

Handbook for School Board Members

Chatham Central School District

Chatham, New York

HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Chatham Central School District

Chatham, NY 12037

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CONTENTS

For Current and Prospective School Board Members	iv
1. Getting Started in Chatham	1
Being Prepared.....	1
Orientation & Training.....	2
Conferences & Workshops.....	2
2. Role of the School Board.....	3
Goals of the CCSD Board of Education.....	4
Relationship with the Superintendent	4
3. Roles and Responsibilities of School Board Members	6
The Time Factor.....	6
Functioning as a Body	7
Being Prepared for School Board Meetings	8
Participating in School Board Meetings	10
Conduct during School Board Meetings.....	13
Communicating Outside of School Board Meetings	14
Communicating with the Public.....	16
School Board Member as a Parent.....	18
Responsibility Regarding Sexual Harassment Policy.....	18
4. Chatham Basics.....	20
The Schools.....	20
School Board Elections	20
School Board Legal Status.....	21
Schedule for School Board Meetings	21
Committee Structure.....	21
More on School Board Membership	22
School Board Officers	23
More on School Board Meetings	23
Resources	26

FOR CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS:

This handbook was written for members of the Board of Education of the Chatham Central School District (CCSD) in Chatham, New York. The handbook covers all aspects of serving on the school board—roles, responsibilities, expectations, and participation in the mission of the board to promote the best possible education for students in the Chatham schools.

This handbook also reflects the ideas and experiences of school board members in Chatham. Each of the current (2007-2008) members contributed suggestions and shared concerns related to board membership. Their input was valuable in developing the handbook.

Throughout the handbook are quotes from current school board members giving the reasons they wanted to serve on the school board. It is hoped that future candidates will be inspired by these reasons for serving. Additional quotes include observations and recommendations by school board members and the CCSD superintendent's office.

John Wapner
President

1. GETTING STARTED IN CHATHAM

I am a newly elected school board member in Chatham. What comes first?

Welcome to the Board of Education of the Chatham Central School District. With your service on the school board, you have chosen to contribute toward strengthening Chatham's quality of life. You will want to prepare yourself for board membership, get some training, and learn as much as you can about the Chatham schools.

This section covers aspects of beginning board membership but also addresses experienced members, who should seek to continually educate themselves as they serve.

BEING PREPARED

Your first step is to meet with the president of the school board and the district superintendent to "learn the ropes" about board goals and process and to obtain materials on board membership.

Some of the materials you will want to read for background on the Chatham Central School District include:

- This handbook
- Policy Manual of the CCSD Board of Education
- CCSD Budget and Educational Plan
- CCSD personnel policies, including collective bargaining agreements and administrators' contracts
- CCSD overall curriculum program and standards
- Current data on school and student performance
- Current Board Operational Goals
- Long Range Facility Report and Financial Report
- Strategic Plan
- Demographic Report
- Minutes of board meetings
- Minutes of committee meetings

These materials are available through the Chatham Central School District office.

In addition to the board packet, which you will receive prior to each school board meeting, every week you will also receive the superintendent's "Friday report," which covers events and activities in the schools during the previous week. The board packet and the Friday report will be delivered by courier to your home on Friday afternoons.

► See Section 4, Chatham Basics, for information on board meetings, committees, and other details related to the Chatham Central School District.

Additional background materials include guides from the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA). When you are elected, the district office will forward your contact information to NYSSBA in Albany where you will be added to their mailing list. If you do not

receive *Essentials of School Board Service: A Guide to Surviving Your First Year* from NYSSBA, call their office at 783-0200.

Tip: Continue to learn about public education as well as education in Chatham.

“New board members bring new vision.”

ORIENTATION & TRAINING

Be sure to meet with the superintendent, who will set up meetings with the school administrators. Get hands-on learning about different areas of the system (e.g., academics, business office, food service, transportation, athletics, and operations and maintenance).

We strongly recommend that you also attend the training courses that are available to you, either through the New York State School Boards Association or Questar III (BOCES). As a school board member, you will receive information on available training and other resources from NYSSBA.

NYSSBA conducts a wide-ranging developmental program for school board members and administrators. One key learning opportunity for new school board members is the Academy for Public School Governance offered in July and again in September.

As a result of financial misconduct in certain school districts in the state, New York State requires newly elected, re-elected, and appointed board members to complete six hours of fiscal oversight training. NYSSBA offers fiscal training at the July and September Academies, at regional workshops throughout New York State, and for individual districts and neighboring districts, in collaboration with local school board associations and BOCES.

CONFERENCES & WORKSHOPS

Recognizing the need for ongoing in-service training and development for its members, the Board of Education encourages the participation of all members at appropriate school board conferences, workshops, and conventions.

As stated in the CCSD Policy Manual, it is the policy of the district to provide for the following:

1. The Superintendent of Schools will maintain and distribute to each board member a listing of school board conferences, conventions, and workshops, to help the board decide which meetings appear to be most promising in terms of producing direct and indirect benefits to the district.
2. Funds for participation at such meetings will be budgeted for on an annual basis. When funds are limited, the board will designate which of its members, if any, would be the most appropriate to participate in a given meeting.
3. When any board member attends a conference, convention, or workshop, the member will be requested to share information, recommendations, and materials acquired at the meeting.

► To obtain authorization and funds to attend conferences, contact the superintendent’s assistant in the district office. She will fill out a purchase requisition and submit it to the superintendent for approval. Once approved, she will register you for the conference or workshop.

A Word to Members . . .

Spend time listening, asking questions, and learning how the public school system operates. Learn about each school from the *school’s* perspective. Before being elected, you knew the schools from the outside perspective. Good board members develop an outside/inside perspective.

You may have a lot of ideas, but don’t reinvent the wheel. Be patient and listen.

