



Boards Making a Difference

School Districts Innovate to Find Civic-Minded, Student-Focused Citizens for Open Seats

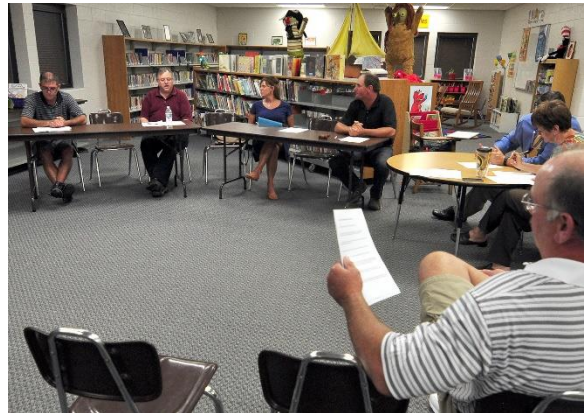
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School board service is a challenging job with long hours, no pay and a significant commitment to learning. Yet, according to current school board members, board service is incredibly rewarding and worthwhile. School board members help ensure that Iowa schools prepare students to succeed in school and beyond.

This year, school elections are on Nov. 5, 2019 and 51% of 1,863 board seats in 327 school districts are up for reelection. The 2017 Iowa Legislature moved school elections to November (from September) beginning in 2019, coinciding with election of city and county officials. This change brings many implications—deadlines, dates, organizational meetings, and more. But one thing remains the same—districts need qualified community members to run for their local school board.

Many school districts struggle to fill these open board seats—whether it's finding interested community members to run for a first term, or urging incumbent board members to run for another term. Nearly half of school board members in Iowa serve only one four-year term.

With school elections just around the corner, school districts across the state are gearing up to build public interest in serving and educating candidates on the role of the board. Visit our [Get on Board elections toolkit](#) for many resources to help with this important work.



MULTIPLE STRATEGIES, ONE END GOAL

School districts are utilizing many different platforms and strategies to provide information to interested citizens to get the word out about elections and open board seats. From candidate forums, to candidate profiles, to informative sessions, school districts are innovating to communicate and share information with their communities.

With all these different strategies and platforms—social media, websites, traditional media, word-of-mouth—there is one end goal in mind: cast the net wide in search of passionate and dedicated leaders.

Johnston Schools Superintendent Laura Kacer says, “More than ever, we feel the need to really communicate about the elections, post all candidate information, respond to individual inquiries, and provide an abundance of information to voters. School board members play a critical role in guiding our district forward.”

INFORMATIVE SESSIONS PROVIDE THE BASICS OF BOARD SERVICE

Albia Schools has collaborated with other school districts within the [South Central Conference](#) to hold informative sessions for interested community members over the past six election cycles. Superintendent Kevin Crall says, “There is no expectation that these individuals attending the informative sessions are going to commit to run for the board. We just want to give them information and provide papers, so if they decide they want to run after learning more about board service, they can do so during or after the session.”

The South Central Conference has sponsored these 60-90 minute sessions at Honey Creek Resort with dinner included. Albia and other districts within the conference invite community members to attend to learn what it means to be a board member. Representatives from IASB help facilitate and answer questions, a former superintendent shares challenges from past experiences, and board presidents are invited to attend to provide important insights. They arrange the round tables by district and encourage citizens to engage in table talk with current board members (not up for reelection) who are also placed at the tables. Each community member is given a packet containing district-specific fiscal information, student demographics, professional development, past academic accomplishments, and future goals and projects.

In the past, these sessions have averaged around 10-15 candidates, advertised through newspaper ads and social media. Crall emphasizes why he values these informative sessions, “It’s important to



have passionate people on your school board, for the right reason—to help promote education in the state of Iowa.”

FORUMS OFFER CANDIDATES A VOICE

Clear Creek Amana Schools has hosted candidate forums the last two election cycles to help candidates share their positions and perspectives, and help community members learn about candidates for the school board. Around 20 community members have attended the forums, with all candidates participating. There are [six to 10 predetermined questions](#) on a variety of issues for candidates to answer, including strengths of the district, board roles and responsibilities and time commitments.

Superintendent Tim Kuehl says the forums are important because they help candidates truly understand the role of the board, “It seems that many candidates have a strong interest in a specific aspect of their district. We try to convey that the board acts as a group, has power in the forms of policy development, and a huge responsibility for the overall vision and direction of the district.”

The school board president moderates and the local media attends the forums. The forums are recorded and posted to the district website. The district promotes the candidate forums on the website and in the newspaper.

Bettendorf Schools began hosting candidate forums in 2013 and used questions developed from IASB candidate resources. The forums are moderated by a professor from the education department of a local university, who also reviews and modifies the candidate questions. Candidates receive the questions in advance and have one minute to answer each question. The forum begins with each candidate giving a two-minute introduction.

The forum is held after the deadline for candidates to withdraw from the ballot. Each candidate is given a table to display information and visit with attendees both before and after the forum. The event is publicized through a press release, district website, social media and the district e-newsletter. The promotion includes a webpage with links to candidate pictures and [candidate profiles](#). The forum is also live streamed through Facebook.

Superintendent Mike Raso says, “Our candidate forums have been well received by the public with the turnout exceeding our expectations and the candidates very grateful for the opportunity.” Raso believes the forums are an important service for interested citizens to learn that serving on the board is an important position, and that there are many topics that must be discussed—not just one agenda item that they find particularly interesting.

[Board Candidate Forum Pamphlet \(2017\)](#)

[Board Candidate Forum Questions \(2017\)](#)

[Board Candidate Forum Announcement \(2017\)](#)

CANDIDATE PROFILES INCREASE VISIBILITY AND AWARENESS

Johnston Schools develops a webpage specifically for school elections with key information as well as short candidate profiles to educate community members. Once candidates turn in paperwork, the district requests headshots, contact information, a short biography and social media information. All candidate profiles follow the same format and are listed in alphabetical order. Superintendent Laura Kacer says, “We feel it’s important to be transparent about the election process from start to finish for all community members. You never know who may be considering running for the board or has interest in local elections.”

The profiles are shared on the district website and social media. The Des Moines Register typically runs a [short profile on each candidate](#) in the weeks leading up to the election.

SCHOOL BOARDS MOVING EDUCATION FORWARD IN IOWA

Kudos to all the districts that take time and resources to help candidates learn more about board service, and provide ways for the public to learn more about candidates. It’s clear what’s at stake—ultimately the future of our children. School boards need civic-minded and student-focused board members to move education forward in Iowa. IASB is here to help—just give us a call or visit <https://www.ia-sb.org/getonboard>.