

# School Committee Guidebook



*Our mission is to develop engaged, well-balanced learners  
through collaborative, caring relationships*

WELLNESS - EQUITY - ENGAGEMENT

*Our vision is to provide high quality educational opportunities that inspire a  
community of learners*

**Acton-Boxborough Regional School District**  
May 2019

Dear New School Committee Member,

Congratulations on your election to the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee! So, the election is over, and you've been sworn in. Now what?

*Serving on an elected board is challenging and exciting. This Guidebook is intended to be used as a general introduction to your responsibilities as an elected public official and school committee member and provide you with resources to get you up to speed on the wide breadth of issues relevant to school committee work. Building this knowledge happens incrementally, so give yourself time. Here are some things you can do to help begin this process:*

1. Complete your (required) orientation course. Our state organization, the **Massachusetts Association of School Committees**, runs a day-long new member orientation called **Charting the Course** as does our Educational Collaborative (EDCO). Our School Committee Secretary can help you locate a course and complete the course registration. You must complete this sometime within your first year.
2. Identify a school committee mentor. The School Committee Chair can help you with this.
3. Start to familiarize yourself with AB School Committee [policies](#) on the district website. A good place to start are those that define our role as a governing body (Section B) and those that speak to our relationship with the Superintendent (Section C).
4. Complete the (required) Massachusetts Conflict of Interest Law/Ethics training found [online](#), and submit your completed certificate to the School Committee Secretary within 30 days of taking office.
5. Read *The Essential School Board Book* by Nancy Walser. The District provides this book to all new school committee members. Please see the School Committee Secretary if you have not already received your copy.

We thank you in advance for your commitment to civic engagement on behalf of the students of AB, and welcome!

## Characteristics of High Performing School Boards

- ★ Regular meeting attendance.
- ★ A personal commitment to governance, not micromanagement.
- ★ A commitment to continuous improvement.
- ★ Acknowledgement that both institutional knowledge and new ideas add richness to the work.
- ★ Deference to the will of the Committee after a vote has taken place.
- ★ A commitment to abide by Open Meeting Law.
- ★ An understanding of the collaborative nature of the work and mutual dependence on each other for making the organization's mission, vision and objectives actionable.

Sources: What Makes Great Boards Great [Harvard Business Review](#) and *Building a Foundation for Student Success*. Chapter 2. The Essential School Board Book by Nancy Walser.

## The Regional Agreement

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC) is the governing board of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District (ABRSD) and as such possesses all of the powers and duties conferred on it by state law.

Our bylaws are codified in a [Regional Agreement](#) made between the towns of Acton & Boxborough in 1955 and updated most recently in 2013. Here you will find information about committee membership, weighted voting, apportionment of expenses by the Towns, the process for making changes to the agreement, etc.

## About School Committee Meetings

School Committee meetings are usually held bimonthly on Thursdays at 7:00 p.m. You can view the current School Committee meeting calendar [here](#). Meeting agendas, which are determined collaboratively by the Superintendent and School Committee Chair, are posted on the district website along with information packets on the Friday prior to the Thursday meeting. The School Committee Secretary posts this information in a timely manner in order to give Committee members adequate time to prepare and ask clarifying questions. Please submit any questions on the meeting packets to the Superintendent (cc-ing the School Committee Chair) at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting in order to allow adequate time for a response. Addendums (if any) are posted by the end of the business day on the following Tuesday. You may peruse archived agendas and packets on the district website.

Regular attendance at our bimonthly business meetings is critical, as school committees are empowered only when a **quorum** of its members are present to vote or establish consensus. A quorum is a fixed number of members whose presence is required in order to transact business. If a quorum cannot be achieved, the meeting cannot take place. We achieve a quorum when no fewer than four (4) Acton members and no fewer than two (2) Boxborough members are present. If you are unable to attend a meeting or will be arriving late to a meeting, please contact the School Committee Secretary

and School Committee Chair as early as possible. [Remote participation](#) is possible under certain circumstances.

The School Committee holds business meetings in order to:

- develop and, ultimately, adopt the budget for the upcoming fiscal year,
- participate in annual district goal development,
- discuss & vote on policies that govern teaching and learning and general operations,
- and perform the superintendent's annual evaluation.