Get the lay of the land first. Think before you speak.

Don’t go in with an agenda or a focus on a single issue. If you do, you’ll be disillusioned quickly. Keep an open mind.

Keep foremost in your mind what is best for the district. Don’t be penny wise and dollar foolish.

“I wanted to provide leadership, help the schools reach higher standards, and be involved with the community.”

“I wanted to use my experience with education and share my understanding of how education works.”

2. ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

What is the school board all about? What are its goals?

It is important to understand the mission and role of the school board both for your own service and for communicating with the public.

To achieve excellence and equity in public schools, four key roles of any school board are:

- **Vision**—setting the vision for education in the local community
- **Structure**—establishing the structure and environment to implement the vision
- **Accountability**—establishing academic standards to achieve the vision, assessing performance progress toward achieving the vision, and formulating strategies to help marginal or failing students
- **Advocacy**—advocating for the public schools and their students

For more information on the role and policies of the school board, see the CCSD Policy Manual.

GOALS OF THE CCSD BOARD OF EDUCATION

In Chatham, as stated in the CCSD Policy Manual, the Board of Education is committed to the education of all students and must be aware of the concerns and aspirations of the community regarding the quality and performance of the district. To ensure that its educational programs provide all students with a high quality education, the board strives to achieve the following:

1. To interpret the educational needs and aspirations of the community, and to meet such needs through the formulation of policies that stimulate the learner and the learning process.
2. To lead the district in accordance with board policy.
3. To provide leadership in order that the goals and objectives of the district, inclusive of the Strategic Plan, can be effectively carried out.
4. To work closely with the community to ensure that board actions and performance take into consideration the concerns and aspirations of the community.
5. To employ a Superintendent of Schools capable of ensuring that the district maintains its position as an outstanding school system, and that school personnel carry out the policies of the board with energy and dedication.
6. To fulfill its fiscal responsibility to the taxpayers of the community, recognizing that a balance needs to be met between limited resources available to fund public education and sustaining and developing educational program needs.
7. To request and use the data needed to make decisions for the advancement of the district.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT

While the school board is responsible for setting the vision and goals for the district, it is the superintendent who implements the policies to attain the goals that have been set. As such, the school board governs and the superintendent administers the school district. In general, boards are elected by the community to set priorities, establish policies, and evaluate the outcomes of district operation. Superintendents identify needs and policies, develop regulations, provide leadership, and manage the day-to-day operations of the district.

This means that the relationship between the board and superintendent should be collaborative. The superintendent solicits board initiatives, finds ways to respond to them, and translates them into realities. At the same time, the superintendent brings ideas to the board and helps educate the board on school operations.

For example, to fulfill the board operational goal of enhancing communication among board, faculty, staff, and administration, the strategy to improve community awareness of board and school activities includes the following action plan: “The board charges the superintendent with redesigning the website so that the community can access district information.” To respond to this action plan, the superintendent would meet with appropriate staff to implement redesign and updating of the website.

In a different example, the board requests a two-stage process for proposals by school administrators seeking major programmatic or budgetary initiatives. The superintendent’s responsibility is to inform administrators of the process and explain how it works.

The superintendent can be seen as the tenth member of the board, although non-voting. He or she fills the gap between the board and the administration by conveying the board’s desires to the administration and the administration’s concerns to the board. The superintendent is expected to speak candidly to each of these concerns.

School Board	Superintendent
<p>Governs (<i>Guides, Directs</i>) Decides What Requests Information Considers Issues Creates, Reviews, and Adopts Policy Approves and Reviews Plans Monitors Progress Contracts with Personnel Approves Evaluation Criteria and Procedures Approves and Reviews Budget Represents Public Interests</p>	<p>Manages (<i>Administers, Operates</i>) Decides How Seeks and Provides Information Provides Recommendations Recommends and Carries Out Policy Implements Plans Reports Progress Supervises Hiring Process and Practices Supervises and Evaluates Personnel Formulates Budget Acts in Public Interest</p>

As can be seen from this chart, the board defines the “what” (vision, policy) of school operations. The superintendent and administration define the “how” (how to, how much).

► Respect the fact that administrators and teachers are educators and professionals. Learn about education and how it works. The board should spend time on education, teaching, and learning and devote time to classroom-based issues.

“The board’s role is to create a framework for what the school system should look like. We should depend on educational professionals to do what they envision.”

3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

What is expected of me as a school board member?

As a member of the CCSD Board of Education, you are:

- A **representative** of the entire community
- A **steward** of the district's resources
- A **leader** of the district
- An **advocate** for public education

This section draws on your own reflections about service as a school board member and written materials from NYSSBA and other sources. It outlines the expectations for effective membership on the CCSD school board. It also offers guidelines for behavior, communication, and functioning within the school board.

THE TIME FACTOR

When asked how much time you need to spend as board members in Chatham, most of you said “a lot.” And the amount of time expected by board members is increasing. The New York State School Boards Association agrees with you: they say that six hours a week is a general rule. It could be more: six to 10 for general members and up to 12 hours a week for the president and vice president.

Make every effort to attend each board meeting. This means two meetings a month—a business meeting and a workshop meeting. Spend about as much time preparing for meetings as being in the meetings themselves.

It is expected that you will serve on at least two committees and have one special assignment (e.g., Long Range Facilities Planning, Strategic Planning). (See Section 4, Chatham Basics, for a list of committees.)

Other kinds of time: Another activity that takes time is attending school events and visiting the schools. This is time well spent in several ways: you will learn more about what's going on in the schools, and the school community (students, teachers, parents) will learn more about you.

Attend school events: The school community appreciates it when board members take the time to attend events. This is a good way to show your interest and build relationships with the community. Being visible is a type of outreach.

