

Clarence Central Schools

Board Member Handbook

Revision 2020.08.24

Overview

This document summarizes the practices and protocols that the Clarence Central Schools (CCS) Board of Education uses to conduct the business of the Board. The goal of this document is twofold: 1. promote transparency and trust between Board members, and 2. orient new board members so that they can more quickly participate in Board activity with confidence. The practices in this document can be amended at any time following the process described later in this document.

A Welcome to New Members

Congratulations on being elected to the Board! One of the big challenges of a Board-level role is that our primary exercise of authority is both **collective** and via **policy**. We are also constrained by state law and State Education Department (SED) guidance, which sometimes makes the “right” thing to do more difficult than it would first appear. What all this means in practice can be very confusing and this document attempts to lay out how the CCS Board interprets these responsibilities. The good news is that using this reference, you will be able to learn things in a matter of minutes that took many of your predecessors’ years to piece together.

In the broadest sense, the School Board has the authority and duty to adopt policies, rules, and bylaws in order to meet its responsibilities and to secure the best educational results for the students within its charge. As elected officials, board members represent the public in:

- defining the philosophy of the district;
- setting goals and objectives;
- employing professional educators;
- establishing policies for the operation of the district;
- evaluating the effectiveness of programs and services;
- developing a budget consistent with educational needs and community resources;
- communicating the needs and progress of the district to the community.

The Role

Each district is unique in how they approach the joint responsibilities of policy and oversight. Too much oversight becomes micromanagement, and too little means that the board has abdicated its elected responsibilities. The American Association of School Boards has a good [summary on this topic](#). There are also required and optional training that discuss this issue in general teams from the Erie County Association of School Boards (ECASB) as well as the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA).

For Clarence, we describe the role as follows:

New Board Member Orientation

After the Election

As soon as practical after the election the Superintendent will:

1. Arrange for an initial orientation meeting.
2. Initiate setup of a district email account and access to the online board resources.
3. Provide relevant technology resources (tablets currently).
4. Add new board members to email updates and relevant correspondence using the school board email.
5. Provide a reference to Robert's Rules of Order.
6. Provide a copy of this document and a copy of the By-Laws.
7. Include information on the mandatory Board training requirements per Section 2101-a of the state Education Law.

In addition, the current Board President or Vice-President will reach out to arrange an opportunity to answer any additional questions and to discuss other orientation matters including mentoring.

Mentoring

While you can always ask any board member or the Superintendent any questions you might have about Board process, it is helpful to have one person who you can develop a relationship with and who can help you navigate the early phases of your tenure. The President will work with you to identify an appropriate partnership. While the selection of a mentor is driven by many factors, the intent is to not have a single board member always play the role.

The Reorganization Meeting

The first meeting of the Board is called the reorganization meeting. For a new Board member, it can be a confusing and rapid process. The first thing to realize is that every year, the Board is completely reconstituted. This means that at the opening of the reorganization meeting, the President and Vice-President roles, along with all other appointments, are vacant.

The basic structure of the meeting is as follows:

1. The District Clerk will start the meeting and facilitate the election of officers.
2. The President and Vice-President are elected.

3. Resolutions are passed related to the assignment of various operational roles in the district (special education review committees, law firms, etc).
4. Resolutions are passed related to ongoing financial activities (carryover from the previous fiscal year, end of year purchases, etc).
5. Board members are assigned to various roles (described below).
6. Any regular business.

Board Roles

President

The President convenes the Board meetings and is the legal and ceremonial head of the board. While individual Board members have no power on their own, the President is charged with executing the actions of the Board. This includes actions such as signing agreements and speaking “for the Board” at various functions.

Vice-President

The Vice-President typically has no responsibilities beyond any other Board member. In the event the President is unable to attend a Board meeting or similar function, the Vice-President takes on the President’s responsibilities.

Community Group Liaisons

There are several community groups that are affiliated with the district (sports boosters, PTOs, foundations). We formally assign a Board liaison to some of these to help inform these community groups about Board and district activities, and to identify any issues or opportunities that may need the Board or administration’s attention. The current roles and assignments are listed on the [CCS website](#).

NYSSBA Roles

The district is part of the NYS School Boards Association. As a member, the Board appoints a representative to serve as a delegate who votes on the advocacy agenda for NYSSBA.

ECASB Roles

The Eris County Association of School Boards (ECASB) provides development and advocacy support for school boards within Erie county. ECASB has several committees that govern their work, all of which are available for CCS board members for participation.

Audit Committee

Audit is a standing committee of a subset of the Board that convenes minimally twice a year and is responsible for making recommendations to the Board as a whole regarding the selection of auditors, the areas of the district to audit each year, and if the audit results should be approved.

