

WASB
WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

GUIDE FOR CANDIDATES

2027 Spring Election Edition

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WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

The WASB Guide for Candidates is designed to provide general information and commentary as a service to WASB members based on state law and agency guidance as they existed at the time of publication. It should not be relied upon as legal advice. If legal advice is needed, the services of the school district's designated legal counsel should be obtained.

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School Board Member
Election Dates

Clerks Publish the "Type A" Notice of Election (this notice identifies the school board seats that will be contested in the district at the Spring Election and includes other information about the election and candidacy process) —

- The fourth Tuesday in November (November 24, 2026)

Deadline for Candidates to File to Appear on the Spring Election Ballot —

- The standard deadline for declaring candidacy is 5 p.m. on the first Tuesday in January (January 5, 2027).

In order to be eligible to appear on the official ballot at the Spring Election, a candidate needs to file a declaration of candidacy and a campaign finance registration statement with the filing office identified in the district's Notice of Election by no later than the applicable deadline.

In some school districts, candidates must also file nomination papers with a sufficient number of signatures in order to qualify for the ballot.

- Nomination papers *may not* be circulated or filed prior to Dec. 1, 2026.

The appropriate forms can be obtained from the websites of the Wisconsin Elections Commission and the Wisconsin Ethics Commission, or from the school district's main administrative office.

Spring Primary (if a primary election is needed) —

- Third Tuesday in February (February 16, 2027)

Spring Election —

- First Tuesday in April (April 6, 2027)

WASB New School Board Member Gatherings —

- Held regionally around the state, usually in mid to late April. Please refer to the schedule on WASB.org once it is available.

Persons Elected (or Re-Elected) to the School Board at the Spring Election Must Take and File the Official Oath of Office —

- On or before the fourth Monday in April (no later than April 26, 2027)

Persons Elected (or Re-Elected) to the School Board Take Office —

- Fourth Monday in April (April 26, 2027)

NOTICE: This pamphlet provides general information and is not intended as legal advice. The dates shown on this page reflect the standard dates established in state law as of the date of publication, but certain exceptions can sometimes apply. Please monitor WASB.org and other WASB communications for any changes, updates, or corrections to the information presented herein.



A Message from the WASB President

Congratulations! You have made the important decision to run for your local board of education. Whatever the outcome of your election, your community is grateful that you made the decision to step up and get involved to make your local school district even better.

Wisconsin has 421 public school districts, each one governed by locally elected school board members. Their job is to make the policy decisions that will provide all of their students with the best education possible and to hire, supervise, and evaluate the superintendent. There are numerous state and federal laws that must be observed, and many of them need community decision makers to fine-tune the requirements to fulfill the spirit of the law, as well as the letter, for each district. Working with superintendents, administrators, and teachers, school board members go about building effective educational systems to benefit their students and their communities.

As a community member, you have always had the opportunity to voice your thoughts, concerns, goals and desires to enhance your school district. As an elected board member, you have the added responsibility to be involved in the full decision-making process. Working with the other members of your board, you will have the responsibility of approving policy for administration and staff to follow, evaluating the superintendent, setting annual budgets, and advocating for your students and your district.

As a member of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, your district has the opportunity to utilize the many tools developed by the WASB to follow good governance guidelines including webinars, workshops, conferences, and the annual State Education Convention held every January.

Best wishes to you in your election journey, and thank you for stepping up to make your local district a great one.

Sandie Anderson

Sandie Anderson
WASB Board President | Wild Rose Board Member



Advocates for Children

School boards and school board members are uniquely positioned to be advocates for children and to make student learning and student achievement the center of their work.

A member of a school board is entrusted with one of the most important responsibilities that can be assigned to any citizen—that of helping to direct the education of the youth of his or her community.

In no other country is there local responsibility for and authority in education comparable to the American school board. This local responsibility and authority—local control—varies in degree from state to state, but it assures that public schools are flexible and responsive to community needs and values.

Wisconsin school board members are the elected representatives of their districts and set policy for the education of the district's children.

In Wisconsin, nearly 2,800 school board members are making decisions affecting more than 800,000 children enrolled in the public schools of the 421 districts in the state. These board members, as individuals, generally have no more power or authority than any other citizen in the district. It is only when these individuals are meeting collectively as a board that they can legally make decisions affecting the district.

Board members in Wisconsin must go through an established procedure to gain election to the school board. This brochure describes general requirements. Your district administrator or school district clerk will tell you the specific requirements for your district.