Get to know the schools first hand: Board members are encouraged to visit the three schools and see how they work. School visits are valuable in maintaining relationships with staff and administrators. They will help familiarize you with the schools from the inside. You may be familiar with the schools from being a parent, but when you walk the halls with a teacher or administrator, you gain a completely different perspective. Visiting the schools is good preparation for making informed decisions.

We encourage you to “shadow” a teacher for a day. You may also request shadowing an administrator or a student for a day.

► Call the district office to schedule a visit. Do not visit the schools without advance notice.

“I am interested in the grassroots political process. I wanted to help protect what’s good about education and share my values.”

FUNCTIONING AS A BODY

Rule Number One: Realize that you operate as a body of nine. As a school board member you must remember that you have no power or authority except that which results from participation in decisions and actions of the board as a whole in an official meeting. Actions, promises, or commitments by individual board members are without legal basis and create no binding commitment upon the district. Also, as a board member, you are elected to represent the entire school district in all matters pertaining to education. As such, you must be able to accept the principle of board unity and subordinate self-interest.

Only the board, in a public meeting, has any authority to authorize any action. Information received by any one board member creates no authority to take action. If board members act on their own, without the approval of the full board, duly given in a public meeting, they are operating outside the purview of the law. What you hear or know is meaningless unless you bring it to the board and the board decides to use the information to take action.

One of your obligations is to discuss issues, vote, and come to consensus (general agreement to accept the vote). To function well as a body, individual members should carry the message of the majority. Take your own individual input and combine it into a single board input. When asked by a member of the public how you voted, if you did not vote with the majority, you can say, “I didn’t personally vote for it, but I do support the board’s decision.” Of course, you may want to say why you did not vote in favor, but you should not do it in a way that undermines the board decision.

If a staff member approaches you with a problem, what do you do? To handle a question appropriately, you can respond: “I hear what you’re saying. This needs to go to the superintendent. It may end up coming back to the board for discussion and resolution.” This kind of response (1) allows some distance between you as an individual board member and the staff person, which (2) allows the superintendent and board as a whole to appropriately handle the issue.

► You are expected to listen to people but not handle the problem. Direct them to the right process, and it may come back to the board. Be careful to support the well-being of the school, not weaken it.

“Remember, your focus is the students (not the public). The board is beholden to the students.”

Lines of Authority—Where to Advise People to Go with a Concern

Concern about teacher → building principal

Concern about principal → superintendent

Concern about superintendent → board of education

Concerns about building & grounds, transportation, and food service → department head

If unresolved, concern → supervisor's supervisor → superintendent → board of education

Notify the superintendent and/or board president if such a referral is made.

“I have worked with kids for years as a coach. I wanted to go further and help them with their education. Education is the priority.”

BEING PREPARED FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

It is crucial that you come prepared for each board meeting. Board members receive a board packet on the Friday before the Tuesday meeting.

Read the packet thoroughly over the weekend. If there is something that involves more than straightforward information, read it with special attention. As you read, jot down notes in the margin to remind yourself of particular points or items of interest.

Asking questions: If you have questions, send them (by e-mail, phone call, or fax) to the superintendent on Monday. Make sure you have relevant questions that the superintendent could answer. If you want a good thought-out answer with data, ask ahead of time. Don't wait until the meeting to bring up this type of question. This point is not intended to avoid public discussion but rather to avoid “blindsiding” the superintendent.

Even if your questions are good ones that you really want to ask at the meeting, remember that they may take time to investigate and research. You will get more worthwhile answers if you ask questions ahead of time.

Ask questions professionally, showing trust and respect. Seek clarification, explanation, and resolution of issues. Once answers are provided, pay attention to them. Use them for further understanding.

► Ask the superintendent, not principals or teachers. Asking other administrators puts them in a precarious position if the superintendent has not been asked the question. The current process ensures that communication is clear and consistent.

Tip: You may also ask the president for clarification/explanation. It is good practice to “cc” the president and vice president on any e-mail message to the superintendent when asking questions about the board packet.

The president and superintendent meet on the Monday or Tuesday before the board meeting. The superintendent will provide answers by e-mail by mid-day on Tuesday and will also bring them to the board meeting.

If an administrator calls: If an administrator calls and asks to speak with you in confidence about an issue coming before the board, be clear that you will decide whether to share the issue (without naming the source). Explain that the process for making decisions needs to be open and “above board.” Avoid triangulation.

Preparing for discussion or a vote: Prepare for a discussion or vote by being informed about the issue.

Example:

The board packet contains a note on budget items to be reviewed at the next business meeting: “On Tuesday evening we will review the program profiles and budget recommendations of our special education/pupil support services program and our proposed summer school program. We will also see Draft 2 of our general fund budget. The administration has been working hard on trimming costs, revising projected revenues, and gathering quantitative and qualitative data to help the board understand various proposals for next year’s educational plan. We will highlight significant changes in our projected appropriations and revenues for the benefit of both the board and members of the staff and public that may be present. We will also try to provide explanations of any areas of the proposed budget about which you may have questions. *Please contact me by phone or e-mail on Monday with any questions you have so that we can provide timely information to you at the meeting.*”

In this example, to prepare for a thoughtful review of the budgets related to the special education/pupil support services program, the proposed summer school program, and the general fund budget, read any available background material. If the program profiles and draft budgets are attached to the packet, or provided in a previous meeting, review them in preparation for the meeting on Tuesday. If you find that you have questions about the program and/or the budget that might require some research on the part of the superintendent, or you just don’t understand a particular item, call or e-mail the superintendent on Monday.

Similarly, if you have an issue that you would like to add to the agenda for discussion, be sure to contact the president or superintendent before the meeting.