Other Board Committees

It has been the practice of the Board to not have any other standing committees. Others can be proposed or formed ad hoc as needed and voted by the Board.

District Committees

The district has several standing and ad hoc committees that allow for broader input from the community and district staff. Board members are welcome to participate in many of these, however

care must be taken to avoid overshadowing other participants or the administration. See the section below on “Information Gathering.”

Other Organizations

BOCES

The district is part of the ERIE 1 BOCES, which is explicitly defined by NYS to assist with group purchases or services sharing between constituent districts. In many ways, you can think of BOCES as a “school district of school districts.”

Board Meetings

Types of Meetings

There are three general types of board meetings:

1. Open/General Meeting

A General meeting is open to the public to observe, and the location and time must be posted in advance. All discussion and voting must be done in a general meeting unless it meets the criteria for an Executive session.

2. Executive Session

An Executive Session is closed to the public and is used for specific sensitive topics as proscribed by law. While the Open Meetings Law (OML) lists eight reasons, the most common groups invoked by school boards are to discuss:

- Proposed, pending, or current litigation.
- Collective negotiations pursuant to article 14 of the Civil Service Law.
- 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.”

The Board can invite non-Board members to provide information as needed. Voting and discussion is focused on the topics articulated when forming the meeting.

3. Educational/Training Meetings

A training meeting is one where board members are provided information by the district or are discussing the functioning of the Board itself. No voting takes place, and no discussion of normal “Board work” is done.

Forming the Agenda

The agenda is collected by the district and reviewed with the Board President and Vice-President in advance of any meeting. The format of the meetings is defined by the Board and can be changed by Board vote. Typically, however, the standing format is used, and the district administration fills in proposed topics that need attention from the Board (approval of personnel changes, review of policy sections, etc.). Any Board member can ask that a new item be added to the agenda by sending an email to the Board and the Superintendent in advance of the meeting. If there is a late-breaking item that

needs to be added, a motion can be made at the beginning of the meeting during the “approval of the agenda” section. It is usually good form to give the board and Superintendent advance notice when possible about a topic so that necessary information can be gathered. At the meeting, an agenda item is added by a majority vote of the Board. Similarly, at a meeting, an item can be removed or tabled by a majority vote of the Board.

Decorum/Robert’s Rules

Currently, the Board has a practice of formal attire at general meetings. This is a tradition and could be changed by the Board at any time.

During meetings (both public and executive sessions), courtesy and respect between Board members is critical for the success of the Board. Debate and dissent are valuable, and the President provides opportunities for Board members to discuss topics before they are voted on.

Robert’s Rules of Order are used for public meetings. This is a tool to help make sure that there is a formal opportunity for all Board members to bring business to the Board and have it be addressed in an equitable way. While the “majority rules,” there are mechanisms to raise awareness for individual members without obstructing the Board’s work. For example, it typically requires two Board members to bring something to make a change or bring something to a vote (a “first” and “second”). If a motion to vote on a change does not receive a “first” and a “second”, the Board may proceed without considering the proposed change. If a “first” and “second” are obtained, the Board must vote on the proposed change prior to proceeding. More details can be found in the Robert’s Rules book.

Public Comment

School Board meetings are open meetings and public input is valuable and welcome. However, while they are open, this does **not** mean that the community can interject or disrupt meetings as they wish – it simply means that they have the right to observe. Clarence has developed a practice of having two “public comment periods” on the agenda to allow for the community to ask questions or to raise issues. It’s best not to engage in a debate and respond to rhetorical questions from the community. The issue isn’t having a discussion, but often the power asymmetry means that any correction or clarification from the Board is perceived as an attack on the individual speaking. It is also difficult to refute or confirm any assertions by the community in real time. Typically, the President thanks the individual for their comments, but other Board members can respond or ask clarifying questions if they choose. The Board does not need to respond immediately and can always ask for the Superintendent to follow up at a later date. To clearly define the process and acceptable behavior, the Board has crafted a pamphlet for the community.

Attendance

Attendance of board members at official Board meetings and functions is an important part of the role. If you cannot attend a regular Board meeting, you should inform the Superintendent and the rest of the Board. The details of the attendance rules are documented by both the State Education department and in CCSD policy 1230.

Information Gathering

As part of their responsibilities, Board members may need additional information about a policy's implementation to best determine if corrections are needed. To implement their fiduciary responsibilities, they also need to have a complete understanding of the district's funds and budget status. To accomplish these goals, they need to obtain information from the district. The Clarence CSD has established some best practices to aid in this process.

