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How to Run for Your School Board

April 21, 2022 by [JoAnn Yao](https://diversebooks.org/author/joannyyao/)



By **Andrea Ruggirello**

Local school board members play a critical role when it comes to ensuring our children receive the best education. These positions, which are often volunteer roles, can also be stepping stones to other political aspirations or simply a way to give back to your community. But these roles are also one of the most misunderstood elected positions.

What do local school board members actually do? Local school boards typically consist of five to nine members of the community who set policies; approve budgets, textbooks and curricula; and, perhaps most importantly, hire and evaluate the superintendent, among other duties that can vary from state to state. Their collaborative decisions are made with input from families of students, researchers, experts, and members of the community—and they have a major impact on the quality of education students receive, sometimes for years to come. Additionally, serving as a school board member can be a springboard into running for other elected positions like city council or the state legislature.

We Need Diverse Books sat down with some school board members as well as a local school boards association to answer some of the questions you might be thinking about if you're considering a run for your local school board.

Why should you run?

Kellie Hinkle, vice president of the Haddon Township Board of Education in New Jersey, was motivated to run for her local school board after the 2016 election. She saw it as an opportunity to invest in her community and be more involved, especially as a non-parent.

Helen Ying, who serves on the Multnomah Education School District Board of Directors in Oregon, was a long-time educator who wanted more people of color to have a voice in curriculum development.

“[As a student], I never saw myself represented in curricula,” Ying, who is Chinese American, said. She was also motivated to address the achievement gap she saw in student performance across the country and the lack of teachers and staff of color she saw in schools in her district.

While there are many reasons to run, there are also many aspects of the job that may scare potential candidates away. Across the country, school board members are facing challenges they never expected (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/05/us/politics/school-board-threats.html>). With pandemic mitigation measures and curriculum focused on race and racism coming under scrutiny by community members, school board members are often the ones taking the heat. Some school board members have been screamed at during public meetings, been harassed outside their homes, and even received death threats.

“In my lifetime it’s the most difficult of times for someone to be a school board member because of the stresses involved,” said Alex Pulaski, director of communications for the Oregon School Boards Association. But at the same time, Pulaski says he is inspired by watching board members take on the challenge anyway. When asked why someone would run for a school board under these conditions he said, “Because you believe in students.”

Hinkle suggests talking to current school board members and attending school board meetings to get a sense of what the experience might be like in your district. Hinkle, for example, hasn’t faced the same amount of pushback on mask mandates as school board members in other states because the mandate was established by the governor.

What makes for a good (and qualified) candidate?

Each district has its own requirements for school board members but the most common ones require candidates who:

- Are at least 18 years old and a registered voter
- Reside in the district in which they are running
- Do not have any felonies
- Are not an employee of the school district in which they are running

You can learn the requirements for your district by visiting your state board of education website or your local school board’s association website.

Beyond eligibility, a good candidate must be truly committed to the work, as these are largely volunteer positions. A strong candidate should also have a clear understanding of what school board members do and don’t do and what’s required of the role—which can often include night meetings and a lot of paperwork. And they should recognize that an important part of the role is collaborative decision-making.

“Sometimes board work gets very combative,” Pulaski said. “People don’t always see eye to eye.”

Ying agreed, noting that it is important for school board members to be able to listen to diverse opinions, work as a team, and help people find common ground.

But you don’t need a background in local government or policy, or even a child attending school to become an effective school board member.

“You need to understand the needs of students,” Ying said.

What should you expect during your campaign?

Campaigns can vary greatly from district to district and even year to year. Smaller districts typically have less contested campaigns. Sometimes candidates can simply register and then run unopposed without raising any money, while in bigger cities, races can be competitive, with candidates running \$100,000 campaigns and above.

When Hinkle ran in 2017, there were seven candidates on the ballot for three seats; she was the only woman. She described her campaign as “not too demanding,” focusing more on smaller gatherings and conversations and participating in a Q&A night organized by the local Parent Teacher Association, which she saw as an opportunity to stand out with her strong education nonprofit background.

She noted that, in the suburbs, door-to-door campaigning can be fruitful, while in cities, many people won't answer the door. Lawn signs are also a hallmark of suburban campaigns, she said, as name recognition is one of the important steps toward getting elected.

When Ying decided to run, she was a part of Emerge (<https://emergeamerica.org/about/about-emerge/>), an organization that helps Democrat women run for office through an in-depth training program. Emily's List (<https://emilyslist.org/>) is another organization focused on supporting Democrat women who are running for office, and many more organizations like it have emerged over the last several years, focusing on LGBTQ+ candidates (<https://victoryinstitute.org/>), Black candidates (<https://collectivepac.org/>) and more.

Ying also encourages candidates to build their networks and reach out to current leaders for endorsements.

State school board associations like the Oregon School Boards Association are a resource all candidates should definitely explore when they're considering running. For example, the Oregon State Boards Association hosts free webinars to prepare prospective board member candidates as part of their Get on Board campaign (<https://getonboardoregon.org/>). Many other state associations run similar campaigns. Once elected, members of school board associations receive ongoing guidance, resources, and training as well as a network of school board members to connect with.

What is it like to actually serve on a school board?

For Hinkle, it took a little while to find her footing as a new board member. After figuring out where to plug in and how to work most effectively with her colleagues, Hinkle now feels like she is making a difference and has since been re-elected as vice president of her board. She has helped

rewrite policies with an equity lens to make them more inclusive, such as removing gendered pronouns from the district's transgender student policy.

Ying is proud to have made an impact in an area that drove her to run in the first place: Inclusive curricula. In 2017, [Oregon passed a state law requiring ethnic studies be part of K-12 curricula. \(https://www.wweek.com/news/state/2017/07/01/oregon-is-now-the-only-state-to-have-required-ethnic-studies-curriculum-for-k-12-students/\)](https://www.wweek.com/news/state/2017/07/01/oregon-is-now-the-only-state-to-have-required-ethnic-studies-curriculum-for-k-12-students/) Ying was appointed to an advisory committee to develop content standards for that curricula, which were adopted by the state board of education in 2021.

In Pulaski's time working with board members, he's been able to witness the impact they can have on students.

"I have been truly humbled to meet volunteers who are not paid a dime and they spend an enormous amount of time and they believe in kids," Pulaski said. "The moment that all that work pays off for them is when they stand in a football stadium in June and they see a kid who had maybe struggled or wasn't headed to a good place and they hand that kid their diploma. That's why they do what they do."



Andrea Ruggirello's stories, essays, and poetry appear or are forthcoming in Gay Magazine, Zora, Hobart, The Baltimore Review, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Electric Literature, Catapult, Third Coast, and elsewhere. She has an MFA in fiction from West Virginia University, and her novel manuscript was a semi-finalist for the James Jones First Novel Fellowship. Andrea was born in Korea, adopted as a baby, and raised on Staten Island, NY. She lives in Washington, D.C.

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