► It is better for all to be informed about an issue, and to put it on the agenda for the next meeting than to bring up an issue for which no one is prepared or informed. No surprises!

Another kind of preparation might involve checking your calendar to see whether you can attend an event or meeting. For example, there may be an announcement in the packet: “Please come to the meeting prepared to tell the president if you will be able to attend the Chatham Village Board meeting on June 28th at 7 p.m. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss school safety issues.”

Keeping your board packets: To be well informed and able to participate in each meeting, don’t throw out past board packets. For example, if you see that an item that was discussed previously will be on subsequent agendas, bring along the section of the packet that pertains to that issue. Having

the materials at hand will provide background and aid follow-up on issues (e.g., long range facilities plan, copies of contracts).

To make a positive contribution, do not forget to:

- Communicate questions to the superintendent.
- Go through the superintendent to ask questions.
- Take note of the superintendent's explanation of an issue.

PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

This section contains suggested guidelines for communication and discussion among board members during meetings in order to conduct open meetings effectively.

As an elected member of the CCSD Board of Education, you are required to debate most issues in public and vote in public. Open Meetings or Sunshine Laws require that public bodies conduct nearly all of their business at open meetings so that citizens know what goes on in their government. The exceptions are executive sessions when personnel hiring or firing or other sensitive staff issues involving specific individuals are discussed. (See Section 4, Chatham Basics, for a list of the only subjects that should be covered in an executive session.)

While staff and the public are invited to attend and participate, at the same time this is the board's opportunity to conduct business. The board should remain in control of the meeting at all times. In Chatham, Robert's Rules of Order are followed. A quorum of the board consists of a majority present or voting. The president votes in order with the rest of the board. Most votes are cast verbally (yea or nay), but occasionally a role call vote is taken when the president cannot discern the voice vote.

As is apparent in the board packet, a suggested time frame is indicated on the right hand side of the page for each agenda item. The purpose is to allow enough appropriate time to discuss an item in a timely fashion.

Discussions: Debate and disagreement are natural and should not be avoided. Every member has the right to disagree (but not to dominate). You have the opportunity to voice your concern and your support. Be clear and say, "This is my point of view." You may want to share your thinking on how you came to your decision.

Although debate can feel uncomfortable at times, it is healthy. It may be time consuming but in the long run may lead to a better, more inclusive outcome since all issues will have been brought out into the open.

Accept that it is OK to disagree—agree to disagree. Recognize that an argument is not a personal attack but rather involves a set of ideas. Sometimes speaking will show how you arrived at your opinion. But think before you speak.

At all times, be respectful of one another. Realize that everyone comes from a different background. Try to work together.

Know the difference between asking important questions and over-analyzing something. Rely on the administration and others to provide good information, e.g., the cost-benefit analysis underlying a decision or proposal. It is not the board's job to manage the operations of the school.

► When wishing to speak, look to be recognized by the president. Be brief, but concise: present your information as factual.

Be aware of the public attending board meetings: Community members and school staff are encouraged to attend board meetings and learn what is going on in their schools. It is important to be conscious of their presence in positive ways:

- Be conscious of how your behavior in meetings affects the public and school staff.
- Be respectful. (Sarcasm shows a lack of respect.) Be aware of the perception that the board is powerful. It is important to not abuse that power, e.g., with a condescending attitude.
- Keep interchanges between members to the business at hand (whispering to your neighbor, or sidebar conversations, can be misinterpreted as well as distracting).
- Having food at meetings can be viewed as unprofessional as well as rude (when the food is not shared with the public!).
- Do not campaign for a favorite issue or stand on an issue. When speaking, be brief. Even though there may be an "audience," board members should not "put on a show."
- Do not be quick to table items. When items are tabled, the reason should be given. Otherwise, people who are affected by the issue may get the wrong idea and feel slighted.
- Recognize that decisions may affect people in the audience. Be careful about levity.

See page 13 for more tips on conduct in board meetings.

To make a positive contribution, avoid:

- Making assumptions based on rumor.
- Complaining about the length of meetings.
- Expecting meetings to go quickly so you can leave.

Voting: Before voting, think carefully about the implications of your vote. Study and learn as much as you can about the issue.

Sometimes you may vote for something you didn't really want to vote for originally. In these cases, you may admit, "I may not like it, but we can't get a better solution." Even when you vote the same way as others, their reason for voting in favor may not be the same as yours.

You have the right to abstain. The courts have ruled that board members cannot abstain simply because they have a philosophical problem with what they are being asked to vote for (e.g., teacher tenure) and may face possible removal from office for "dereliction of duty."

President's role: The board president has several other roles and responsibilities in addition to those outlined in this handbook. The president has equal standing and votes as a member of the board. Additional roles include:

- Provide leadership.
- Facilitate the process; have patience.
- Assign committee structure.
- Keep communication open.
- Meet with superintendent to set agenda, also on a regular basis.
- Share, develop consensus.
- Serve as mentor.
- Develop alternatives for people to consider. What are our choices?

“I’ve always been civic-minded and wanted to be involved in the public school district to help the community. I wanted to help the Chatham schools achieve the best education they can while being good stewards of tax dollars.”

“I wanted to help students who are falling through the cracks get recognized, and their situations addressed. I also felt I had something to offer in helping the three schools work together.”

