

School Committee Guidebook



Our Mission is to prepare all students to attain their full potential as life-long learners, critical thinkers, and productive citizens of our diverse community and global society.

Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

April 2015

WELCOME!

Dear New School Committee Member:

Congratulations on your election to the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee. Serving your community on an elected board is both challenging and exciting. Communities need the ideas and dedication that each newly elected member brings to this and other boards. For that we thank you!

This guidebook has been developed to give you an introduction to the work for which you were elected. Please read it carefully and thoughtfully. After you have finished, if you have not already done so, you should make arrangements to meet with the Superintendent and/or the Chairperson of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee to discuss any questions you may have or concerns that the Guidebook has raised for you.

Introduction

So, the election is over and you've been sworn in; now what? The first few months after joining any board can be a little unsettling. We have arranged this Guidebook so that you can read through it quickly and have an overview of what is expected of you. It can also serve as a reference throughout your term of office. Each section presents a different aspect of your position.

Membership of the School Committee

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee is composed of eleven members: seven members from Acton and four members from Boxborough residents.

School Committee Meetings

Open Meeting Law

Meetings of the School Committees are subject to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law, which states that all Committee meetings where issues are discussed or votes could potentially be taken must be posted at least 48 hours in advance, held in a public place, and open to the general public. These laws were updated as of July 1, 2010. The Guide can be found at <http://www.mass.gov/ago/docs/government/oml/oml-guide.pdf>. It is also labeled B1 in this appendix.

Executive sessions, which are not open to the general public, may be conducted for one or more of ten specific reasons stated in Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 30A, Section 21. The reasons for an executive session generally involve contract negotiations, litigation, or issues of personal character. Members must be polled individually to vote on whether the Committee should enter or exit an executive session. All issues discussed in executive session must be kept confidential and cannot be discussed with anyone who did not participate in the executive session.

In case of emergency, when School Committee action is needed quickly, the Open Meeting Law allows a School Committee to hold a meeting in either public or executive session, as appropriate, which meets all criteria of the Law except the 48-hour advance posting.

Schedule

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee usually meets on the first and third Thursday of each month in the R. J. Grey Junior High School Library, starting at 7:00 p.m. Exceptions are made for the April meeting, which is usually held the last Thursday in March in order not to conflict with the Acton Town Meeting, and for the July and August meetings, which are held when most members will be able to attend. Executive sessions are held when needed, in the Superintendent's Conference Room, usually before or after the open session of a regular School Committee meeting, and at other times as necessary.

During January and February when budget presentations are underway, additional meetings are often scheduled. There is usually an all-day Saturday budget workshop at the end of January. An Open Budget Hearing is required by law and typically held in early February. The school budget for the next school year is voted on at the Acton Town Meeting in April and the Boxborough Town Meeting in May.

Agendas

The School Committee meeting agenda is determined by the Superintendent and the Chairperson of the Committee. You are welcome to request that specific items be included, but you must make your request well in advance of the meeting so that relevant data can be provided by the Central Office staff.

Packet

A packet of material related to the topics on the agenda is posted to the website (www.abschools.org) after 6 p.m. on the Friday preceding the Thursday meeting. A small addendum may be posted on the Tuesday night prior to the meeting if needed. Each packet contains the material that you will need to read prior to the meeting. Paper copies of the agenda are provided at the meeting. Members use their own laptop or iPad to access the packet during the meeting. iPads are available to borrow for meetings. Meeting packets are at: <http://www.abschools.org/school-committee/meetings-agendas-packets-and-minutes>

Major items on the agenda are annotated with suggested times. Notations are also provided to indicate when a vote is expected to be taken. The adoption of policy requires at least two readings at public sessions, with a vote often taken at the same meeting as the second reading.

Legal Aspects of Being on a School Committee

A School Committee is empowered only when a quorum of its members convene as a group and vote or come to consensus. A quorum for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee is no fewer than four (4) members from Acton and no fewer than two (2) members from Boxborough. Each member from Boxborough shall cast one vote and each member from Acton shall cast 2.5 votes. This weighted voting is re-examined every ten (10) years, after the publication of the new federal census data to verify that the weighted voting is within DESE standards.

Each School Committee member has equal responsibility and authority with the other members to participate actively in carrying out Committee business. No member should abuse this authority by seeking more for himself/herself, his/her family, or a particular constituent group.

Similarly, no member has the authority to speak or act on behalf of the Committee unless (s)he has been specifically authorized to do so by the entire Committee. Only the Superintendent and/or the Committee Chairperson speaks or acts on behalf of the School District. Nevertheless, what you say in public may be taken to be representative of the Committee as a whole. When you make public statements on school-related issues, you must be sure to stipulate that you are speaking only for yourself, unless you are just stating a policy decision already voted by the Committee. You may be contacted by the press for a statement regarding a current issue before the Committee. You are free to give your own opinion, clarifying that that is what it is, or you may direct the caller to the Superintendent or Committee Chairperson for an official statement.

