

# How to Engage with the BUUSD Board

The BUUSD School Board members care deeply about public education and the well-being of our students, faculty, administrators, and community members. We recognize that there will be times when members of the public hope to share their opinion or understanding of the situation for our consideration. Below is an overview of avenues to reach out to the School Board -- and what to expect in terms of outcomes.

## **A few notes about the way the Board works...**

The School Board is a public body and is governed by many laws to assure that our work is both ethical and responsive to our community. A few of the biggest guiding principles include:

- [Open Meeting Law](#) -- which assures that all deliberation and decision-making occurs in the public eye -- at publicly warned meetings. This can slow things down -- since work can't get done behind the scenes -- but it also ensures that the Board's work and processes are transparent and that members can be held accountable.
- [Robert's Rules of Order](#) -- is the general procedural approach taken to run our meetings and conduct our business. This internationally recognized protocol creates a level of formality that can take some getting used to but is very effective in ensuring that the decisions of the Board reflect the will of the membership's majority.
- **State deadlines and rules** -- Drafting a budget for the district is one of the biggest charges of any school board, but deadlines and the detailed algorithms that will determine our local taxes are set by the state. Ironically, the state of Vermont rarely provides the local school boards with many of those details until well after they have legally required us to pass a budget!

## **Many types of communication**

This document is intended to provide guidance to those who are wishing to interact with the BUUSD Board so that they can choose the best course of action based on their desired outcome, and understand what to expect from the Board along the way. We have observed that there are four broad categories of interaction:

1. [Complaints](#)
2. [Feedback/Input](#)
3. [Requests for Information](#)
4. [Dialog](#)

Our hope is that by focusing on each type of interaction, community members will be able to figure out the best course of action to take for their needs.

# 1. Complaints

Alas, it is human nature to fall short of perfection, despite our aspirations otherwise. Over time, the district has developed a [Complaint procedure](#) to handle these issues. The basic gist is to first get in touch with the person closest to the situation. For example, if you would like to complain about something that happened to your child, reach out to your child's teacher first. If, after discussion, you can not resolve the situation to your satisfaction, then consider reaching out to their immediate supervisor -- in this case, the building principal; if it is still not resolved to your satisfaction, then you would reach out to the superintendent. At the other end of the spectrum, complaints about district-level decisions should be registered directly to the superintendent. If you are not sure who to contact regarding your complaint, a member of the Board might be able to advise you where to start or where to go next.

Although the Board cares deeply about the concerns of our constituents, it is inappropriate for individual Board members, or the Board as a whole, to get involved at the beginning of the complaint process. The primary reason for this (other than a general belief that those closest to a problem are the best equipped to deal with it) is that the Board is required to act in a quasi-judicial capacity in the event that complaints move through the process and are appealed to the Board. Getting involved in the complaint process too early limits (or sometimes eliminates entirely) our ability to act in this capacity as it may compromise our impartiality.

# 2. Feedback / Input

Community members often have opinions about matters under consideration by the Board and would like to share their perceptions, experiences, or ideas with Board members. Much of the time, sharing the input is enough of an action -- the community member is not in need of a response or major discussion, they just want to know the Board heard their statement. There are two primary means for this type of valuable, one-way interaction:

## A) E-mail

These days, email is one of the easiest ways to share your thoughts with the Board. You can email [individual members](#) or send a letter to all members at [buusd-board@buusd.org](mailto:buusd-board@buusd.org).

The Board distribution list is, in general, a one-way communication path designed for distributing information or feedback to the Board. The Board's standing procedure is that the Chair will respond to emails from constituents within 2 business days.

You may also get a response from an individual Board member after communicating in this way. It is important to remember that responses from individual Board members represent only that

one Board member's thoughts. Communicating with one Board member is not the same as communicating with the full Board.

Email is one of the areas where Board member activity can unwittingly bump up against the Open Meeting Law. As a practice, we work to avoid substantive conversations about Board business through email because the format takes it outside the public eye. So, while email is a great way to be heard by the Board, it is not an effective way to engage in dialog or to generate action from the Board (both of which need to take place in public). The Board can only act when it meets and is able to speak as a whole.

## B) Public Comment

Each Board meeting provides time for Public Comment at the beginning of the meeting for items not on the agenda or time for public comment during a specific agenda item. The Board's procedure allows up to 2 minutes per person.

Some people opt for public comment in addition to email and some opt for it instead of email. If you'd prefer to provide feedback or input to the Board verbally or in person or to have your opinion recorded as part of the meeting video, public comment is an effective way to do that.

Public comment is essentially a one-way communication channel. Board members will listen to public comment as it is offered, but won't respond to it during the meeting or engage in dialog or back and forth as part of the public comment process. This lack of response can feel impersonal or distant. However, there are important practical reasons that, over many discussions, the Board has elected to continue this approach: we have seen too many instances where an effort to respond to public comment ends up not only with many ruffled feathers but also derailing the agenda previously determined by the Board -- the agenda that was publicly warned and that our community expects us to follow in order to carry out the business of the district.

The Board's existing policy regarding public comment can be found [HERE](#); day-to-day procedures regarding public comment can be found [here](#).

## 3. Requests for Information

We typically see two broad types of requests for information, Public Records or Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and general information requests.