Conduct During School Board Meetings

During board meetings, members will:

1. State their position.
2. Vote their conscience.
3. Move on to the next item.
4. Avoid springing any surprises on other members or the superintendent.
5. Avoid hidden agendas.
6. Use Robert's Rules to guide board action on motions, amendments, etc.
7. Address problems and not attack people.
8. Not debate issues with members of the audience.
9. Treat all present with respect.
10. Focus on an agenda item until it is resolved or until a specific time has been reached to resume the resolution process.
11. Support the president's attempts to control conflicts at meetings.
12. Ensure deliberations/activities are limited to board work and not administration/staff work.
13. Ensure only one person speaks at a time.
14. Listen to each other and not engage in side conversations.
15. Respect each other's opinions/comments.
16. Not waste time repeating what has already been communicated.
17. Not have long unnecessary speeches.
18. Ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.
19. Role model the behaviors expected of students, staff, and community members.
20. Stay on task.
21. Avoid focusing on and/or criticizing things that are unchangeable.
22. Avoid trying to persuade and advise by using aggressive tactics.
23. Avoid rigorously agreeing or strongly disagreeing.
24. Avoid approving someone for conforming to my stance or opinions.
25. Ensure meetings start on time.
26. Ensure meetings end on time.
27. Support the president when presiding at the meetings.
28. Ensure there is no discussion of items without a motion made and seconded before the item is discussed.
29. Agree to limit your comments, on any item, to those that are pertinent to the decision-making process.
30. Agree to be concise and avoid redundancy.
31. Not speak without first being recognized by the president.
32. If needed, paraphrase or check impressions of the speaker's meaning.
33. Describe observable behaviors that influence your feelings.
34. Share your own feelings.
35. Agree that only the president is authorized to respond to comments received during the privilege of the floor/public comments.
36. Use a "Consent Agenda" within the regular board meetings, whenever possible.

37. Support the superintendent's administrative procedures and decisions to the public and staff and communicate disagreements privately.
38. Refrain from taking definitive action until the superintendent has been given the opportunity to make a recommendation on the action.
39. Refrain from committing to a position on an agenda item or issue before all relevant information is presented.
40. Work to reach consensus on important items. If no consensus is reached, then the vote of the majority will determine decisions/outcomes.
41. Refrain from public criticism of one another.
42. Monitor and enforce compliance with legal, regulatory, and school district board policies.
43. Adhere to decision making practices that are based on data, policy, and best practices.
44. Avoid communicating one position in private conversations/communications and a different position in public communications.

COMMUNICATING OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

At social or school events, you may want to take the opportunity to get to know your fellow board members better. Socializing without discussing board business is a good idea.

But school board members are strongly encouraged *not* to engage in discussion and debate about board business outside of board meetings. This is because the board is a decision-making body. The Open Meetings Law states that a discussion of board business by a quorum (a simple majority) outside a board meeting would violate the law.

► E-mail and telephone calls should be used only for asking questions and giving information, not expressing opinions or having a discussion.

Using e-mail: E-mail is a good way to communicate, but it is not a legal way for the board to conduct business that results in decisions. In addition to the Open Meetings Law, most e-mail messages regarding school business are probably subject to Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requirements, which allow public access to government records. So watch what you say, how you say it, and what the subject matter is all about. Share information broadly, among board members and the superintendent. Avoid promoting an opinion or lobbying other board members. Remind each other if you receive a message that is becoming "business."

The CCSD Policy Manual states:

Acceptable uses of e-mail among board members include normal communications about non-board issues in the same manner that board members may communicate via telephone or face to face. Board members may also communicate factual matters concerning board issues, including the meeting schedule.

- The board shall *not* use e-mail as a substitute for deliberations at board meetings, including the sharing of opinions, discussion, debate, or for other communications or business properly confined to board meetings.
- Board members shall be aware that e-mail and e-mail attachments received or prepared for use in board business or containing information relating to board business may be regarded

as public records which may be inspected by any person upon request, unless otherwise made confidential by law.

- Board members shall avoid reference to confidential information about employees, students or other matters in e-mail communications because of the risk of improper disclosure. Board members shall comply with the same standards as school employees with regard to confidential information.
- Official communications by board members involving staff members shall be conducted as detailed in Board Policy #2700 (Board Staff Communications). Status as a member of the board shall *not* impede communications on a parental or personal level. Board members may use normal e-mail, telephone, or other protocols when communicating with staff concerning parental or personal issues.

Gathering and sharing information: Every board member is equally elected by the public and has a right to equally share in the process of governing and leading the district. When information is not equally shared, then some board members are disenfranchised from their right to officially conduct district business.

If you need information from another board member, ask for it. Recognize that if that information has the potential to create a board action, you have an obligation to bring it to the board for assimilation and ultimately some action. Each board member can gather information, but to the extent that it will result in some issue, concern, or need for action to come to the board, all board members need to be informed and equally prepared to use the information.

The superintendent is both a partner in managing the affairs of the district and a vehicle for board members to gather information, discern facts, and create opportunities for board action. Keep the superintendent and the president in the loop so that they are informed of communications about concerns, rumors, issues, and needs.

Finally, if there is a concern about a health, safety, financial, or district reputation issue, all board members should ask the superintendent to gather information, distill facts, develop an official district position, and have a common message to the community which can be delivered by everyone, including all board members.

Confidential information: In light of the fact that board meetings are public, it makes sense that you may discuss any board business *except* information (1) covered in executive sessions, or (2) involving personnel issues or student records. Any topic discussed in executive session is confidential and should never be discussed with anyone other than a board member or the superintendent. (See Section 4, Chatham Basics, for information about executive sessions.)

► No board member will be involved in any decision involving a spouse who is an employee.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

As noted previously, board members are encouraged to attend school events and be visible in the school community. In this way, they are exercising symbolic leadership and demonstrating their commitment to the educational life of Chatham.

► See the next page for a sample sign-up form. Each year (usually in September), board members should fill out the form and return it to the district office. This helps plan board attendance and makes sure that events are “covered.”

You should be accessible to answer questions from community members. You may be their only source of information since they do not have access to school administrators or staff. If you are asked about a sensitive topic, you may want to say, “The board is aware of the situation and is looking at all the issues.”

