



A Guide to Decision-Making in Schools

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When it comes to broad questions about public schools – like how money is spent, what classes are taught, and what extra-curricular programs are offered – decisions are made at many levels and it can be unclear who to go to for answers.

The purpose of this guide is to identify who makes decisions in public schools and where you can go to get your questions answered.

State Board of Education

Each state in the country has a Board of Education – sometimes called by that name and sometimes called by a different name – that makes policies about the state’s education system.

State Boards of Education are often established by the state constitution and typically oversee or are part of the state’s Department of Education. Usually, Board members are appointed by the state’s governor, although they can be elected by the state’s electorate.

The roles of State Boards of Education vary from state to state, particularly as they pertain to areas like state financing for public schools. Below are examples of some issues and areas that State Boards of Education are responsible for.

Responsibilities

- Sets the state’s education policies for pre-kindergarten through high school, and often for community colleges and public colleges and universities
- Decides how the rules that govern schools will be enforced and recommends changes in school laws when appropriate
- Sets high academic expectations for all schools and students in the state
- Adopts long-range plans for the state’s entire education system
- Adopts rules for accrediting public and nonpublic schools
- Hears appeals of local school board decisions
- Collaborates with other educational and non-educational bodies and organizations
- Approves the budgets of community colleges and state education agencies
- Approves teacher training and preparation programs

Ask Your State Board of Education

State Boards of Education tend to meet monthly and meetings are usually open to the public. A public comment period is usually set aside during each meeting.

If you'd like to bring up a topic or question, most Boards require you to submit a request to the Board office in advance. Visit your State Board of Education Web site or call the Board office for details.

Your State Board of Education should be able to answer questions about:

- Statewide public school performance
- State standards like graduation requirements and high school exit exams
- Teacher training and programs to improve teacher quality
- Long-range plans to improve school quality

Local School Board

The role of the local school board differs by state and even across districts. In fact, in some districts the traditional functions of the school board have been turned over to the mayor. However, the majority of districts do have local school boards that are entrusted to set the policies and standards that govern a school district. These boards can only take action on issues through a majority vote at a public meeting.

Responsibilities

- Establishes academic goals for the school district
- Adopts a budget for the school district
- Approves individual school budgets and expenditures
- Levies and collects taxes and issue bonds
- Sets the school calendar including the number of days and hours students must attend school
- Adopts the curriculum and courses for the school district (in some states)
- Hires and supervises the Superintendent of Schools
- Approves the hiring and termination of school personnel, including teachers
- Approves new building plans and oversees construction and maintenance of school buildings and grounds
- Adopts standards for student promotion
- Establishes student safety and behavior codes
- Adopts rules regarding student uniforms
- Enforces mandatory school attendance laws
- Makes sure school buses and transportation are available to students
- Holds regular meetings to conduct the business of the district and hear from employees, students and citizens
- Provides annual district progress reports to the state
- Makes overall student performance data available to the public
- Informs parents of district enrollment options

Ask Your Local School Board

In many districts, local school boards are elected by the people and directly accountable to the community. In other communities, school board members are appointed by officials who are elected.

School board meetings are open to the public (except for meetings on personnel issues) and frequently provide opportunities for residents to participate. Contact your local school board to learn whether meetings include a public forum, or whether your concern or questions should be part of the meeting agenda.

Your local school board should be able to answer questions about:

- School budgets and funding
- School safety and student behavior policies
- School curriculum and course requirements
- District-wide school and student performance

Superintendent

The superintendent is chief executive officer of the school system.

Under direction of the school board (and sometimes the mayor), the superintendent is responsible for general supervision of all of the schools and personnel in a local school district. The superintendent manages schools according to the school board's policies, makes recommendations to and is directly accountable to the school board.

Responsibilities

- Provides administrative leadership and manages district day-to-day operations
- Makes recommendations to the school board on strategies to implement and achieve the educational goals set by the board
- Prepares and administers the school budget
- Designs and implements school governance procedures, according to policy set by the school board
- Makes recommendations to the school board on the hiring, renewal, non-renewal and dismissal of personnel
- Keeps the school board informed on school curriculum and the evaluation of school programs
- Leads the administrative effort to plan for, operate, evaluate and supervise improvements to school facilities
- Recommends and implements a program of school-community relations and keeps the community informed about district performance, policies, programs and procedures

Ask Your Superintendent

If a question or issue is not resolved at the school level, it is often brought before the superintendent. The superintendent, in turn, may resolve the issue or bring it before the local school board.

Your superintendent should be able to answer questions about:

- School budgets
- District-wide strategies to improve student achievement
- School curriculum and any special academic programs (like remedial programs, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, etc.)
- Programs and partnerships to engage the community in public schools

In larger school districts, you may visit or contact specialists at the school district's central office. These specialists are designated to represent the superintendent in areas like testing, curriculum and budget, and should be able to answer your questions.

Principal

The principal oversees the work of the entire school staff including teachers, counselors, custodians and many others.

The school principal must ensure that the work of the school runs smoothly including providing discipline and safety as well as day-to-day management of the students and teachers. The principal is also in charge of ensuring that students receive high quality instruction and that teachers work to raise student achievement.

Responsibilities

- Organizes, implements and administers the total school program (according to the standards of the local Board of Education and State Department of Education) as it relates to students, faculty and other school staff
- Ensures compliance with all laws, board policies and civil regulations
- Supervises and evaluates the instructional program
- Supervises and evaluates all school personnel
- Uses multiple sources of data to develop a plan for the improvement of student achievement
- Maintains high standards of student conduct and enforces discipline when necessary
- Maintains a safe, supportive learning environment within the school
- Plans and implements opportunities for teacher and staff development
- Communicates with students, teachers, parents and community organizations and provides opportunities for community involvement in all phases of the school program
- Prepares and submits to the appropriate agencies all required records and reports

Ask Your Principal

As the educational leader of the school, the principal knows the “ins and outs” of what’s happening in the classroom and is one of the first people to approach with questions or concerns about the school.

Your principal should be able to answer questions about:

- School performance
- School curriculum and the instructional program
- School-wide strategies to improve student achievement
- Teacher qualifications and plans for ongoing professional development
- Programs and partnerships to engage parents and the community in the school
- Student discipline and school safety

Parent Teacher Associations/Parent-Teacher-Organizations

Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) are voluntary organizations of parents and teachers in a school or school district. These groups typically deal with issues particular to their local school or district, such as fundraising, community communications, parent involvement and volunteering.

Local PTAs are associated with their state's PTA and the National PTA, while PTOs are unaffiliated with the National PTA.

Ask Your PTA or PTO

The PTA and PTO are not decision-making bodies in schools and do not have the authority to make school decisions. They do, however, serve as a key link between schools and the community and often provide opportunities for parents and the community to engage in schools. Many play a key role in distributing school information and in organizing activities and events that raise money for school programs and activities.

Your local PTA or PTO should be able to answer questions about:

- Opportunities to get involved in activities that support public schools
- Fundraising events and volunteer opportunities
- Ways that the community can support public schools