Thank you for your interest in becoming a school board member!



Daniel M. Rossmiller
WASB Executive Director

Qualities of a School Board Member

There are many qualifications and qualities that experienced school board members have indicated are important to school board membership. These include:

- A commitment to the belief that all children of the school district are entitled to a beneficial educational program.
- An open mind and readiness to learn.
- A willingness to attend seminars and workshops to help make intelligent decisions in school affairs.

  [The first WASB events for newly elected school board members are the New School Board Member Gatherings held in mid to late April in 15 regions throughout the state to briefly review school board member responsibilities and introduce new members to the services and information provided by the WASB.]
- A vision and an ability to understand changes in our society.
- The ability to act with other school board members to advance the best interests of the school district.
- The capability to articulate the philosophy and goals of the district and to listen carefully to the criticisms offered by people with differing views.
- A willingness to invest the hours necessary to faithfully discharge board duties.
- The freedom from conflicts of interest.

What Does the School Board Do?

School boards lead and govern the schools and educational programs of our local public school districts. This leadership role is performed as part of a team that includes the district administrator (also known as the superintendent). The leadership team, in turn, operates within a unique framework of authority, duties, and powers that is established by a variety of state and federal laws and supplemented by local policy decisions.

There are several different types of public school districts in Wisconsin, including K-12 common school districts, K-8 common school districts, union high school districts, unified school districts, and the Milwaukee Public Schools. While the different types of school districts and their boards share many general characteristics, there are some differences in the specific powers and responsibilities that are assigned to them. However, all school districts and school boards are alike in that student learning and student achievement constitute the centerpiece of their mission.

Major Responsibilities:

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: The school board adopts academic standards for pupils and establishes expectations for education in the district. The school board monitors student achievement and exercises general supervision over the schools.

POLICYMAKING: Policymaking covers the broad range of goals, expectations, rules and regulations that school boards enact, alter or repeal. Board policies are the basis of school district operations. It is through policy-making that the board acts, directing the district administrator and staff regarding district priorities. To have a well-organized school system, the board needs a sound philosophy of education as a basis for policymaking.

BOARD-ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONS: Research has shown that the board-administrator relationship is central to the success of the district. Effective board members are aware of the differences between their role and that of school administrators. In essence, the school board determines *what* needs to happen and the district administrator and staff determine *how* to make it happen. The school board sets its goals and operational policies and expects the district administrator to carry them out. Although the board should refrain from becoming involved in the day-to-day operation of the schools, it should follow up on the administration and operation of the schools and require periodic reports for purposes of evaluation.

EVALUATION: Evaluation is a continuous function that applies to policies, people and programs. Regular evaluation of all facets of school operations uncovers areas of success and opportunities for growth, establishing a basis for future action.

BUDGET RESPONSIBILITY: Nothing conveys what is important to a school board more than the budget it adopts. The board uses public input to align resources with the school system's vision and goals. After that, the board supervises the execution of the budget, reviews school district accounts and business procedures and provides for an annual audit of the accounts as required by law.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC: There are times school board members need to build greater support for public education. This can be done by sharing the district's story, focusing on progress and success. At other times, listening becomes the key communication strategy so board members can better understand the values and concerns of the community and appropriately establish priorities. Effective board members use both types of communication strategies to build support and establish relationships with their stakeholders.

ADVOCACY: The board serves as the key advocate in the community for students and their schools—encouraging progress, energizing systemic change and supporting children as whole persons within a diversified society. In addition, effective
school board members engage with state and federal policymakers to ensure such policymakers understand the local implications of legislative decisions and their impact on schools and communities.

More detailed information on the role, rights and duties of a Wisconsin school board member is available from a variety of WASB resources.

TIME COMMITMENT: A regular term of office for a school board member is 3 years. School boards are required to hold a regular board meeting at least once each month at a time and place determined by the school board. School boards may choose to have more than one regular board meeting each month as a matter of local policy or by any decision of the board. Aside from regular meetings, state law also establishes procedures for calling additional, special meetings of the board. (see s. 120.11 and 120.43 of the Wisconsin statutes.)

Questions and Answers

Q. What are the legal qualifications for being a school board member?
A board member must be an eligible elector of the school district. According to the Wisconsin Elections Commission, in order to qualify for placement on the ballot as a candidate in a school board election, a person must:

(a) Be a citizen of the United States;
(b) Be 18 years of age or older;
(c) Have no disqualifying prior criminal convictions; and
(d) Be a resident of the school district for at least 28 consecutive days at the time of filing a declaration of candidacy.