From the Superintendent

The primary conduit for information about the district is the Superintendent. The key current practices are:

- A weekly update that highlights the unusual or noteworthy events and issues.
- The Board packet in advance of each meeting, containing detailed financial statements as well as items the board will review or approve in the meeting.
- Presentations from teachers and administrators as part of the regular Board schedule reviewing a topic in detail (e.g. the music program, professional development, or sports).
- Annual or bi-annual retreats to review topics in detail in advance of general meetings (e.g. budget planning, academic ranking).

In addition to these routine updates, Board members can request that the Superintendent provide any information about the district that is needed. Unless it is determined an urgent issue or if the Superintendent is too busy to respond, this information will be provided to all Board members in the next weekly update. If more information is needed, the Superintendent can request more time.

From the School Attorneys

From time to time, it is important to get a legal evaluation about an issue from the school attorneys. For example, there may be a need to understand what risks the district has regarding an outstanding personnel complaint, or a grievance from one of the unions. Preferably, any issues not addressing the Superintendent should be proxied through that office. The response will be shared with all Board members, most likely within an executive session. If discussion is required, arrangements can be made to invite the school attorney(s) to an executive session. When the Superintendent is not the appropriate proxy, the Board President should contact the attorney. Individual Board members should not directly contact the school district attorney without prior approval from a majority of the Board.

From Other School Staff

When gathering information from district staff, care must be taken. As a representative of the Board, you are in a powerful leadership role. You should take issues that are presented to you seriously, but also ensure that you do not unintentionally undermine the administration. The best way to accomplish this is to encourage those who have specific concerns to follow the chain-of-command and raise them with their supervisor or principal as appropriate. As a practice, Board members should refrain from contacting district employees others than the Superintendent to obtain information. If a Board member is interested in obtaining information about a school, program, sport, etc. the Board member should request that the Superintendent obtain that information. Any such request should be directed to the Superintendent and copied to the entire Board.

From the Community

Similarly, it is typical that community members will approach you about concerns or issues that they have with teachers, principals, or district practices. In general, the best approach is to direct the community member to follow the relevant chain-of-command. For example, if it is a grading issue, the right person to talk to is the student's teacher. If it is an issue with passing times being too short, discussing it with the principal is appropriate. A Board member should refrain from allowing a community member to skip the proper chain and raise issues immediately with the Board that are better addressed by the relevant district staff.

The key point to note in both the school staff and community cases is that Board should not "expediate" issues. While this line is subtle at times, the key is to distinguish between individual cases, and a possible systematic issue. The Board works almost exclusively in policy, and so individual issues at best will indicate that a policy is being ignored or needs revision. Even in those cases, the resolution of the issue is the responsibility of the administration, not the Board.

Visiting Schools

As part of the Board's legal responsibilities, they must visit all of the buildings used for teaching at least once a year. This is incorporated into the Board public general meeting schedule, and typically the principal of the school provides information specific to that school to the Board. Outside of these scheduled meetings, the Superintendent may arrange for special visits of the Board (e.g. as part of a facilities review in preparation for a capital project).

Individual Board members can also choose to visit a school building (in their Board capacity) to learn about specific programs. This can be arranged by contacting the principal. As a courtesy, the Superintendent should also be informed. Like the other public interactions described above, it is important to not give the appearance of undermining the administration. Any areas of concern that are identified should be raised as a question to the Superintendent and discussed in a Board meeting if appropriate.

Board members have all of the same rights of access and inquiry as a community member or parent. This means that special arrangements are not needed for things like open house, student programs, and other activities. Board members are often invited to activities by teachers or administrators. Provided that these invitations are open to all Board members, community members and parents, no special notification is required.

Board Professional Development

There are many opportunities to develop as a Board member. There are programs offered by ECASB as well as NYSSBA, including the annual NYSSBA conference. As part of the district budget, funds are set aside for board members to participate in many of these activities. Board members are also welcome to participate in district staff development day programs.

The Presentation Calendar

If there are specific topics that the Board would like to learn more about, the Superintendent can arrange for a presentation to be held as part of the general meeting. Early in the school year, the Superintendent develops a list of these topics and coordinates with the relevant staff to schedule them throughout the year.

The Budgeting Process

Developing the budget is one of the most complex and important parts of the Board role. It typically starts at a Board retreat, where basic information about the budget climate is provided by the district, and the board can provide guidance on priorities for the upcoming year. Several general meetings in the spring have budget updates on the agenda, where data about enrollment, state finances, and recommendations by the district are reviewed and discussed.

The last phase of the budget development process is to have the Board adopt a formal levy amount.