We also regularly receive reports and presentations on a variety of topics including **enrollment trends, staffing, school improvement plans, special initiatives** and updates on **student achievement, special education, transportation, capital projects**, etc. In addition, we invite our Program Directors to update the Committee on a rotating basis on **athletics, physical education, the arts** and other areas of the curriculum. **Elected student representatives** to the School Committee and **other groups** are invited to speak to us at the Chair's discretion.

Our business meetings follow parliamentary procedure (Robert's Rules of Order), which is a widely accepted set of protocols aimed at maximizing meeting efficiency and ensuring that all members have an opportunity for full and fair participation in debate and group decision-making before taking action. Some basic meeting procedures that you should be aware of include:

- You must be recognized by the Chair in order to speak.
- Debate may not begin until there is a motion on the floor.
- No member can speak twice to the same issue until everyone who wishes to speak has had a chance to do so.
- All remarks must be directed to the Chair.

You should familiarize yourself with [common protocols](#) for making, amending, voting on and withdrawing motions and for extending, limiting, suspending and closing debate.

On the rare occasion that you are unable to adequately prepare for a business meeting, please contact the Chair and let him/her know your situation so accommodations can be provided.

On the meeting following Boxborough's town election in May, the Committee holds its annual reorganization meeting at which time members elect the Chair as well as the Vice-Chairs from Acton and Boxborough (all terms are for one year and begin on August 1st) and the Secretary and Treasurer. We also determine our meeting schedule for the upcoming calendar year.

## Meeting Broadcasts

School Committee meetings are broadcast by Acton TV and can be viewed live on cable channel 99 (Comcast) and 41 (Verizon). Acton TV offers online streaming of meetings both [live and on-demand](#).

## Rules of Conduct for Members of the Public

Though our meetings are held in public, they are not public meetings in the same way that a public hearing is held intentionally and for the explicit purpose of informing the public on a targeted topic and receiving public input. That being said, we value public input and typically allow for an additional period immediately following reports so that the public can comment on agenda items. We also designate a time at the beginning of every meeting where the public is invited to speak to us on topics not on the agenda. The Chair determines the length of time each speaker will have (typically 2 minutes) and designates a time-keeper. Speakers are required to begin their remarks by stating their name and town of residence. See [Policy BEDH](#) for more details.

Anyone from the public who wishes to record or photograph the meeting must first notify the Chair who then makes a public announcement. Audio or video recordings may not interfere with the meeting.

## Limitations on School Committee Members' Authority

A school district is analogous to a business in that the Superintendent functions as its Chief Executive Officer overseeing day-to-day operations while the School Committee serves as its Board of Directors. It is critical that

members know enough about the work of administrators & educators to be able to assess and support their efforts and be partners in the conversation without dictating what should be done.

The authority of the Committee comes from the group, not from any particular individual member. While you are asked and encouraged to express your individual opinions and ideas, once the Committee has voted, the expectation is that all members uphold and support the decision, regardless of your individual viewpoint and regardless if you voted against a motion or abstained from voting. It is of the utmost importance to recognize that authority rests with majority decisions and that actions taken independent of the group compromise the integrity of the Committee as a whole and erode the public's trust.

Our Committee has composed [operating protocols](#) that articulate norms for our School Committee. These are updated periodically.

## Open Meeting Law

The Open Meeting Law (OML) of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is intended to protect the public's right to access the deliberations of its elected representatives and promote transparency in government. The OML requires us to:

- provide the public with notice of our meetings 48 hours in advance (excluding weekends and legal holidays) except in cases of emergency,
- hold our meetings in a publicly accessible venue,
- and create, approve and maintain accurate minutes which include the date, time and location of the meeting, a list of the names of members present and absent, a summary (not a transcript) of discussions, a list of documents and exhibits used, and a record of all decisions made and actions taken, including a record of all votes.

The OML applies to both our business meetings as well as our subcommittee meetings. Meeting minutes as well as any other documents, emails and correspondence that you send or receive (including texts) in your capacity as an elected public official become public documents and are subject to the [Public Records Law](#) of the Commonwealth.

The OML also restricts how and where elected officials can deliberate. With certain exceptions, **expressions of opinion on matters within our jurisdiction must be open to the public**. The legal definition of “deliberation” is an oral or written communication through any medium (including electronic mail and social media) between or among a quorum of a public body. For example, if a member of a public body sends an email to a quorum of that public body expressing an opinion on a matter that could come before that body, this communication violates the law, even if none of the recipients respond. (For additional scenarios, see Appendix A of this Guidebook.)

