



# *Handbook*

for Brittonkill School Board Members:

A guide for new and veteran board members.

Compiled by:  
**the New Board Member Orientation Committee**

Kyle Christiansen, Chair  
Craig Gilbert  
Karen Zagursky  
Matthew Wade (ex officio)

*January 2012*

## **HANDBOOK FOR BRITTONKILL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

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Brunswick (Brittonkill) Central School District

Troy, New York 12180

Compiled by the New Board Member Orientation Committee:

Kyle Christiansen, Chairperson

Craig Gilbert

Karen Zagursky

Matthew Wade (ex-officio)

Thanks to the Chatham Central School District Board of Education for permission to use its school board handbook as a basis for this handbook.

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## **FOR CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

This handbook was written for members of the Board of Education of the Brunswick (Brittonkill) Central School District (BCSD) in Brunswick, New York. The handbook covers most (if not all) aspects of serving on the school board—roles, responsibilities, expectations, and participation in the mission of the board to promote the best possible education for students in the Tamarac schools.

This handbook is meant to give new and veteran board members a good perspective of district governance as well as quick access to essential reference documents. It is also meant to give prospective board members an idea of what serving on a board is like; it is usually not everything you expect.

This is a living document. Being the first of its kind in the district and based heavily on a successful version in another district, it is meant to be built up, fixed, and updated regularly by the New Board Member Orientation Committee.

I applaud the New Board Member Orientation Committee—Kyle Christiansen, Craig Gilbert, and Karen Zagursky—for their swift turn around of this document, which I expect will become an essential source for efficient and effective board service in the future.

Matthew Wade  
President

# **1. GETTING STARTED IN BRITTONKILL**

## **I am a newly elected school board member in Brittonkill**

Welcome to the Board of Education of the Brunswick (Brittonkill) Central School District. With your service on the school board, you have chosen to contribute toward strengthening Brittonkill's quality of life. You will want to prepare yourself for board membership, get some training, and learn as much as you can about the Tamarac schools.

This section covers aspects of beginning board membership but also addresses experienced members, who should seek to continually educate themselves as they serve.

### **Being Prepared**

Your first step is to meet with the president of the school board and the district superintendent to “learn the ropes” about board goals and process and to obtain materials on board membership.

Some of the materials you will want to read for background on the Brittonkill Central School District include:

- This handbook
- Policy Manual of the BCSD Board of Education
- BCSD Budget
- BCSD personnel policies, including collective bargaining agreements and administrators' contracts
- BCSD overall curriculum program and standards
- Current data on school and student performance (e.g., district report card)
- Current board goals
- Long Range Facility Report and Financial Report
- Minutes of board meetings
- Minutes of committee meetings

These materials are available through the BCSD district office, as well as the district website.

Each Friday before a board meeting, you will gain access to that week's agenda and backup material on BoardDocs. You will be required to sign in with your individual user name and password to gain access to executive content.

Additional background materials include guides from the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA). When you are elected, the district office will forward your contact information to NYSSBA in Latham, where you will be added to their mailing list. If you do not receive a copy of *Essentials of School Board Service: A Guide to Surviving Your First Year* from NYSSBA, call their office at 783-0200.

**Tip:** Continue to learn about public education as well as education in Brittonkill.

## **Orientation and Training**

Be sure to meet with the superintendent, who will set up meetings with the school administrators. These meetings may occur before your first meeting, when all parties are available. Get hands-on learning about different areas of the system (e.g., academics, business office, food service, transportation, athletics, and operations and maintenance).

We strongly recommend that you also attend the training courses that are available to you, either through NYSSBA or Questar III (BOCES). As a school board member, you will receive information on available training and other resources from NYSSBA.

NYSSBA conducts a wide-ranging development program for school board members and administrators. One key learning opportunity for new school board members is the Academy for Public School Governance usually offered in summer at their Latham headquarters.

As a result of financial misconduct in certain school districts in the state (most notably Rosslyn School District in 2004), New York State requires newly elected, re-elected, and appointed board members to complete fiscal oversight training. NYSSBA offers fiscal training at its Academy for Public School Governance, at regional workshops throughout New York State, and during its annual convention in October. Questar III also offers similar classes.

## **Conferences and Workshops**

Recognizing the need for ongoing in-service training and development for its members, the Board of Education encourages the participation of all members at appropriate school board conferences, workshops, and conventions. This is especially important because school board members are not typically experts in school district governance.

The Capital District School Boards Association (CAPSBA), of which the Brittonkill school board is a member, recently began offering free seminars and dinners to its members, all for a fee of \$400 per year. Previous speakers have included the Commission of Education and the executive director of NYSSBA.