Policies

Policies are developed by the Board, and the Superintendent and administration develops the practices to execute those policies. Policies cannot contradict law, and for some policies (harassment, etc.) it is not unusual to have the policy language adjust based on legal changes. The district subscribes to the BOCES policy service, which means that they assist in reconciling local policies with law and recommending updates.

For other policies, it is primarily the Board that sets the direction. An example is the Clarence policy on volunteer hours being required for graduation. When developing policy, it is important to make it descriptive and clear as to the goal, but to avoid requiring a specific implementation. This allows the administration to adapt to operational needs. Using the athletic placement policy (7420) as an example, it is reasonable for the Board to determine the eligibility criteria for placement, but it would not be appropriate to enumerate the specific methods used by the athletics staff to evaluate goal statements like “physical maturity” or “gifted athlete.” The complete set of Policies is available on the [BOE web page](#).

Non-Meeting Board Communication

Use of Email

Email is a convenient way for the Board to keep in touch between meetings. Due to the requirements of Open Meetings Law, there are some significant constraints to how it is used. The first is that the official Clarence CSD email system should be used for all Board-related correspondence. Most of this email is public record, and so mixing personal or business email with Board material can open your other email up to review under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). These documents must follow specific retention policies that the district manages, just like other public documents.

Email cannot be used for voting or for debate or discussion. If it seems like a request for information or some other valid use of email is turning into a discussion, it is best to suggest that an agenda item be added to the next Board meeting so that the discussion can happen during the proper setting. Most commonly, email is used to ask questions, scheduling meetings, and to supply information. In many cases, even if the question is asked and answered via email, it will be appropriate to provide the same information in a general meeting so that the community has access as well.

When an issue is brought to an individual Board member’s attention, by either a district employee or the community at-large and that issue may also be brought to other Board members, it is the Board’s practice to forward the relevant email to the Superintendent and copy all Board members.

Board members should be mindful when responding to emails that are received from district employees or the community at-large. It is Board practice that either the Superintendent or the Board President shall respond to all emails directed to the entire group with a copy to all Board members. If a Board member receives an individual email communication, care should be taken when responding to not commit the Board to any action and a best practice is to inform fellow Board members of community inquires.

Open Meetings Law

Because school boards are public bodies, all meetings of a quorum of the board must be open to the public except where an Executive Session or an Education and Training Session is properly convened for certain reasons authorized by law.

Speaking to the Press

The Superintendent is the spokesperson for the Board in most cases and is the most appropriate person to address the press. In circumstances where the Board needs to speak directly, the Board President is the default contact. Any press inquiries about issues should be referred to the Superintendent or President.

Speaking to the Community

As described in sections above, it is exceptionally difficult for the community or staff to separate you as an individual from you as a Board member. Any comments that you make have the weight of your role as a trustee and as the supervisor of the Superintendent. While you as an individual have no formal vested authority, the community sees you as the voice of the board. For that reason, care must be taken to not commit to policy changes, undermine the administration, or promise to intervene on someone's behalf on an issue. You can always ask questions and listen, and if you feel there is a general concern that rises to the level of the Board, you can raise it with the Superintendent and to the board as a whole.

Goals and Evaluation

Board Goals and Self-Evaluation

The Board develops goals annually, and then measures their progress against these goals as a group at the end of the year. These goals are usually strategic and directional rather than specific tasks. An example might be to improve student support services, or to increase the transparency of board activities. The Superintendent may suggest ideas for goals to use as a starting point.

Superintendent Goals and Evaluation

The Superintendent's goals usually cascade from the board goals and are somewhat more specific in nature. For example, successful negotiation of union contracts within board parameters or progress against a curriculum plan. The Superintendent has a mid-year evaluation to track progress, and then a final evaluation as the end of the school year which typically coincides with a contract review.

Addressing Conflict

Conflict is inevitable when you have seven people from different backgrounds working as a collective. The important thing is that while you don't have to like each other, that doesn't preclude being civil in

meetings. Decorum is always expected in meetings, and one of the ways to accomplish this is using Robert's Rules.

If one Board member identifies behaviors that seem to violate the spirit of this handbook or the Board [code of conduct](#), it should be addressed promptly. If the issue is tied to personal behavior (e.g. talking over or interrupting other board members in a meeting), it is best to speak to the individual one on one and see if the issue can be resolved. If that is unsuccessful, or the issue involves public behavior that could reflect on the Board as a whole (e.g. public statements at a PTO meeting, conflicts of interest, micromanagement of staff, using cell phones during Board meetings), the issue can be raised with the Board President and/or the Board as a whole for discussion. If addressed with the Board President, the Board President should report back to the board member that action was taken.