. If others are obviously unprepared, but are debating the issue anyway, try to cut them off as diplomatically as possible (a motion to table is one method).
- Work to reach agreement on the issues and come to a decision. If the discussion gets bogged down, try to summarize and encourage action.
- Avoid having a hidden agenda—saying one thing and meaning another.
- Avoid espousing personal philosophies at length.
- Don't attack personalities, attack problems.
- Keep your eyes open. If, in mid-sentence (mid-argument), you realize that everybody around you is either glaring at you, blushing for you, or packing up to go home, take the hint and stop talking.
- Don't dominate discussions.
- Broaden your concerns. No matter what special interest group encouraged your election or appointment, once on the committee, you should cast your vote according to your conscience. Vote with the knowledge that, as a committee member, you almost always know more sides of an issue than your constituents do.
- Do not debate issues with members of the audience.

D. Setting Achievable Goals

The first step toward setting goals is establishing a vision for your district. This vision tells your students, teachers, parents, and community members where you're going. To create a vision, you need to seek the widest possible involvement by all groups in the community. Students also need to be included in the process. It is important that you reach out to a variety of students—not just your National Merit Scholars or your Student Council members.

Simply put, establishing a vision requires the committee and the community to:

- take a deep look inside
- take a wide look around
- take a long look ahead

Once a vision has been established, committees need to create a structure for reaching their vision. This can be accomplished by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of your school district.

1. Examine and evaluate routine school activities and operations.
2. Identify priority educational needs.
3. Review existing policies in light of the district's vision.
4. Demonstrate the concern of the committee and staff for the continued evaluation and improvement of the school system.
5. Collect valuable information that will help committee members and administrators plan and allocate revenues for a variety of programs and projects.

Once the committee has clarified its vision, conducted a needs assessment and identified emerging trends, it must establish the structure for achieving the vision. In general, this is done by setting goals and priorities for the district. It is not uncommon to have 30 or 40 goals evolve from the needs assessment. Boards often require their administrative team to reduce the list to about 10 broad goals.

Following are some concepts you should be familiar with:

Priorities	are your most important goals. Boards set priorities by deciding which goals will get the most time, attention and money. Although money is often a key factor, some boards try to avoid the funding issue until after they set their priorities.
Objectives	are the support tasks which must be successfully completed in order to accomplish a given goal. Objectives sometimes are called "targets," "milestones," or "strategies." They usually are developed by the administration, sometimes approved by the board, and often written with a price tag attached.
Goals	are statements of purpose and direction. They serve to identify standards to be maintained where change is to occur and to define the boundaries of that change. They are the results your board hopes to achieve in order to eliminate a problem or meet a need.
Vision	is a statement of a preferred future, assuming all resources are available. The vision statement may encompass a period of up to ten years.

E. Ed Reform Clarifies Key School Committee Responsibilities

Since the enactment of the Education Reform Act in 1993, it is important to note that the authority of the school committee has been more clearly defined. Establishing **POLICY** has been identified as a critical responsibility of the school committee. "Policy" is not easy to define. Webster defines it as "organizing and regulating the internal order of....." National School Boards says "Policy is an idea with power". When we speak about school committee policy we speak about ideas with the power to set directions for the school system to bring about prudent action by the administration, the staff, and the Committee itself. Without clear and concise written policies, your school system will not operate effectively with the stability and continuity you expect.

Another important school committee responsibility is the review and approval of the **BUDGET**. The superintendent presents his/her recommendations to the committee based on the educational goals and other needs of the system. The budget reflects the committee's established priorities and demonstrates its commitment to the community and to the students.

In order to establish a meaningful strategic plan, the school committee and superintendent are responsible for developing system-wide **GOALS and OBJECTIVES**. Budget priorities should reflect these goals and objectives.

Goals are statements of purpose and direction. They serve to identify standards to be maintained where change is to occur and to define the boundaries of that change. They are the results your board hopes to achieve in order to eliminate a problem or meet a need.

All students should have equal educational opportunities and every student should be prepared, upon graduation, to go on to higher education or into the work place.

The committee will also play a roll in designing and assessing **PERFORMANCE STANDARDS**. The assessment document should be developed to ensure accountability and performance. This will allow both students and teachers to achieve the goals and objectives that have already been established. Evaluation should be viewed as a positive step toward building a healthy school system.

As you consider these four areas of responsibility, you will realize the importance of your school system's **MISSION /VISION STATEMENT**.

Vision is a statement of a preferred future, assuming all resources are available. The vision statement may encompass a period of up to ten years.

Your **MISSION/VISION STATEMENT** should reflect your purpose. Your **BUDGET, POLICIES, GOALS & OBJECTIVES** and **PERFORMANCE STANDARDS** all should be closely aligned with your mission statement. Once this is accomplished, you will better understand that the role you play in the educational process has not diminished, but, in fact, has been enhanced. The changes that have taken place have helped to clarify your role and inspire teamwork.