If you are given new “information,” you may say, “I’m glad you told me. (I’ll find out more and get back to you.) Have you talked to the teacher/administrator and gone up the chain of command?”

Sometimes a student may call you. Be appreciative of the effort the student took, and handle the question in the same way as you would if coming from an adult.

Above all, be respectful in any interaction with the public or school staff and administrators. A good rule of thumb is, “don’t say anything that you wouldn’t say to your mother or your father.” Even if you feel strongly about a subject, never lose your temper!

► Act as a conduit for information. Be knowledgeable about the schools and what’s going on in Chatham.

With any issue being put to the public for vote, learn as much as you can about it and explain the issue to the public (even if you might disagree with the plan).

After the board has voted, it is best to say, “The board decided X because Y. . . .” If you voted no, you can say, “I voted against it, and here’s why, but I support the board’s decision.” Remember that information on voting is in the minutes of the board meeting, which are public.

“I felt I could bring a new voice to the board, and I wanted to work on improving board-community relations.”

**SAMPLE SCHOOL DISTRICT EVENTS
FOR BOARD ATTENDANCE (2006–2007)**

Board Member Sign-up Sheet

October

- 5 CHS Open House, 7 P.M.
- 7 CHS Athletic Hall of Fame Induction at Kozel's
- 20 Close Encounters with Music (HS Orchestra) daytime

November

- 2 CHS Fall Concert, 7 P.M.
- 9 & 11 Shakespeare & Company School Performance
- 13 Fall JV/V Sports Awards, CHS 7 P.M.

December

- 1–2 CMS Musical, 7 P.M.
- 3 CMS Musical, 2 P.M.
- 6 CMS Grades 7/8 Concert, 7 P.M.
- 13 Grade 4 Canaries Concert, 7 P.M.
- 14 MED PTA Ice Cream Social, 6–8 P.M.
- 19 Grade 6 Winter Concert, 7 P.M.

January

- 18 CHS Winter Recital, 7–9 P.M., St. James Church
- 24 Grade 5 Winter Concert, 7 P.M.

February

- 4 CHS Musical, 2 P.M.
- 10 Panther Pride Day
- 11 CMS PTSA Sweetz & Jazz, 6–8 P.M.

March

- 1 CHS Pops Concert, 7 P.M.
- 6 Winter Varsity/JV Sports Awards, 7 P.M.
- 9 All-County Festival @ Chatham CHS, 7 P.M.
- 21 CMS PTSA Science Fair & What's Happening, 7 P.M.
- 29 MED PTA Ice Cream Social, 6–8 P.M.

May

- 3 CHS Spring Concert, 7 P.M.
- 11 CMS Student Recital, 7 P.M.
- 17 MED Canaries Musical, 7 P.M.
- 23 CHS National Honor Society Induction
- 23 7/8 Spring Concert, 7 P.M.
- 24 CHS Arbor Day & Banquet
- 30 CMS Grade 6 Concert, 7 P.M.
- 31 Modified Sports Awards Night, CHS, 7 P.M.

June

- 1 CMS D.A.R.E. Graduation, daytime
- 1 "At Tanglewood" Concert, 6:30–8 P.M.
- 4 Strategic Planning Meeting, 3:30–5:30, CHS Library
- 5 CMS Grade 5 Concert, 7 P.M.
- 8 MED Arbor Day
- 9 CCSTA Retirement Banquet
- 12 CMS Arbor Day and Picnic
- 13 CMS National Jr. Honor Society Induction
- 15 Grade 8 Moving Up Ceremony, 7 pm CHS Aud.
- 22 CHS Commencement, 7 pm

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER AS A PARENT

Sometimes school board members currently have children attending school. In fact some people want to serve on the school board *because* they are parents. However, you will find that serving on the board as a parent is complicated—but not impossible.

When serving on the board, you need to think in terms of what is best for all children in the school district. Think in terms of policy, not in terms of your child. Don't expect or ask for special treatment for your child.

Communicating with teachers: You are always a parent first and a board member second (NYSSBA). You will need to find a way that works for you when communicating with a teacher about your child. First and foremost, talk about *your* child and your child's situation.

As a board member, you don't leave behind your parental rights, but you do lose some ability to be a parent advocate. Err on the side of being less of an advocate. Cultivate a careful consciousness of your role since teachers may perceive that you have power as a board member.

Be mindful of *how* you approach a problem related to your child. In interactions with teachers, usually problems are not as simple as they seem: ask questions first, approaching the problem in terms of seeking information, rather than seeking to change a situation. This approach may result in the teacher gaining a new understanding.

Tip: When contacting a teacher, you might say, "I am calling you as a parent. I hope you're comfortable with that. If not, how should we proceed? Do you want a third party?" Another option is to request the help of the guidance officer when setting up a meeting with a teacher. Married members may want to ask their spouse to interact with teachers.

► As a board member, you will receive a staff directory with home phone numbers. This is to be used *solely* for board business and not as a parent.

RESPONSIBILITY REGARDING SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

The CCSD Board of Education recognizes that harassment of students and staff on the basis of sex or sexual orientation is abusive and illegal behavior. All such behavior is strictly prohibited. The CCSD Policy Manual includes the policy and regulations on the definition, complaint procedure, investigation, and discipline regarding sexual harassment.

Because of your perceived position of power, you need to be especially careful about what you say and how you say it. You may not think the situation involves sexual harassment, but others may see it that way. School board members are strongly urged to attend training in this area.

"I had been working in public schools for many years and felt that my experience would be beneficial. I wanted to see more advanced technology in the district, and special education was also priority."

The Most Difficult Thing to Learn . . .

