

13 Things School Board Members Wish People Knew About Them

1. We are the best trained elected officials in the state.

New Jersey requires school board members to take training courses that cover topics such as policy, school finance, student achievement, labor relations and school law.

These courses must be taken in the first, second and third years of a board member's first term in office. Then, in the first year of any re-elected or reappointed term, the board member must undergo training on recent developments in school law. No other elected officials in the state are required to take such training.

2. We have to go through a criminal background check before taking office.

Again, this is a mandate that no other elected officials must go through. Before taking office, we undergo a criminal background check to ensure we haven't been convicted of crimes that would disqualify us for school board service.

3. We have to adhere to a code of ethics.

The Code of Ethics for School Board Members says, among other things, that board members will not administer schools but see that they are well-run; that board members will hold confidential all matters pertaining to the schools which, if disclosed would injure individuals or the schools; and that board members will make decisions based on the educational welfare of children. Here is the entire code of ethics: <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ethics/coe.htm>

4. We are legally required to go into executive session when we discuss certain matters.

At a school board meeting, when the board adjourns to go into executive, or "closed" session, sometimes people don't understand the function of a such a session. They think that perhaps the board would just rather conduct its business out of the public eye. But there are solid legal reasons why boards have to do this: they are required to protect the privacy of employees and students when discussing certain matters. Examples of other topics that need to be kept confidential would include anticipated litigation and issues that involve attorney-client privilege, negotiations with labor unions; matters involving the purchase of property and issues dealing with security that could undermine safety if made public.

5. We can't tell you the "real" reason that teacher was non-renewed... or that student got suspended.

One of the core values we observe—and a tenet of the Code of Ethics for School Board Members—is observing confidentiality.



6. We're not the person to talk to if you have a problem with your child's teacher.

Our mandate is to oversee the management of the schools, not to manage them. That means complaints about a teacher need to go up through the chain of command. First, parents need to talk to the teacher, then perhaps the department supervisor, the principal...and so on up to the superintendent. So if you tell me about a problem with a teacher, the first thing I'll say is: Have you talked with the teacher and the principal?

7. At school board meetings, the public comment period is for the members of the public to comment, not engage in a discussion with board members.

State law requires a public comment period at board meetings, but it is not a time for board members to engage in a dialog with members of the public. If a member of the public has a question, school district staffers will sometimes answer, and sometimes will get back to them later with the information.

Boards are allowed to establish reasonable restrictions on the time, place and manner of public comment. For instance, school boards typically set guidelines on the length of an individual's comment time, so no one person dominates the meeting. There is no required format for public comment; some boards have one public-comment period per meeting, others have more.

8. We don't get keys to the school buildings.

Again, we don't run the school district, we see that it is properly run. Building administrators have keys to the buildings, but we don't. So don't call us at 9:30 p.m. when the building is locked and your child left his math book in the locker.

9. We don't get paid a salary!

More often than you'd think, we have to educate people about the fact that being a school board member is an unpaid gig. There are some school districts in some states, including Florida, Virginia, North Carolina and California that pay school board members, but not in New Jersey. Not now, not ever.

10. We only oversee one employee: the superintendent.

The board votes on recommendations for hiring (and non-renewal) that the superintendent makes, but we only truly have complete authority over the hiring of one employee: the chief school administrator.

11. One or two board members can't enact new policies.

The board only has authority to act when a majority of its members vote on something. That means no matter how strongly one or two board members feel about an issue, or how often they bring something up at meetings, unless they can convince a majority of their colleagues to see things their way, they don't have the power to do anything.

12. We don't decide when school is closed for a snow day.

That call belongs to the superintendent. To be honest, we wouldn't even want to make that decision!

13. We take great pride in the most satisfying part of our job: having a lasting impact on the education of the children in our community, and helping every child reach his or her full potential.

As veteran board members will tell you, it is immensely satisfying to watch their district's schoolchildren at graduation, at a musical or theater performance, at an athletic event, or receiving some sort of recognition. Research has shown that the decisions that boards of education make can positively impact student achievement. Just knowing that their service on the board contributed to that child's success, makes all those long evening meetings worth it!

