



# New Jersey School Boards Association

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## **92<sup>nd</sup> ANNUAL LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES CONFERENCE**

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### **APPOINTED VERSUS ELECTED SCHOOL BOARDS – THE ECONOMIC IMPACT**

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**NO CORRELATION EXISTS BETWEEN SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL BOARDS AND BOARD TYPE.** There are well-functioning and poorly functioning appointed school boards, and well-functioning and poorly functioning elected ones. No correlation exists between successful boards and a given form of government. There is a correlation, however, between a well-functioning board and the community climate that is measured by the degree of community interest and responsiveness, enthusiasm and pride. When there is dissatisfaction with how things are going, the hue and cry tends to be “change the system!”

The New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) supports current statute that gives communities the ability to decide which type of school board, elected or appointed, they prefer.

**CHANGE AMONG DISTRICTS.** State law dating from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century codified local boards of education. Initially, the law required school boards in municipalities incorporated as cities to have appointed boards of education. It required school boards in municipalities incorporated as towns, townships, boroughs and villages to have elected school boards.

However, the statute also gave citizens of all communities the right to change from one type of school board system to another.

Over the years, several communities have taken advantage of this provision. Recent changes include: Irvington, an urban school district with an elected board, which changed to an appointed board system in 1989—and back again in 1995. Others switching from appointed to elected since 1990 include: Hackensack in 1990; Burlington City and Millville in 1991; Edison Township, Egg Harbor City and East Newark in 1992; Sea Isle City in 1998; and Englewood in 2000.

Communities changing from elected to appointed since 1990 include Union City in 1991; Pine Valley in 1996; East Newark in 2002; and Rockleigh in 2004.

In recent years, some of the communities that have *rejected* a proposed switch from elected to appointed include: Guttenberg, Hudson County (2006); Woodbine, Cape May County (1995); and Clifton in Passaic County (2003).

In addition to the state’s 21 county vocational school districts and 8 county special services school districts (which are appointed by county-level officials), NJSBA’s database shows 21 school districts have mayor-appointed boards of education. They include:

Atlantic County: Brigantine, Corbin City, Linwood, Margate, Port Republic, Ventnor

Bergen County: Rockleigh

Burlington County: Beverly City

Camden: Pine Valley, Tavistock

Essex County: East Orange, Montclair, Orange

Hudson County: Bayonne, East Newark, Harrison, Union City, West New York

Mercer County: Trenton

Middlesex County: New Brunswick

Union County: Summit

**REASONS FOR SERVING ON A SCHOOL BOARD.** Whether a member serves on an elected or appointed board, his or her chief qualification should be a deep interest in the schools and a desire to represent the community as a whole. A school board requires infinite teamwork.

One survey of board candidates cited 21 possible reasons that prompted them to run for the school board. Forty-six percent said they sought board membership as a “civic duty”; 38% said they were persuaded or pressured by friends to run; and 29% had an interest in educational matters. Ten percent said they disapproved of the way the schools were run (the seventh most frequently cited response).

Six requirements are necessary for successful membership on an appointed or an elected school board:

1. Acceptance of the principle of board unity and subordination of self interest.
2. Effective understanding of the chief school administrator's function and a willingness to support it when it administers board policies.
3. Demonstration of initiative, informal leadership, and insight in board planning and policy making.
4. Effectiveness in personal relationships.
5. Effectiveness in staff and group relationships.
6. Courageous action for the good of the schools in spite of pressure and influence from various sources.

*The following list of advantages and disadvantages of elected and appointed school boards are based upon observations of individuals in the field. They do not represent the policy of the New Jersey School Boards Association.*

## **THE ELECTED BOARD**

### *Advantages...*

- An election campaign popularizes the educational issues and produces more interest among the community in school issues.
- It is more democratic since the system is based upon direct input by voters. The board members are directly accountable to the voters for their actions in maintaining the kind of schools the people want and are willing to pay for.
- The board is generally viewed as a free agent, able to act independently of municipal government.
- Proponents of elected school boards feel that the system is freer from patronage and more often protects the schools from local politics.
- Elected school boards can take advice from staff professionals without fear of offending the municipal appointing authority. (An appointed board sometimes does not feel free to follow professional advice when it conflicts with the city's interests.)

## **THE APPOINTED BOARD**

### *Advantages...*

- An appointed system can assure service by better and more qualified members. A potential, able board member who might reject a political campaign is more likely to accept an appointed position.
- The mayor has the opportunity to appoint a board which is representative of the community and schools in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic community.
- The people can hold the mayor fully responsible for the actions of the board, for the integrity of the members appointed, and for any misuse of the schools by the appointing authority or by the board.
- If the mayor appoints sincerely dedicated people for overlapping terms, it can result in a board that is much more objective and less politically oriented than if members vied for their jobs through public elections. The average length of service is longer under appointed systems than under elected ones.
- An informal poll among a group of superintendents indicated a preference for appointed boards. They felt that more work was actually accomplished, financing was easier and political hassles non-existent.

## THE ELECTED BOARD

### *Disadvantages...*

- Although proponents argue that the democratic process is better served under an elected method, the fact is that voter turnout in school elections is traditionally low. Voter turnout at the Annual School Election generally ranges from 10 to 15 percent of registered voters.
- The school budget is the only government finance plan subject to direct voter approval. The small number of people who do vote often vent their frustration with financial decisions of state, county and municipal governments.
- When board members are elected on particular issues, they often feel they have a mandate from the people and must pursue their goal. This becomes a drawback when the new member does not fully understand the relationship of issues to sound educational practice.
- The desire to make change at all cost can result in the board taking on administrative functions that should be performed by the superintendent and his or her staff; conflict with the administration; and changes in board membership that may keep education policies and practices in flux.
- The prospect of incurring campaign expenses, sometimes sizable, can discourage many qualified candidates. At the same time, it may encourage political involvement in the campaigns of other candidates.

## THE APPOINTED BOARD

### *Disadvantages...*

- Opponents contend that appointed board members are sometimes selected on the basis of political patronage or to award contracts to supporters of local politicians.
- Mixing schools with politics can invite the misuse of school funds to the disadvantage of both the schools and taxpayers. Any sense of obligation to a municipal authority nurtures the political whim of the politicians in power at the moment.
- When it makes decisions, a school board relies in part upon the advice of its education specialists—namely, the superintendent and other administrators. Appointed board members, influenced by a mayor and/or council, may find it difficult to accept such professional advice on matters in which the city authority has a vested interest.
- “Politics” may come between the board and the executive officer it has employed to carry out its directives.