In some school districts, school board members are elected to numbered seats, to designated and apportioned election districts, or according to a plan of apportionment of board seats among the cities, towns and villages in the district. Where a plan of apportionment is in place, the person elected to an apportioned seat must reside in the designated geographic area at the time he or she takes the oath of office. In all school board elections other than in Milwaukee and Racine, each board member is ultimately elected by the votes of the electors of the entire school district.

Q. What are some potential conflicts of interest to consider before filing a declaration of candidacy?
There are at least three potential conflicts of interest that a candidate should consider before filing his or her declaration of candidacy:

Private interest in public contracts: School board members are prohibited by a felony criminal statute from having private, pecuniary interests, either direct or indirect, in school district contracts that involve aggregate receipts or disbursements by the school district of more than $15,000 in any year. Some limited exceptions to this prohibition are enumerated in the statutes. Significantly, abstaining from participation in particular board discussions and board votes does not always resolve this type of conflict. For example, bidding on certain school district contracts in one's private capacity while simultaneously holding office as a school board member can, by itself, trigger criminal liability under this statute. (see s. 946.13)

Code of Ethics: The Code of Ethics for Local Government Officials prohibits local public officials (including school board members) from engaging in specified conduct that might otherwise involve a conflict of interest, the improper use of a public position for personal gain, or other divided loyalties. For example, a local public official may neither (1) use his or her office to obtain financial gain or anything of substantial value for private benefit for himself or herself, or his or her immediate family, or for an organization with which he or she is associated; nor (2) take any official action substantially affecting a matter in which the official, a member of his or her immediate family, or an organization with which the official is associated has a substantial financial interest. (see s. 19.59)

It should be noted that the Wisconsin Ethics Commission and its predecessors (the former Government Accountability Board and former State Ethics Board) have consistently interpreted the phrase "anything of substantial value" to mean anything of more than nominal, token, or inconsequential value in light of the totality of the circumstances. Although the Ethics Commission has not identified a specific figure, previous opinions suggest that anything worth more than several dollars may be suspect.

Further, the Code of Ethics does not define "substantial financial interest" and fails to contain a safe harbor like the $15,000 annual threshold found in s. 946.13 mentioned above. Thus, unlike s. 946.13, it is likely that financial interests in matters involving far less than $15,000 will trigger the application of the Code. Finally, whereas s. 946.13 restricts an individual's conduct in both the person's private and public capacities, as it deals with private interest in public contracts, the Code of Ethics is primarily concerned with actions that a local public official takes in his or her public (i.e., official) capacity.

Incompatibility of Office: The common law doctrine of incompatibility of office is generally understood to prohibit a school board member from being simultaneously employed by the same school district where he or she is on the school board, and it may restrict school board members from serving the district in other capacities as well (e.g., in certain volunteer roles (exceptions may apply under s. 120.20)). Opinions of the Wisconsin Attorney General and the former State Ethics Board suggest that holding even a relatively minor employment position (e.g., substitute teaching) can give rise to incompatibility concerns.

Before seeking a school board seat, a potential school board candidate who already holds some other public office should also determine if there may be a legal incompatibility between the currently held office and the office of school board member.

Q. What are the election procedures for the office of school board member?
In Wisconsin school districts, school board members are elected in April in connection with the spring election of various municipal and judicial officers. A regular term of office for a school board member is 3 years.

In common, union high and unified school districts, candidates who wish to appear on the election ballot must file a campaign finance registration statement, a declaration of candidacy, and, if required, nomination papers, with the school district clerk on or before 5 p.m. on the first Tuesday in January (or on the next day if Tuesday is a holiday). This deadline may be extended by 72 hours where an incumbent, without giving prior written notification of noncandidacy, fails to file as a candidate for re-election. (If this extension applies, the board clerk will give public notice of the 72-hour filing extension.)

If required, nomination papers may not be circulated for signatures or filed before December 1. Staff in the office of the district administrator (superintendent) should be able to identify whether candidates in the district are required to solicit and file nomination signatures, as well as how many signatures are required.

Notwithstanding the final January deadline for filing the forms that qualify a candidate to appear on the ballot, a candidate must also separately comply with the campaign finance registration requirement by the time that he or she becomes a "candidate" as that term is defined by the campaign finance laws in Chapter 11 of the Wisconsin statutes. A person often becomes a "candidate" under Chapter 11 ***prior to*** the January ballot-access deadline.