Many have argued that the OML restrictions on where and when we are able to opine on issues pertinent to our work impedes our ability to fully develop and explore our ideas and concerns. This remains a conundrum for public bodies.

You can find more detailed information on OML by consulting the [Open Meeting Law Guide](#) published by the state Attorney General’s Office. All school committee members are required to complete an online training annually and file a certificate of completion with the School Committee Secretary.

## Executive Sessions

Massachusetts General Law Chapter 30A Section 21 and OML identify ten (10) exceptional situations where a meeting or part of a meeting of a public body may be **closed to the public** due to the highly sensitive nature of the content. These meetings are confidential. Members are prohibited from discussing the content of these meetings. Some of the more common reasons why public bodies may meet in executive session include the following:

- Deployment of security devices, strategies or personnel.
- Investigating charges of criminal misconduct or filing of criminal complaints.
- Strategizing with respect to collective bargaining or litigation, but only if an open meeting may have a *detrimental effect on our bargaining or litigation position* & if the chair declares this to be so at a public meeting.

- Discussing the reputation, character, or physical or mental condition (but not the professional competence or performance) of an individual.
- Discussing the discipline or dismissal of or complaints or charges brought against a public officer, employee, staff or individual, provided that the individual to be discussed in executive session is notified in writing by the public body at least 48 hours prior to the proposed executive session.

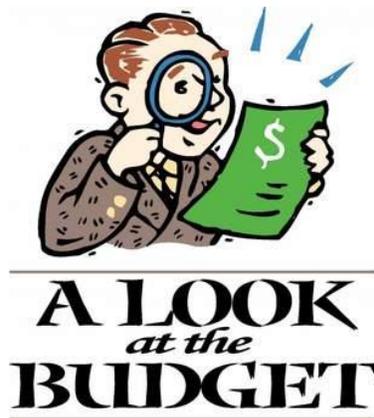
## Communication Dos & Don'ts

Communication is central to productive, effective, harmonious relationships. When roles are clear and relationships are sound, communities feel a sense of confidence in their school leaders which in turn positively impacts school and district culture. It is therefore critical for members to comply with policy around communication -- not only with respect to OML, which governs communication between committee members -- but also with best practices that guide communication between committee members and the press, the public (including via social media), district leaders and school principals, teachers & staff.

The following tips are intended to provide you with guidance on communication with stakeholders:

Do	Don't
Contact the School Committee Chair, your School Committee mentor and/or the Superintendent with any questions that arise about your role, packet materials, etc.	Speak or act publicly on behalf of the entire district or School Committee unless specifically authorized by the entire Committee to do so. It is the job of our Superintendent & School Committee Chair to speak and act on behalf of the district and Committee. No other member has this authority.
Refer inquiries by the press to the Superintendent and/or School Committee Chair. If you are contacted by the press regarding an issue before the Committee, you may give your opinion, but you must clarify that you are <u>not</u> speaking on behalf of the entire Committee. It is advisable to	Contact district employees (including principals, teachers & staff) on matters pertaining to School Committee business without first obtaining permission from the Superintendent. Please be aware that no matter how well-intended, such interactions may and often are perceived

<p>carefully consider your impact when opining on matters that are controversial and/or potentially polarizing.</p>	<p>as an attempt to meddle in the day-to-day operations of a school.</p>
<p>Refer parents/caregivers who approach you for help resolving personal concerns to the <a href="#">Parent Communication Map</a> located on the district website. This map will direct them to the appropriate person(s) who can address their specific questions/concerns.</p>	<p>Use your position for personal gain for yourself, family members, relatives or constituents. This is a violation of <a href="#">state conflict of interest laws</a>. Examples include: using public resources for private purposes, advocating for a child’s special education placement, pressuring staff to afford special privileges to students or influencing hiring practices. Even the <i>perception</i> of impropriety is problematic.</p>
<p>Read the Massachusetts Association of School Committees guidance document on School Committee members’ <a href="#">use of social media</a>.</p>	<p>Publicly voice an opinion about whether you believe the actions of staff are right, wrong, worthwhile or not worthwhile. In doing so, you risk dismantling an essential relationship and inciting antagonism.</p>



Among the School Committee's most significant responsibilities is the development, review and approval of the district's operating budget for the ensuing fiscal year and its presentation at Town Meeting in both Acton (in April) and Boxborough (in May). Our budget is a policy document and exists to make our district goals, mission, vision and values actionable.

