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William Miller

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Buffalo School Board Governance

Abstract

The Board of Education of the Buffalo City School District consists of nine members elected annually by the voters of the school district. Six members represent sub-districts within the city in three-year terms. Three members serve in an “at-large” capacity for five-year terms. A School board member must be a citizen of the United States, qualified to vote, able to read and write, eighteen (18) years of age or older, a qualified voter of the District, and the only member of their family serving on the board. At-large members must be residents of the school district for at least three years prior to the election. If representing a sub-district, a candidate must be a resident of the sub district for one year prior to the election as well as lived in the school district for three years prior. No member may be a candidate for or hold another elected office while serving on the school board.

Keywords

Buffalo, Education, Governance, Policy Brief, PPG, PDF

Buffalo School Board Governance

William Miller

SUNY Buffalo Law Student

What is the Buffalo Board of Education?

The Board of Education of the Buffalo City School District consists of nine members elected annually by the voters of the school district. Six members represent sub-districts within the city in three-year terms. Three members serve in an “at-large” capacity for five-year terms. A School board member must be a citizen of the United States, qualified to vote, able to read and write, eighteen (18) years of age or older, a qualified voter of the District, and the only member of their family serving on the board. At-large members must be residents of the school district for at least three years prior to the election. If representing a sub-district, a candidate must be a resident of the sub-district for one year prior to the election as well as lived in the school district for three years prior. No member may be a candidate for or hold another elected office while serving on the school board.¹



Should Board Members Receive a Pay Raise?

When the Buffalo School Board became an elected entity in 1974, the Buffalo Common Council set the board members’ salaries at \$5,000. In June 2012, School Board Member John Licata approached the Common Council to raise board members’ salaries to \$20,000, which is the equivalent of \$5,000 in 1974 dollars. In comparison, members of the Rochester Board of Education earn \$23,000 per year in a school system roughly the same size as Buffalo. Members of the Syracuse Board of Education earn \$7,500 per year and are entitled to the district’s health care benefits.²

Buffalo school board members contribute time and expertise in their bi-monthly general meetings, various committee meetings, community events, and other duties. Although school board members are reimbursed for actual expenses incurred in representing the District³, they are expected to pay for many events they attend. Board members are expected to meet a high standard of excellence and often face public criticism for the collective shortfalls of the school system. This environment likely deters many members of the community who may want to serve on the Board, but choose to stay away due to the high demands and low rewards.

Critics of increasing the pay or benefits of board members deem it inappropriate to spend additional monies in this way when Buffalo teachers are being laid off and the average cost per pupil is one of the highest in the United States. There is also a school of thought that school board membership should be voluntary due to the privilege and prestige associated with the position. However, eliminating compensation would narrow the field of candidates to those in the community that can afford to volunteer countless hours.

Raising the salaries of board members to rates adjusted for inflation would perhaps attract a broader range of candidates. Also, an increase in pay would be an equitable action for current board members who are not sufficiently compensated for their decision to undertake the tumultuous task of being a school board member. While it may be a privilege to serve, school board membership deserves compensation as much as any other elected position does.



The 2012-2013 Buffalo Board of Education Members

Should the School Board Election Be Held in November?

New York State Education Law calls for the school board election to “be governed by the provisions of the election law in the same manner as candidates for office generally to be elected by the voters of the city of Buffalo except, as the case may be, as to the date of the election.”⁴ Currently, school board elections in Buffalo are held in May, with voter turnout as low as 4 to 6%.

Proponents of the May election argue that this small electorate consists of individuals who are more knowledgeable about the issues of the Buffalo Public Schools and therefore consciously decide to vote for a school board candidate in a separate election. They sometimes note that a May election also depoliticizes school board elections, as candidates do not have to align themselves with political parties, and that more special interests might weigh in during a November election.

