Getting Started as a Student Board Member

nsbma

NATIONAL STUDENT BOARD MEMBER ASSOCIATION

Summary

This resource from the National Student Board Member Association (NSBMA) provides an **introductory guide for newly elected or appointed student board members** (SBMs). It outlines essential expectations, skills, and best practices to help SBMs effectively navigate their first weeks in office and build confidence in their leadership role.

The guide offers practical advice on **board meeting etiquette**, **professional conduct** inside and outside the boardroom, **parliamentary procedure**, and **how to prepare for meetings**. It also includes strategies for understanding district structures, engaging with peers and administrators, and representing student perspectives authentically. Grounded in NSBMA's national experience and peer-informed training, this toolkit helps student board members begin their term with clarity, professionalism, and purpose.

Introduction

Congratulations on becoming a student board member! This is an extremely exciting and rewarding role. As a student board member, you join a community of leaders who have helped create change across the United States. You also join a small but growing group, with fewer than 2,000 student board members per year across the United States.

Student Board Member Etiquette

As a student board member (SBM), you represent your peers and all of the students that your school board represents. In this role, you can sponsor initiatives and shape policy both through board actions and collaboration with district initiatives and staff. While the exact duties vary between school boards, some key responsibilities remain the same for all SBMs. You are expected to attend every public meeting of the board. You should have a thorough understanding of the meeting agenda and be prepared to accurately represent student perspectives on all agenda items. You should always be prepared and informed for the decision-making process. Besides doing your job, it causes your colleagues and staff to take your voice seriously.

As a student board member, you are often subject to public scrutiny. If a student member is unprepared, it may reflect badly on the entire student population. An eloquent question or heartfelt anecdotes, on the other hand, can sway opinions and create real change. Students are already overlooked more than they should be, and you should do everything in your power to bolster student voice and strengthen pathways of communication between students and their peers, students and staff, and students and the greater community.

There is more to the student board member position than representing your peers. You should always act professional and follow all codes of conduct set by the board. SBMs must follow the same set of rules and procedures as adult board members. Learning how to navigate meetings, school functions, and other events with decorum is a skill that must be sharpened.

Inside the Boardroom

Board meetings, with the exception of closed session, are open to the public. This means that as an SBM, you have the ability to shape and channel public opinion. If a student board member is engaged in board meetings, eloquent, and respectful they are easy to work with and represent their constituency with pride. Remember, the boardroom is not immune to the influence of community politics and the pressure of bureaucracy.

It's important to keep in mind that there is a longstanding tradition of "no surprises" in a board meeting. The board acts on matters that affect the education of all the students in the district. It is for that reason that boards shouldn't act rashly or quickly when presented with a resolution or policy that they are unfamiliar with. If you have a question, would like to add items to the agenda, or would like to do something that would be seen as generally disruptive or surprising, it is in your best interest to notify the board president and superintendent ahead of the meeting.

Outside the Boardroom

Just like during meetings, SBMs should act professionally in public spaces. It is not uncommon that you will be approached by members of your community to discuss board related items in public. Where possible, you should make an effort to attend a variety of school functions at different school sites across your district. If you need support with transportation or other logistical arrangements, ask school district staff about what resources are available.

What is Parliamentary Procedure?

Parliamentary procedure is a structured way to conduct meetings and make decisions as a group. It's like the "rulebook" for how school boards, including student board members, carry out official business, ensuring that everyone's voice is heard, that debates are fair, and that decisions are made efficiently and democratically.

A motion is a formal way to propose an action.
Example: "I move that we approve the school safety plan."
Types of motions:

- Main motion: The basic proposal to take an action.
- Amendment: A change to the motion. Example: "I move to amend the motion by adding..."
- Point of order: If something seems out of procedure, you can call this to address it.

Not all student board members can motion, so as you begin in your role, this is something to check.

Once a motion is made, board members may discuss it. After discussion, the board votes.
Common methods include:

- Voice vote: "Ayes" and "nays"
- Roll call: Each member says their vote out loud

You may or may not have a formal vote depending on your board's policies, or you may be able to still express your position for the record.

A Motion is Made → Discussion → Board Votes → Outcome Recorded

As you are learning parliamentary procedure, some recommendations for mastering it are observing how your board colleagues are utilizing it. You can also look at Robert's Rules of Order, which is the standard guide for parliamentary procedure. Lastly, ask for help and learn by practicing!

Orienting Yourself with the District

As you are orienting yourself with the district, it is important to learn certain details about your district to understand how your district fits into the landscape of the school system. This period sets the tone for your relationships, your confidence, and your ability to effectively represent student voices.

First, understand the landscape of your district:
It is important to understand the composition of your district. This includes:

- Type of district (elementary, middle, high, alternative, career and technical)
- Student demographics
- Geographic distribution and size

To review and understand the history of your district, you can look into past board decisions, recurring community issues, and controversies, familiarizing yourself with recent initiatives and how they've impacted students. To do so, you can look at board meetings from the last 3-6 months. Additionally, you should review your district's budget and strategic plan to understand the long term visioning.

Next, get to know key people:

- Meet with each board member to learn about their priorities. As you revisit old board meetings, note their past voting records
- Meet with the Superintendent and District Staff: These decision-making executives can help with enacting your ideas, so understanding how you will communicate and how they can support you will be important.
- Student leaders, such as ASB presidents, club leaders, and equity groups can serve as both sounding boards and allies.

Decide how you'll collect student opinions: surveys, forums, site visits, or a district student council. See more in our "Effective Representation" toolkit, available at www.nsbma.net/resources

As you work as a student board member, you will also grow in the role. Focus on being authentic, staying informed, and developing your leadership voice over time.

How to Prepare for Board Meetings

As you prepare for each board meeting, it is important that you review the agenda ahead of time. Reading a school board agenda as a student board member can feel overwhelming at first. By prioritizing important information, you will be prepared to engage meaningfully in meetings.

Unpacking the Board Agenda

School board agendas are usually organized in a standardized order. Typical sections include:

- Call to Order/Roll Call
- Public Comment (on non-agenda items)
- Consent Calendar (routine approvals like contracts, minutes)
- Discussion (to be talked about but not voted on yet)
- Action Items (things to be voted on)
- Board Member Reports
- Superintendent/Staff Updates
- Closed Session Items (confidential, often not accessible to student members)
- Adjournment

Public comment allows members of the public to comment on any item, both on the agenda or not. As a board member, you are not allowed to respond to public comments.

Consent calendar items are approved in one motion, so typically these are routine items. It is still important to review these, because items can be taken off the consent agenda before the overall agenda is approved.

Begin with the discussion/action items and read through attachments for additional information. For things that you have questions about, meet with allies to get more clarification ahead of the meeting. If a student-relevant item is coming up, prepare a few comments or questions ahead of time. Back up your points with experiences or student input, not just personal opinion.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it can be overwhelming stepping into your first board meeting, but the more that you prepare, the more effectively you will be able to represent your peers and the more confident you will be in doing so. We look forward to working with you through your year of service!

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