In order to begin to familiarize yourself with the components of a regional school district budget, it is recommended that you view the following series of (1-4 minute) video vignettes produced by Support Mass Regional Schools on [revenue sources](#), [general expense categories](#) and specific costs associated with [transportation](#), and [special education](#).

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center has produced two additional informative, brief (6-8 minute) videos on [how the state funds public education](#) as well as how state funding for public schools has become an [underfunded mandate](#). These videos will provide you with background knowledge on districts' largest revenue source other than local taxes.

Finally, State Auditor Suzanne Bump published a groundbreaking report in 2017 entitled [Updating the Structure and Finance of Massachusetts Regional Schools](#) which will provide you with a state-wide perspective on the problems inherent in funding education in regional school districts.

## **Our Budget Process**

The budget process in Acton-Boxborough is cyclical and ongoing, beginning in the fall when each school and department budget request is reviewed by the Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent and Finance Director, staffing needs are identified, and collaborative work begins among district leadership teams (including the School Committee) to develop budgetary goals and priorities for the ensuing fiscal year. Deliberation on the budget continues throughout the fall and into early winter and is guided by the driving question of how to allocate resources to students in a way that strikes a balance among considerations of fairness, expense and administration.

In mid-January, Committee members receive a budget binder which details the budget for the ensuing fiscal year. This comprehensive, preliminary draft budget is formally presented to the School Committee at an all-day business meeting typically held on the third Saturday in January during which we have an opportunity to hear panel presentations, ask questions and voice concerns. At the conclusion of that lengthy meeting, the School Committee votes on the preliminary budget. Final adjustments are made if necessary.

Our final vote occurs in February subsequent to a public hearing required by [Massachusetts General Law](#). This is the time when the public is invited to comment on our budget for the ensuing fiscal year. This final vote must occur at least 45 days in advance of Acton's Town Meeting which is typically held on the first Monday in April. Once voted, the amount that each Town is required to pay can be lowered but not raised.

Final budget approval lies with the citizens of Acton and Boxborough and requires a [2/3rds majority vote](#) at their respective Town Meetings. Once

that vote is secured, our budget becomes official, and the expenditures therein are established for the next fiscal year which begins on July 1st.

### **Budget Updates on the Current Fiscal Year**

Additionally, throughout the year, the Director of Finance provides us with updates on the district's financial position in the current fiscal year at our regular business meetings. These updates present a snapshot in time of funds budgeted, spent and remaining for each cost center in the current fiscal year. We also vote to accept or reject bids for goods and services, as recommended by the Superintendent.

The School Committee also approves the district's payroll and authorizes payments to vendors and individuals through approval of warrants, which are detailed lists of funds to be spent in a defined period of time and include the amount owed, name of recipient or vendor and the cost center against which the amount is charged. Warrants are produced and payments are processed through the Finance Office. We authorize payments by signing the warrants and publicly announcing them at our business meetings. During the summer and vacations, a subcommittee is assigned the task of ensuring that warrants continue to be signed so that payments can be released.

The School Committee liaises with Town Select Boards and Finance Committees throughout the year on budgetary issues affecting our schools and towns and updates the Committee during regular business meetings. You can access more information on these intergovernmental bodies by clicking on the [Acton Leadership Group](#) and [Boxborough Leadership Forum](#).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Advocacy Organizations

Visit the **Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC)** [website](#) to join the ListServe, an online question-asking and knowledge-sharing venue for School Committee members across the Commonwealth.

Sign up to receive newsletters from [Support MA Regional Schools](#) and [MARS](#) (The Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools) on issues impacting regional school districts.

### Links to Info on our District

The District's website is a great resource, and we are always working to make it more user-friendly. Here are some links to pertinent info that will be helpful in getting up to speed in your role:

Click on these links to access our District's [mission and long range strategic plan](#), [collective bargaining agreements & administrator contracts](#) and student [handbooks](#).

Clicking [here](#) will take you to a webpage where you can explore our District's profile, school improvement plans and the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education's report card for our schools and district. You will also be able to access **ClearGov** which provides data on financial and demographic benchmarks as well as comparative data.

Click [here](#) to familiarize yourself with the programming offered by Acton-Boxborough Community Education which oversees before and after school programming for all of our elementary schools as well as summer programs, driver's education and more.