Experienced board members from across the nation were asked to identify the most difficult lesson they had to learn about board service. Here's what they said most often:

- Determining your function on the board and how to accomplish it effectively.
- That no matter what you think you know about board service when you first come on board, you still have a lot to learn.
- Learning to acknowledge publicly that you have no power and authority as an individual board member and that only the board as a whole can make policies and decisions for the school district.
- Recognizing the difference between setting policy (the board's job) and administering the schools (the superintendent's job).
- That you must think deeply and sometimes accept board decisions that are contrary to your own beliefs.
- That you must represent all the students. Your decisions must be made in the interest of the total school system and not made solely for special groups or interests.
- Learning how to respond appropriately to the complaints and concerns of citizens, school administrators, and other staff.
- That change comes slowly.
- That you can't solve everyone's problems by yourself.
- That boardsmanship means being able to hold the minority viewpoint when voting on an issue, then openly supporting the majority vote in your community.
- Discovering how the schools are funded.

4. CHATHAM BASICS

What kinds of Chatham-related information would be helpful to me as a school board member?

This section provides Chatham-specific information and resources.

THE SCHOOLS

Chatham Central School District
50 Woodbridge Avenue
Chatham, NY 12037
518-392-2400

Mary E. Dardess Elementary School
518-392-2255

Chatham Middle School
518-392-1560

Chatham High School
518-392-4142

Website: www.chathamcentralschools.com

SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

The elections of members of the Board of Education are held on the third Tuesday in May, unless this date conflicts with religious observances on that day, in which case it will be held on the second Tuesday in May. The polls will be open for those hours designated by the district. The following items will be voted upon:

- the annual budget
- any vacancies on the Board of Education
- any special propositions

Board members serve five-year terms. There is no limit on the number of terms that a board member may serve.

Oath of office: Newly elected or appointed school board members must take their constitutional oath of office within 30 days of the beginning of their term of office. They will be sworn in by the board president, district clerk, or any notary public, and the oath will be filed with the district clerk.

“I was concerned about safety and fiscal issues and felt that I had administrative experience and organizational skills to offer. I wanted to help address some of the educational issues in the schools.”

SCHOOL BOARD LEGAL STATUS

The legal status of the board is that of a corporate body established pursuant to the laws of New York State. Any liability of the district is a liability of the Board of Education as a corporation and not that of the members of the board as individuals.

SCHEDULE FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

Workshop meetings are held once a month on the second Tuesday of the month, all year. Workshop meetings provide opportunities to learn about a particular project or activity taking place in the schools. Business meetings are held once a month on the fourth Tuesday of the month, September through June, except December.

The annual reorganizational meeting of the Board of Education is held on the first Tuesday in July unless that day is a legal holiday, in which case the meeting will be held on the first Wednesday. The purpose of the reorganizational meeting is to elect officers of the board and appoint and designate other district employees for the proper management of the school district during the school year.

Meetings are held in the High School Library unless otherwise designated.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

The CCSD board's standing committees are the Finance, Policy and Library committees. In addition, the board may establish ad hoc committees. The board reserves the right to terminate any committee at any time. The president serves as an ex officio member of all committees to which s/he is not appointed.

School board members are expected to serve on at least two committees. The president of the board will appoint you to the committees. In deciding where members should serve, s/he takes into consideration the member's request and knowledge of the area—as well as the opportunity for members to diversify—and the number of people already on the committee.

Currently, board committees include:

- Policy
- Library
- Finance
- Audit

Superintendent's committees include:

- Facilities
- Negotiating

Examples of district-wide committees that serve as task forces or ad hoc committees include:

- Strategic Planning
- Liaison
- Long Range Facilities Planning
- Hiring

Tip: You may have to vote on an issue in area that is unfamiliar to you. If you have not served on the committee in that area, learn about the issue by reading the committee meeting minutes.

MORE ON SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERSHIP

Resignation: A member of the Board of Education may resign his or her office by filing his or her resignation with the district clerk. The effective date of the resignation must be within 30 days after the date of filing.

Removal from office: A member of the Board of Education may be removed from office for willful violation or neglect of duty, or for willfully disobeying any decision, order, or regulation of the Commissioner of Education. Notice of the charge and an opportunity for defense must be provided. Official misconduct may be grounds for removal by the board after a hearing.

A vacancy on the board may also be declared if it is clearly established that a member has failed to attend three consecutive meetings without sufficient excuse or if a member has changed his/her legal residence from that of the school district.

Unexpired term fulfillment: The Board of Education has the power to fill any vacancy which may occur on the board by reason of death, resignation, removal from office or from the school district, or refusal to serve, of any member or officer of the board by a majority vote or a special election. The person so appointed in the place of any such member of the board will hold his or her office until the next annual elections of board members.

Code of conduct: As stated in the CCSD Policy Manual, school board members, operating under the highest ethical standards, should:

- ASSURE the opportunity for high quality education for every student.
- OBSERVE state and federal laws and regulations pertaining to education.
- ACCEPT office as a board member as a means of unselfish service and leadership to the district.
- TAKE official actions only in public sessions, except where otherwise provided or required by law.
- REPRESENT the entire community without fear or favor.
- MAINTAIN confidentiality of privileged information.
- DELEGATE authority to the superintendent as the board executive and confine board action to policy making, planning, and appraisal.
- EMPLOY only competent, trained personnel.
- PRESERVE the obligation of having all issues considered fairly and without bias.
- INSTILL respect toward our country and one's fellow person.

SCHOOL BOARD OFFICERS

The president and vice president of the Board of Education are elected by members of the board at the annual reorganization meeting in July.

