



# STRONGER THAN EVER

# TOGETHER

## Insights for Prospective School Board Candidates from Former Board Members: *What is School Board Service All About?*

*We look forward to meeting and hearing from all of the candidates running for seats on our school board! PT Council approached a few former board members for some personal and frank insights on what being a school board member was really like; here's what they shared:*

### **How can people who are interested in running to be elected as a school board trustee learn more about what this position involves?**

- Review materials from New York State and Westchester/Putnam School Boards Association
- Look at Mamaroneck-specific materials – watch Board meetings, review the proposed budget and other items on District website, review Board of Education operating procedures and policies
- Talk to current and former school board members – they are a great resource for what the board member experience is really like!

### **What characteristics/experiences are helpful for school board work?**

- INTEREST – commitment to public education and respect for same
  - Desire to improve outcomes for ALL students – not just address one single issue
  - Willingness to work WITH school community
- TIME
  - Estimate: approximately 15-20 hours/week
    - Mostly hours are flexible, but you need to be available for scheduled meetings
    - At least some Board members need to be available during the day to work with PTAs and other committees that meet during the school day
  - Lots of reading – Board agendas, memos, policies, budget docs
  - Make time to stay informed about national/regional news items
  - Learn how to prioritize so you are prepared for the next meeting but also have time for thinking about long-term issues/goals
  - Offer timely responses to emails from Board president, committees, administrators and provide your own written communications to the group (such as notes of committee meeting or other meeting attended) in a timely fashion

- WILLINGNESS TO LEARN – and there’s A LOT!
  - Schools are highly regulated by state and federal law
    - Become familiar with laws and regulations that govern everything in education from budgets and the ability of school districts to “save” money for future expenses to special education services and collective bargaining agreements
    - Understand and comply with the Open Meetings Law
  - Understand the different responsibilities of school boards and school district administration
  - Some training is mandated by the state (fiscal oversight and governance)
  - Other training from school board associations is available and often helpful
  - Mamaroneck also provides formal training for new Board trustees; on-boarding process includes:
    - meetings with central and building administrators
    - review of policies and other historical documents
    - assignment of a more experienced Board member as a mentor
  - New Board members need to take a broad perspective – become a “generalist”:
    - show up as much as possible wherever possible to get different points of view
    - participate in committees not just because of a particular interest, but also to learn more
  - You need to be responsible for your own education as a new trustee
    - BUT – before asking for data, etc., need to consider if/how a request will further the work of the Board (vs. “I was just wondering...” or “it would be nice to know...”)
    - The Board president and your mentor are very helpful in this process
    - There are also “experts” to help you – attorneys, accountants, administrators – but remember that the fiduciary duty is yours
  
- WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE
  - YOU MUST LISTEN -- to administrators, stakeholders and fellow Board members
  - Share in communicating to the community what the Board is doing and why
  - Communicate in a timely and appropriate fashion with Board president and Board colleagues
  
- INTEREST IN BEING A TEAM PLAYER
  - The authority to act rests with the Board as a whole and not with individual Board trustees
    - The Board speaks through the Board president, who leads the Board’s work
  - Try to reach consensus when possible – compromise is key
    - Decisions are made based on Board members’ individual independent analyses
    - Respect colleagues and administrators even if you disagree, and aspire to tee up discussions in a way that will be productive

- There are only seven trustees, so an inability to work together would make it difficult to serve the needs of the District and its students
  - While individual Board members are encouraged to voice their opinions during the decision-make process, it is expected that all trustees will support the final decision of the Board even if they had been in the minority
- WILLINGNESS TO MAKE HARD DECISIONS
  - Sometimes, hard choices have to be made
  - Compromise when appropriate
  - You simply can't please all the people all the time – and it can be difficult to disappoint your friends and neighbors
- MUST RESPECT CONFIDENTIALITY
  - Certain matters are confidential by law
  - Even if a matter isn't confidential, it is hard to have a functional board of education or a thriving school district if trustees make it a practice of speaking negatively about colleagues and work in progress

**What are some of the challenges that comes with this type of public service?**

- Things take time – big ships need time to turn. You'll need patience and persistence
- Making decisions on behalf of the community
  - How do you know what the majority really thinks?
    - The loudest voices are not always representative
    - Aspire to hear all voices
  - Defining what's the "right" decision is often complicated
  - Sometimes there is no "right" answer
- Distrust from some in community that is sometimes expressed as hostility... there will be times you'll need a tough skin