## Appendix A: SAMPLE SCENARIOS

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

**Answer:** (c) Contact the Superintendent to ask that the copies be made available. School Committee members may not ask staff (including assistant superintendents, principals, teachers, or staff) to perform duties without first checking with the Superintendent. The Superintendent reports to the Committee; staff report to the Superintendent.

- (2) At a social gathering of parents, several parents complain about the performance of a particular teacher, principal and/or administrator. They ask you to intercede on their behalf. How should you respond?
- a) Direct them to the Parent Communication Map which outlines the steps to resolve personal concerns.
  - b) Ask the Superintendent to contact the parents.
  - c) Talk to the teacher, principal or administrator to explain the situation and email the Superintendent.

**Answer:** (a) Direct the parent/guardian to the Parent Communication Map. Unresolved or ongoing issues will be referred to the Superintendent.

- (3) A member of the media calls you after a particularly difficult meeting where many angry constituents voice a variety of viewpoints. You are aware of the cause of this uproar because people have spoken to you at length. The Committee has postponed a decision until a subsequent meeting. The reporter wants to discuss the situation with you to get your perspective in order to write an article for the local paper. How do you respond?
- a) Speak with reporter on behalf of the Committee, providing any background information and answering questions openly and honestly.
  - b) Speak with the reporter but stipulate 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) Though you have a constitutional right to give your personal opinion, it's important for members to know that they don't represent the School Committee or District when speaking to the public or press. When controversial,

polarizing issues arise and no decision has been made or consensus reached, it is best to say nothing.

## Appendix B: Robert's Rules of Order

### What is a Motion?

A motion is a proposal pertaining to an issue upon which the entire membership can take action or take a stand. Individual members may:

- Make a motion
- Second a motion
- Debate a motion
- Vote on a motion

Main Motions introduce an item to the membership for consideration. They cannot be made when any other motion is on the floor.

### How to Present a Motion

1. Obtain the floor by doing the following:
  - Wait until the last speaker has finished.
  - Obtain the Chair's attention by raising your hand (or rising).
  - Wait until the Chair recognizes you.
  - Address the Chair by saying, for example, "Mr./Madame Chair"
2. Make Your Motion  
Say, "*I move that we ...*" rather than, "*I move that we do not ...*" Speak in a clear and concise manner, always state a motion affirmatively and stay on topic. This is not the time to speak in favor or against a motion. You are just making debate possible.
3. Wait for Someone to Second Your Motion  
Another member will second your motion or the Chair will call for a second. If there is no second, your motion is lost.
4. The Chair Restates Your Motion  
The Chair will say, "*It has been moved and seconded that we ...*" thus placing your motion before the membership for consideration and action. The membership then debates your motion or may move directly to a vote. Once your motion is presented to the membership by the Chair it becomes the 'property of the assembly' and cannot be changed by you without the consent of the members.

## 5. Debating a Motion

This is the time for members to speak in favor or against your motion. The person who made the motion is always allowed to speak first. All comments and debate must be directed to the Chair and must adhere to the time limit for speaking that has been established. The mover may speak again only after other speakers are finished, unless called upon by the Chair.

## 6. Putting the Motion to a Vote

The Chair asks, "*Are you ready to vote on the question?*" If there is no more discussion, a vote is taken. If debate continues a member may make a motion to "*move the previous question*". If this motion is adopted members are required to move directly to a vote.

### Voting on a Motion

The method of vote on a motion depends on the circumstances and the by-laws of your organization. There are five voting methods used by most organizations:

- Voice Vote. The Chair asks those in favor to say, "*aye*", those opposed to say "*nay*" and calls for any who would like to abstain from voting. Any member may move for an exact count.
- Roll Call Vote. Each member answers "*yes*" or "*no*" when called. This method is used when a record of each person's vote is required.
- General Consent. When a motion is not likely to be opposed, the Chair may state, "*If there is no objection ...*" The membership shows agreement by their silence; however, if even one member says, "*I object*" the item must be put to a vote.
- Division Vote. Members raise hands or stand with the *ayes* or the *nays*. A count is not necessarily required.
- Ballot Vote. Members write their vote on a slip of paper. This method is used to maintain secrecy in votes.

### Proper Use of Robert's Rules

- Most importantly, *BE COURTEOUS*.
- Obtain the floor properly.
- Speak clearly and concisely.
- Obey the rules of debate.

adapted from <https://robertsrules.org/rulesintroprint.htm>