The candidate(s) who are elected to the school board at the spring election must take and file the official, written oath of office ***on or before*** the 4th Monday in April. The oath of office does ***not*** have to be administered at or in connection with a school board meeting. Failure to take and file the oath by the deadline gives rise to a vacancy. The term of office begins on the 4th Monday in April.

Q. What are some of the basic campaign finance requirements for candidates?
As mentioned above, the campaign finance laws found in Chapter 11 of the Wisconsin statutes include the requirement that every person who meets the definition of a "candidate" must file a campaign finance registration statement with the school district clerk. Each candidate registers as a "candidate committee." Requirements for designating a candidate committee treasurer and a depository (checking account) for campaign funds are also set out in Chapter 11.

While every school board candidate (defined to also include every actively serving school board member) must be registered, a candidate may claim an exemption from filing periodic financial reports. If a candidate declares on his or her current registration statement that he or she does not anticipate accepting contributions, making disbursements, or incurring obligations in an aggregate (i.e., combined total) amount exceeding $2,500 in a calendar year, and if he or she does not actually exceed that dollar threshold, then the candidate's committee is exempt from filing periodic financial reports. The reporting exemption does ***not*** encompass what is known as a termination report. See s. 11.0104 or visit the Ethics Commission website for more information (ethics.wi.gov).

Notwithstanding the $2,500 aggregate threshold for claiming the reporting exemption, ***all*** candidates and their committees (including those who have claimed the reporting exemption) must adhere to the general limits that apply to contributions from specific sources, as further specified in Chapter 11. In addition, it is very important for candidate committees to understand that claiming the exemption from filing reports does ***not*** relieve the candidate and his or her candidate committee from other obligations imposed by the campaign finance laws. For example, ***all*** candidates and their committees must (1) track and keep adequate records of all receipts and disbursements, (2) include appropriate "paid for by" attribution statements on applicable campaign materials, and (3) eventually file a termination report at the appropriate time.

For additional information, refer to the Wisconsin Ethics Commission's manual titled "Campaign Finance Overview: Local Candidate Committees."

Q. What happens to election committees after the election?
Nonincumbent candidates that lost the election may wish to terminate their committee by filing the appropriate paperwork. Committees for candidates winning the election must remain active and cannot be terminated until the board term ends. Candidates that do not terminate their candidate committees must file periodic finance reports unless they qualify for the exemption from filing.

Q. Do school board members get paid for their service?
In common and union high school districts, the annual meeting of district electors may vote annual salaries for board members or an amount for each school board meeting that the board member actually attends.

In unified school districts, each school board member may be paid an annual salary or an amount fixed by the school board for each school board meeting the member actually attends. In the Milwaukee Public Schools, the members of the board of school directors are paid an annual salary in an amount set by the board.

School board members may refuse their salary by giving timely written notice. For more information, see s. 119.13 (Milwaukee), s. 120.45 (unified school districts), and s. 120.07 (common and union high school districts).

Q. Are school board members protected from civil suits?
The laws of Wisconsin provide some protection for school board members and other public officials who become involved in a legal action in their official capacity. The protection comes in the form of limited immunity and/or indemnification by the school district in certain civil suits. School districts generally maintain liability insurance policies that help the district meet its obligations to indemnify its officers.

While school board members are generally protected from personal liability when acting in the scope of their official capacities, this protection is not absolute. For example, personal liability may arise if a board member's actions are determined to be outside the scope of his or her official capacity/authority and have caused harm to another—particularly in cases involving intentional misconduct or criminal behavior. Furthermore, personal liability may arise from a board member's violation of the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law and from other failures to perform legally mandated duties. Violations of such laws can result in both civil and criminal penalties, including fines, imprisonment, and the invalidation of contracts.

Q. How are vacancies on school boards filled?
Vacancies in school board offices in common, union high school and unified school districts are generally filled by appointment by the remaining members within 60 days of the actual vacancy. Such appointees hold office until a successor is elected and takes office. Although the exact process to be followed varies by the timing of the vacancy, it is often the case that a partial (or "unexpired") term of either one or two years that is connected to a vacancy will appear on the ballot at the spring election, in order to replace the board's appointee with a duly elected board member. A vacancy on the board of school directors in the Milwaukee Public Schools is filled by a special election.

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