When you attend a scheduled function with other School Committee members, and there are sufficient members present to constitute a Committee quorum (at least four members from Acton and at least two members from Boxborough), you cannot discuss any school-related issues. To do so would be a violation of the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law. Please note that "'meeting' shall not include attendance by a quorum of a public body at a public or private gathering, including a conference or training program or a media, social or other event, so long as the members do not deliberate." (Chapter 30A, Section 18)

School Committee Responsibilities

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee is responsible for the education of Acton and Boxborough students in kindergarten through grade twelve, as well as special education students from age three through age twenty-one.

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee is responsible for hiring the School Superintendent, establishing policies, setting the budget, negotiating employment

contracts, and sustaining good community relations for the five Acton elementary Schools: Conant, Douglas, Gates, McCarthy-Towne, and Merriam, the Blanchard Memorial Elementary School in Boxborough , the R. J. Grey Junior High School and the Acton-Boxborough Regional High School.

Superintendent Selection and Evaluation

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee negotiates the terms and conditions of the contract with the Superintendent of Schools every year. The School Committee also provides a written annual evaluation of the Superintendent's job performance. The Superintendent of Schools is the only District employee that the School Committee hires.

Policy Formulation

The School Committee is the policy-making body for the School District. All current policies that have been enacted to govern the operation of the schools and the procedures for implementing these policies are posted on the School Committee section of the school website at <http://www.abschools.org/school-committee/policies> . We try to review all policies on an on-going basis, but sometimes we need to revise a policy due to circumstances. Feel free to recommend the review of any policy that seems out-dated or incomplete. In addition, if there is any area for which you feel we need a policy, please bring it to the attention of the Superintendent and the other School Committee members for consideration.

Fiscal Accountability

The School Committee's most significant fiscal responsibility is the review and approval of the District operating budget for each fiscal year, and the presentation of the budget at the Town Meetings. The School Committee may also present a capital budget for separate approval by Town Meeting. The budget process usually begins in the autumn of each school year, when the Superintendent and Central Office staff send out guidelines for expenditures in each category for each school in the District. Each school or department then submits a budget request to the Central Office staff, where it is reviewed and then presented to the School Committee. Committee members are given an opportunity to review these budgets with principals and/or regional department leaders, usually at extra meetings scheduled for this purpose in January and early February each year. At these presentations, we can ask questions and clarify any concerns. The School Committee then votes on the budget to be presented to the Town Meetings. The Acton-Boxborough Regional School District budget must be voted and assessments for each town set at least 45 days in advance of the first Town Meeting, which is currently the Acton Town Meeting, held starting the first Monday in April. Once voted, Regional District assessments can only be lowered. Once voted at Town Meeting, the District budget establishes the funding available for expenditures in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1 following the Town Meetings.

At quarterly School Committee meetings, we receive an update showing the funds budgeted, spent, and remaining for each category of expenditure for the current fiscal

year. We also vote to accept or reject all bids for goods and services to be contracted by the District, as recommended by the Superintendent. In addition, we must approve payroll and expense warrants, which list all money to be spent in a given period of time with the name and address of the recipient, the budget category line item charged with the expense, and the amount paid. Most warrants are signed during regularly scheduled School Committee meetings. Occasionally, however, we are asked to sign a warrant (or warrants) in the Central Office in extraordinary circumstances (such as in the summer) when a meeting will not be held before payment is required. You will be notified by the Central Office staff when this happens. You will receive an email when a warrant is posted online for your review prior to signing.

Contract Negotiation

The School Committee negotiates with the Acton-Boxborough Education Association (ABEA) regarding teachers and nurses. The School Committee also negotiates with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) regarding maintenance and custodial personnel. They also negotiate with the Office Support Association (OSA), which is represented by Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA). The School Committee selects a subcommittee that, with one or more members of the Central Office staff, performs the negotiations and reports back to the Committee periodically during this process. Legal counsel or a professional negotiator may also be engaged to facilitate the negotiations.

The School Committee is also the final level of appeal in the grievance procedure within each School District. When a member of a bargaining unit files a grievance and that grievance is denied at each level up through the Superintendent of Schools, the grievance can be presented to the School Committee. The Committee hears the grievance in Executive Session, deliberates following the presentation, and then makes a decision to allow or deny the grievance. If the grievance is denied, the appropriate union has the right to bring the grievance to arbitration.

Community Relations

The most successful school systems have a supportive community behind them. The School Committee is responsible to the voters of the community they serve and should work to maintain open lines of communication with other municipal boards and committees and with the public.

Limitations on the School Committee Role

A School Committee has specific responsibilities allocated to it by law. For new School Committee members, however, it is equally important to understand what a School Committee does not do. A School Committee does not participate in running the day-to-day activities of a School District. If you think of a School District as analogous to a business, the Superintendent functions as the Chief Executive Officer of the District and the School Committee serves as its Board of Directors. This legal limitation on the powers of the School Committee is often difficult for new members to understand. Located in Appendix A of this Guidebook is a worksheet that contains specific cases to illustrate this distinction. You should take the time to read over these examples.