Proponents of the November election argue that there is nothing holding interest groups back from the May election (teachers unions and business groups often spend heavily in these elections already), and that board members are not allowed to affiliate with a political party, anyway. They feel that the May voter turnout is too small. Some view the politicization of the November election as a positive outcome, as it will likely force the school issues into the public discourse through more campaigning and advertisements.

In May 2010, the Buffalo Common Council adopted a resolution calling for an amendment to the education law that would make the school board elections coincide with other local, state, and federal elections in November. The Common Council cited low voter turnout, cost benefits, and the ability to hold candidates responsible to a greater amount of the electorate as their reasoning⁵. Senators Grisanti and Kennedy in turn sponsored Senate bill 2478, which called for the



actions proposed by the council. The bill has been passed by the Senate and was referred to the Assembly’s Education Committee as of June 2012 as A10634-2011. The justification for the bill is to “increase voter participation and lessen the costs associated with the election process. Past years’ elections have seen voter turnout as low as 5% of eligible voters, all at a cost of nearly \$100,000 to the fiscally challenged city coffers.⁶” The bill also points out the fact that the cities of Rochester and Syracuse hold their school board elections in November. Also, New Jersey passed a similar bill in 2012, which lowered spending on school board elections around the state by nearly \$1 million⁷. However, the bill has been stuck in the Education Committee since June of 2012

Should School Board Committee Structure Be Changed?

The Internal Operations of the board state that “The Board and/or the President of the Board may at its discretion establish committees for the purpose of undertaking a specific task in connection with Board activity.” These committees, however, cannot make legal decisions for the entire Board. The Board’s bylaws specifically call only for an Audit Committee to oversee and report to the Board on the annual audit of the district; and a Visitation Committee to appoint one or more committees to visit every school or department annually and report to the Board on their condition.

Current standing committees consist of Student Achievement, Educational Support, Executive Affairs, and Finance and Operations. Every board member sits on every committee, which meet one after the other every other Wednesday. This leads to an overworked board that does not have enough time to address or comprehend the issues facing the committee.



Buffalo Board of Education Meeting Room 801 City Hall

While the committee structure is important, it may be wise to enlist others to assist in the committees so as not to overburden the school board members. For example, in Rochester the school board invites parents to join board committees that correlate with their expertise⁸. This practice lightens the workload of the board members, gets parents more active with their children's school, and provides free expertise in areas that board members may not be privy to. At any rate, in order to lessen the overall burden on Board members, committees should be made up of five or fewer board members, not all nine.

Should School Board Meeting Style Be Changed?

Buffalo School Board meetings are open to the public and broadcast on the government access channel. The public input section of the meetings often lasts an hour or more, with more than 20 speakers talking for three minutes. The Board may wish to consider separate public meetings and hearings so the public can voice their opinions or concerns. While this may not differ much from the current format, it will take the looming stress of confrontation away from their general meetings and let them focus on the issues. The Board also spends much of its meeting time on matters unattributed to decision making such as reports, presentations, and awards. These matters would be better attended to at events outside of the limited time of bi-monthly meetings.

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- ¹ New York Education Law Sections 2102, 2103, 2103-a, 2501(7), 2553(1) and (10)(e), Election Law Section 5-106, Public Officers Law Section 3.
- ² “The School Board Asks for a Raise and Other Tales from the Common Council.”
http://blogs.buffalonews.com/school_zone/2012/06/the-school-board-asks-for-a-raise.html
- ³ General Municipal Law Section 77-b; Education Law Section 2118
- ⁴ New York State Education Law § 2553(10)(d)(1)
- ⁵ “Common Council Items of Interest,” <http://www.buffalorising.com/2010/05/common-council-items-of-interest-2.html>
- ⁶ S2478-2011, <http://open.nysenate.gov/legislation/bill/S2478-2011>
- ⁷ “School Board Elections Moved to November in Haledon,”
http://www.northjersey.com/news/187917821_School_board_election_switched_to_November_in_Haledon.html
- ⁸ Rochester City School District, <http://www.rcsdk12.org/Page/108>

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www.ppgbuffalo.org
237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203