COLLECTION III — LOCAL GOVERNMENT

How School Boards Work

The role of school boards in local governance and how community members can engage.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

What a school board does

In most New York school districts, an elected **board of education** governs the district. The board:

- hires and evaluates the superintendent;
- adopts the district budget and proposes it to voters;
- sets district policies;
- approves contracts, staffing and major purchases;
- oversees facilities and long-term planning.

The superintendent and staff run day-to-day operations. The board sets direction and holds them accountable.

Who serves

Board members are unpaid volunteers elected by district residents. Terms are usually three to five years. Boards typically have five to nine members. (New York City and a few other large city districts are governed differently.)

The May budget vote

In most districts outside the big cities, voters approve or reject the school budget directly on the third Tuesday in May, the same day as school board elections. Because of the state's property tax cap, a budget that raises the tax levy above the district's cap needs at least 60% voter approval. If voters reject a budget twice, the district must adopt a contingency budget with no increase in the tax levy.

How to engage

1. **Attend board meetings.** They're public, and most include a public comment period.
2. **Read the budget.** Districts must publish a budget summary and a property tax report card before the vote.
3. **Go to the budget hearing,** held before the May vote.
4. **Vote in May.** Turnout is often very low, so each vote carries real weight.
5. **Join a committee** or the PTA, or run for the board yourself. Candidates file petitions with the district clerk in the spring.

What to look for

- How the budget changes from year to year, and why.
- Whether board meetings include real discussion, or just votes.
- How the board communicates with parents and taxpayers without children in school.

> OFFICIAL SOURCES
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> - NY State Education Department (https://www.nysed.gov)

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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