We have all been in your position before: wondering if the time commitment will be too great; not sure what we will be asked to do; feeling that everyone else knows so much more than we do. Your fellow School Committee members will be your greatest source of information and collegial support. We are here to help you be as successful as you choose to be.

Once again, welcome aboard and congratulations!

Appendix A: Worksheet on School Committee Role Limitations

The School Committee hires a professional administrator (the Superintendent) to run the schools, and it is (s)he who is responsible for the schools and to the community. While Committee members are often the ones first contacted about an issue, it is our responsibility to turn it over to the Superintendent. For those of us with school-age children, particularly in the elementary schools where parental involvement is extremely high, this can be difficult. We feel strong ties and a sense of loyalty and a desire to “make things right” for our children and our school. Election to the School Committee is not meant to impede our participation in school activities. However, we should be aware of and careful to control the desire to step in and “take care of” an issue for someone. Please read the following scenarios carefully and then meet with the School Committee Chairperson if you would like to discuss them.

SAMPLE SCENARIOS

- (1) You have been asked to speak about the proposed budget at your child’s school. You'd like to bring multiple copies of the proposed budget to the meeting. Do you . . .
- a) Call the Director of Finance and request the appropriate number of copies.
 - b) Ask the principal of the school to see that the copies are available for the meeting.
 - c) Contact the Superintendent to ask that the copies be made available.

Answer: (c) You contact the Superintendent to ask that the copies be made available. A School Committee member does not ask staff (Assistant Superintendents, principals, teachers, etc.) to perform any duty without checking with the Superintendent first. While the Superintendent reports to the Committee, all other staff members report to the Superintendent. We should not give direction to any school personnel. Refer also to the Communication Map in Appendix B.

- (2) At a gathering of parents in a social context, several parents complain about the performance of a particular teacher/principal/administrator. They ask you to intercede on their behalf. Do you . . .

- a) Tell them to speak first to the teacher/principal/administrator. If that does not satisfy them, tell them to speak next to the principal/appropriate administrator/Superintendent, outlining all the steps that should be taken for the particular situation.
- b) Call the Superintendent to explain the situation and ask that the parents be called.
- c) Tell the parents that you will take care of it since you are aware of the situation. Go directly to the teacher/principal/administrator and explain the situation. Write a report for the Superintendent to review.

Answer: (a) State the steps that these parents should take in order to resolve the issue. The Superintendent is in charge of all personnel issues. Also, the Superintendent needs to know what issues are occurring and be able to deal with the whole picture before the fact. If the issue is not resolved even by the Superintendent, it will come to the School Committee as the last level of appeal.

(3) A member of the media calls you at home after a particularly difficult meeting where many angry constituents voiced a variety of viewpoints. You are aware of the cause of this uproar because these people have spoken to you at length. The Committee has postponed a decision until a subsequent meeting. The member of the media wants to discuss the situation with you to get your perspective in order to write an article for the local paper. Do you . . .

- a) Speak with the member of the media, answering questions openly and honestly and providing some of the background for the issue.
- b) Answer the specific questions of the member of the media, stipulating that these are only your opinions.
- c) Decline to answer any questions until the full Committee has made a decision and made it public.

Answer: (c) Decline to answer any questions. When there are controversial issues which could polarize the community and no decision has been made, it is best to say nothing. We can leave ourselves open to charges of bias if we speak inappropriately, and that is a disservice to the Committee and to the School District.

Appendix B: Attachments

- B-1 Massachusetts Open Meeting Law <http://www.mass.gov/ago/government-resources/open-meeting-law/>
- B-2 Sample School Committee Agenda
- B-3 Superintendent Evaluation Procedure and Form
- B-4 Communication Map <http://www.abschools.org/parents>
- B-5 Public Participation at School Committee Meetings, policy file: BEDH
- B-6 Last year's School District Profile (pending)
- B-7 FY15 Superintendent Performance and School District Goals
- B-8 ABRSD Regional Agreement (amended October 6, 1998 and June 3, 2013)
- B-9 Acton Leadership Group
- B-10 School Committee Groundrules
- B-11 ABRSD Long Range Strategic Plan
- B-12 FY 2016 ABRSD Budget Book
<http://www.abschools.org/departments/finance/budgets>
- B-13 10/1/14 Student Enrollment Projections – by Peter and Mary Ann Ashton
- B-14 Professional Development Booklet at
<http://www.abschools.org/departments/curriculum/professional-learning>
- B-15 School Calendar, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016
- B-16 Schedule of School Committee Meetings, 2014-2015
List of School Committee Members, 2014-2015 as of 4/10/15
- B-17 Community Education *Interaction* – <http://abce.abschools.org/>
- B-18 Current AEA Agreement – at <http://www.abschools.org/departments/human-resources/contracts-salary-scales-other-benefits>
- B-19 Notice of Non-Discrimination
- B-20 Conflict of Interest/Ethics Law and Acknowledgement of Training Completion