To obtain authorization and funds to attend conferences, contact the board secretary in the district office. She will register you for the event and obtain authorization to cover any fees associated with the conference or workshop.

### **A Word to Members...**

Spend time listening, asking questions, and learning how the public school system operates. Learn about each school from the school's perspective. Before being elected, you knew the schools from the outside perspective. Good board members develop an outside/inside perspective.

You may have a lot ideas, but don't reinvent the wheel. Be patient and listen.

Get the lay of the land first. Think before you speak.

Don't go in with an agenda or a focus on a single issue. If you do, you'll be disillusioned quickly and your intentions as a board member may come into question by the board, administration, and others.

Keep foremost in your mind what is best for the district and the students. Don't be penny-wise and dollar-foolish.

## **2. ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD**

### **What is the school board all about? What are its goals?**

It is important to understand the mission and role of the school board both for your own service and for communicating with the public.

To achieve excellence and equity in public schools, four key roles of any school board are:

- **Vision** – setting the vision for education in the local community
- **Structure** – establishing the structure and environment to implement the vision
- **Accountability** – establishing academic standards to achieve the vision, assessing performance progress toward achieving the vision, and formulating strategies to help marginal or failing students
- **Advocacy** – advocating for the public schools and their students

For more information on the role and policies of the school board, see the BCSD Policy Manual

### **Goals of the BCSD Board of Education**

In Brittonkill, as stated in the BCSD Policy Manual, the Board of Education is committed to the education of all students and must be aware of the concerns and aspirations of the community regarding the quality and performance of the district. The Board seeks to ensure that its educational programs provide all students with a high-quality education.

### **Relationship with the Superintendent**

While the school board is responsible for setting the vision and goals for the district, it is the superintendent who implements the polices to attain the goals that have been set. As such, the school board governs and the superintendent administers the school district. In general, boards elected by the community to set priorities, establish policies, and evaluate the outcomes of district operation. Superintendents identify needs and policies, develop regulations, provide leadership, and manage the day-to-day operations of the district.

This means that the relationship between the board and superintendent should be collaborative. The superintendent solicits board initiatives, finds ways to respond to them, and translates them into realities. At the same time, the superintendent rings ideas to the board and helps educate the board on school operations.

The superintendent can be seen as the tenth member of the board, although non-voting. He or she fills the gap between the board and the administration by conveying the board’s desires to the administration and the administration’s concerns to the board. The superintendent is expected to speak candidly to each of these concerns.

The separation between the board and superintendent boils down to division of responsibilities. The board is responsible for the vision and policy (the ‘what’ of school operations) and the superintendent is responsible for implementing the board’s vision and policy (the ‘how’ of school operations).

Respect the fact that administrators and teachers are educators and professionals. Learn about education and how it works. The board should spend time on education, teaching, and learning, and devote time to classroom-based issues.

<b>School Board</b>	<b>Superintendent</b>
<b>Governs (guides, directs)</b> Decides what Requests information	<b>Manages (administers, operates)</b> Decides how Seeks and provides information

<p>Considers issues</p> <p>Creates, reviews, and adopts policy</p> <p>Approves and reviews plans</p> <p>Monitors progress</p> <p>Contracts with personnel</p> <p>Approves evaluation criteria and procedures</p> <p>Approves and reviews budget</p> <p>Represents public interests</p>	<p>Provides recommendations</p> <p>Recommends and carries out policy</p> <p>Implements plans</p> <p>Reports progress</p> <p>Supervises hiring process and practices</p> <p>Supervises and evaluates personnel</p> <p>Formulates budget</p> <p>Acts in public interest</p>
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### 3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

#### What is expected of me as a school board member?

As a member of the BCSD Board of Education, you are:

- A **representative** of the entire community
- A **steward** of the district’s resources
- A **leader** of the district
- An **advocate** for public education

This section outlines the expectations for effective membership on the BCSD school board. It also offers guidelines for behavior, communication, and functioning within the school board.

#### The Time Factor

When asked how much time one needs to spend as board members, the typical answer is “a lot”. And the amount of time expected by board members is increasing. NYSSBA agrees: they say that six hours per week is a general rule. It could be more: six to ten for general members and up to 12 hours per week for the president and vice president. During budget months, this can be more. During summer months, it can be less.

Make every effort to attend each board meeting. This means two meetings per month. Spend about as much time preparing for meetings as being in the meetings themselves. It is expected that you will serve on at least two committees and have a special assignment.