The CCSD Policy Manual states that the duties of the president of the board are as follows:

1. to preside at all meetings;
2. to act as chief fiscal officer of the board;
3. to execute all documents on behalf of the board;
4. to appoint all standing and ad hoc committees;
5. to act as an ex officio member of all committees;
6. to call special meetings he/she considers necessary or on request of one member of the board;
7. to vote together with other members of the board;
8. to perform the usual and ordinary duties of the office;
9. to act as temporary chair of the annual district meeting and special district meetings; and
10. to, along with the other members, offer resolutions, and discuss questions.

The vice president is authorized to act for the president in case of the president's absence or inability to act, within statutory limitations.

MORE ON SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

Notice of meetings: The Board of Education believes that public notice of its activities is essential to ongoing, proactive cooperation between the board and the community it serves.

To this end, and in accordance with state law, notice of meetings will be sent to all members of the board, Superintendent of Schools, District Treasurer, and to the newspapers of the district. The time, date and place of regular board meetings is established at the reorganizational meeting. If a meeting is scheduled at least a week in advance, notice must be given to the public by posting at designated public places not less than 72 hours prior to the meeting. These include the Chatham Public Library, the doors of all school buildings, the district signboard at the driveway to the MED elementary school and high school, and the website, www.chathamcentralschools.com.

When a meeting is scheduled less than a week in advance the board will provide public notice to the extent practicable. The notice must be posted on the district signboard at the driveway to the MED elementary school and high school, and at least in one or more of the other designated public locations listed above.

Regular meetings: At the annual reorganizational meeting, the Board of Education will set the date, time, and place of regular semimonthly board meetings.

Special meetings: Special meetings of the board may be called by any member of the board. Public notice of such meetings will be given not less than 24 hours before the time fixed for the meeting except in cases of emergency. The notice should state the specific matter or matters to be presented for consideration.

Public participation at board meetings: Recognizing its responsibility for proper governance of the schools and the need to conduct its business in an orderly and efficient manner, the board may schedule on its agenda at least one question and answer period for public participation during each regular meeting. The president will set a time limit in the length of this period and/or a time limit for individual speakers. The board president will be responsible for recognizing speakers, who should properly identify themselves, for maintaining proper order, and for adherence to time limits.

Executive sessions: The CCSD Policy Manual states as follows:

The Board of Education reserves the right, within the constraints of state law, to meet in executive session. Such sessions can be requested by any member of the board or the Superintendent of Schools.

A board member must make a motion during an open meeting to convene in executive session. Upon a majority vote of its members, the board may convene in executive session at a place which the board president or said members may designate within the district to discuss the subjects enumerated below. Matters which may be considered in executive session are:

1. matters which will imperil the public safety if disclosed;
2. any matter which may disclose the identity of a law enforcement agent or informer;
3. information relating to current or future investigation or prosecution of a criminal offense which would imperil effective law enforcement if disclosed;
4. discussions regarding proposed, pending, or current litigation;
5. collective negotiations pursuant to Article 14 of the Civil Service Law (the Taylor Law);
6. the medical, financial, credit or employment history of a particular person or corporation, or matters leading to the appointment, employment, promotion, demotion, discipline, suspension, dismissal, or removal of a particular person or corporation;
7. the preparation, grading, or administration of examinations; and
8. the proposed acquisition, sale, or lease of real property or the proposed acquisition of securities, or sale or exchange of securities, but only when publicity would substantially affect the value thereof.

Matters which may *only* be considered in executive session are:

9. discussions concerning probable cause to bring disciplinary charges against a tenured teacher; and
10. discussions concerning the evaluation and/or placement of students with disabilities.

Formal action or vote on matters enumerated in paragraphs 9 and 10 above may only be taken by the board during an executive session. No formal action or vote may be taken on any other matter. The board shall reconvene in open session to take final action on other matters discussed, and to adjourn the meeting.

Minutes of executive sessions will reflect all actions and votes taken by the board in executive session without personally identifying employees or students affected thereby. The name of the person who called for the executive session will also appear in the minutes of the public meeting. The board may permit staff and other persons whose presence is deemed necessary or appropriate to attend some or all of an executive session.

Listening: A Survival Skill for Board Members

For members of a school board, good listening habits can save money, promote solid relationships, and foster effective decision-making. Here are some tips:

- **Take notes.** Writing down what you hear can improve your chances of learning, but beware that too much note taking can interfere with listening and can disturb the speaker.
- **Control your emotions.** Reserve judgment and listen to the full story before you respond.
- **Question carefully.** Questioning can help break deadlocks, introduce new ideas, clarify points, improve rapport, and enhance understanding.
- **Concentrate on the speaker.** Look directly at the speaker and focus on the message, even though you think you already know what it is. Don't interrupt or permit unnecessary interruptions or distractions.
- **Listen responsively.** Let the person speaking know that you are hearing what they say by nodding, restating main points, and reaching agreement as to what has been said.
- **Evaluate what you hear.** Review mentally the key points and then question to validate your conclusion. Listen between the lines for what isn't said.
- **Keep track of what you hear.** Try cataloguing what you hear, including compliments, complaints, and questions.

“I was raised here and went to the Chatham schools. Now I want to give back to the community.”

RESOURCES

New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA)
24 Century Hill Drive, Suite 200
Latham, New York 12110–2125
Tel: (518) 783–0200
Fax: (518) 783–0211
E-mail: info@nyssba.org
www.nyssba.org

National School Boards Association (NSBA)
1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314
Tel: (703) 838–6722
Fax: (703) 683–7590
E-mail: info@nsba.org
www.nsba.org

Questar III (BOCES)
10 Empire State Boulevard
Castleton, NY 12033
Tel: (518) 477–8771
Fax: (518) 477–9833
www.questar.org

New York State Education Department (SED)
Education Building
Albany, NY 12234
Tel: (518) 474–3852
www.nysed.gov