### A) Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests

Public Records requests (also referred to commonly as FOI Requests or FOIA requests) follow strict legal protocols and go through the Superintendent. If you are seeking public records related to *any* district matter, no matter which building it took place in or which employee or

volunteer it involves, the request procedure begins with a specific request sent to the Superintendent. Please note that these requests can only be made for existing documents and correspondence; new documents or reports will not be created for an FOI request.

## B) General Information Requests

Most requests that we receive are much more general and do not require public records requests. These are times when constituents would like to know more about a specific topic or more about specific actions the Board has taken. It is appropriate for community members to reach out to the Board -- not district staff -- to get this information, and the Chair will reply, usually within 2 business days.

So, if you have a specific question,

- The Chair will try to ascertain if your question has already been answered within work that has already been completed and if so, send you a link to that document. We find that the vast majority of questions have already been answered and posted on our website, but sometimes they are hard to find or were presented in an unexpected format. We'll connect you to the source -- you might have to watch a video or wade through a spreadsheet -- to answer your question.
- If we do not already have that information, neither the Board nor district staff will be able to provide it, unless the Board Chair or the Board as a whole tasks the administration or an outside contractor (say, our attorneys) to do so through an approved motion.
- Even if we do not have an answer and do not act to provide an answer, your questions or comments are included in our thinking, especially before we make decisions, whether we take obvious action or not. If you have a critique about a data point, for example, board members will consider whether they think your critique is valid or not and whether it is relevant or not prior to making any decisions.
- We are starting to incorporate answers to questions we hear many times into FAQ documents on the website. These evolve over time and are a great place to start!

## 4. Dialog

There will be times when you will feel like registering your opinion with the Board is not enough. There are two major ways to engage at a deeper level: participate in community engagement events or work to get a topic on the Board's agenda.

### A) Community Engagement Activities

Prior to our merger in 2019, the nature of our small school districts made it easy for community members to feel like they were "engaging" with their school board. Since merging, one of the challenges we have been trying to address is how to -- not just hear from community members, but -- dialog with them about matters of import to our district, and to do so while we are in the

process of shaping the Board's thinking and direction. Our policy on community engagement can be found [here](#).

At this time, there are several avenues we are using to try to work with the community to shape both our understandings in a more back-and-forth way: more frequent updates to Front Porch Forum and school newsletters about Board actions; improvements to the website so community members can easily find minutes, documents, etc.; brief surveys to check the pulse of the community about an issue; Q&A sessions to clarify information and/or figure out where better communication is needed; community conversations to sit down and hear multiple perspectives from many stakeholders.

Community engagement is useful in a number of ways to the Board. For example, public comments and emails to Board members often help us realize (among other things) points in our discussion or work that need further clarification and lead us to update our website, write an op-ed or host a Q&A event. We have used short surveys to enable us to hear from many people quickly and about a general topic and the results of the survey are available to all Board members as a point of reference as we explore that topic more deeply. Small group events help us to understand the nuance of perspectives (that on the surface might seem) either different from or similar to our own. We use community engagement in all its forms to deepen both our knowledge of and understanding about our larger community, knowing that many of our constituents may not choose to engage directly with the Board.

## B) Getting an item on the agenda

Using Roberts' Rules of Order, the work of the Board is established in its agenda. If an item is not on the agenda for a meeting, it will not be considered for discussion or action by the Board. This aligns well with the Open Meeting Law, too -- it means that the group will not be taking action on matters about which the public hasn't been warned.

In the broadest terms, most of what will go on the agenda is determined during Board retreats, when the group identifies and votes on its main focus areas for the year ahead.

Meeting agendas are put together by the Chair, following the Board's approved goals and work plan. One of the Chair's primary duties is to organize meetings and work to assure that the Board meets its approved goals. Specific meeting agendas are published 7 days prior to a meeting.

Under Robert's Rules, once the meeting has started, the order of items that will be taken up can be rearranged without a vote. Also, as the first order of business, any member of the Board can move to add or delete an agenda item at the beginning of a meeting. Such a motion must be approved by a majority vote in order to occur. Technically, a Board member may also move to add or delete an agenda item later in the meeting, but this requires a  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority vote to pass.

Last-minute changes are discouraged because they do make it harder for the Board to complete its previously agreed-upon work.

On an ongoing basis, the Chair reviews “parking lot” or future agenda items at the end of each board meeting. The Chair will add items to the parking lot when board members make suggestions to items that need to be considered at a later date.

If there is an item that you feel should be on the Board agenda, there are two ways to go about making that happen:

1. Reach out to the [Chair](#) directly. This is probably the simplest and most effective way to achieve your goal. The Chair will talk to you to understand more about what you are hoping to achieve, offer suggestions about whether starting at the Board level makes sense, and add your idea to our list for consideration.
2. Reach out to an individual Board member and ask them to move that your idea be added to the agenda. If they agree, they would move to add or delete an agenda item during the meeting and it would be voted on by the Board. This method depends on being able to convince a Board member to take up your cause as well as utilizes a pathway that we try to save for only occasional use.

The BUUSD Board is dedicated to providing the best possible educational experience to our community. We welcome ongoing involvement and engagement from all of our constituents. If you have suggestions about how to improve our processes or our communication about them, we look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you!

BUUSD Board

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