**Other kinds of time:** Another activity that takes time is attending school events and visiting the schools. This is time well spent in several ways: you will learn more about what’s going on in the schools, and the school community (students, teachers, parents) will learn more about you.

**Attend school events:** The school community appreciates it when board members take the time to attend events (even if they don't make it apparent to you). This is a good way to show your interest and build relationships with the community. Being visible is a type of outreach.

**Get to know the schools first hand:** Board members are encouraged to visit the schools and see how they work. School visits are valuable in maintaining relations with staff and administrators. They will help familiarize you with the schools from the inside. You may be familiar with the schools from being a parent, but when you walk the halls with a teacher or administrator, you gain a completely different perspective. Visiting the schools is good preparation for making informed decisions. Let the board know in advance that you would like to do this. Call the district office to schedule a visit. Do not visit the schools without advance notice.

### **Functioning as a Body**

Rule number one: Realize that you operate as a body of nine. As a school board member, you must remember that you have no power or authority except that which results from participation in decisions and actions of the board as a whole in an official meeting. Actions, promises, or commitments by individual board members are without legal basis and create no binding commitment upon the district. Also, as a board member, you are elected to represent the entire school district in all matters pertaining to education and district governance. As such, you must be able to accept the principle of board unit and subordinate self-interest.

Only the board, in a public meeting, has any authority to authorize any action. Information received by any one board member creates no authority to take action. If board members act on their own, without the approval of the full board duly given in a public meeting, they are operating outside the purview of the law. What you hear or know is meaningless unless you bring it to the board and the board decides to use the information to take action.

One of your obligations is to discuss issues, vote, and come to consensus (general agreement to accept the vote). To function well as a body, individual member should carry the message of the majority. Take your own individual input and combine it into a single board input. When asked by a member of the public how you voted, if you did not vote with the majority, you can say, "I didn't personally vote for it, but I do support the board's decision." Of course, you may want to say why you did not vote in favor, but you should not do it in a way that undermines the board decision; this undermines your fellow board members, which does not help the 'team' aspect of the board.

If a staff member approaches you with a problem, what do you do? To handle a question appropriately, you can respond: "I hear what you're saying. This needs to go

to the superintendent. It may end up coming back to the board for discussion and resolution.” This kind of response a) allows some distance between you as an individual board member and the staff person, which b) allows the superintendent and board as a whole to appropriately handle the issue.

You are expected to listen to people but not handle the problem (it’s not your job to do so). Direct them to the right process and it may come back to the board. Be careful to support the well-being of the school, not weaken it. Remember, your focus is the students (not the public). The board is beholden to the students.

### **Lines of Authority – Where to Advise People to Go with a Concern**

Concern about a teacher → building principal

Concern about a principal → superintendent

Concern about the superintendent → board of education

Concerns about buildings & grounds, transportation, or food service →  
department head

If unresolved, concern → supervisor’s supervisor → superintendent → board of  
education

Notify the superintendent and board president if such a referral is made.

### **Being Prepared for School Board Meetings**

It is crucial that you come prepared for each board meeting. Board members receive access to the board ‘packet’ online the Friday before the Thursday meeting.

Read the packet thoroughly over the weekend. If there is something that involves more than straightforward information, read it with special attention. As you read, jot down notes to remind yourself of particular points or items of interest.

**Asking questions:** If you have questions, send them (preferably by email) to the superintendent by Wednesday morning; carbon copy the entire board, board clerk, and board secretary (most likely, someone else has the same question). Make sure you have the relevant questions that the superintendent could answer. If you want a good thought-out answer with data, ask ahead of time. Don’t wait until the meeting to bring up this type of question. This point is not intended to avoid public discussion, but rather to avoid blindsiding the superintendent.

Even if your questions are good ones that you really want to ask at the meeting, remember that they may take time to investigate and research. You will get more worthwhile answers if you ask questions ahead of time.

At the meeting, ask your questions that are emailed ahead of time. Answers will typically not be provided early as this would go against the Open Meetings Law. Ask questions professionally, showing trust and respect. Seek clarification, explanation, and resolution of issues. Once answers are provided, pay attention to them. Use them for further understanding.

Be sure to ask the superintendent, not principals or teachers. Asking other administrators puts them in a precarious position if the superintendent has not been asked the question and can create a negative perception by the public if done so at a meeting.

**Preparing for discussion or a vote:** Prepare for a discussion or vote by being informed about the issue.

**Example:**

The board packet contains a note on budget items to be reviewed at the next business meeting: “On Thursday evening we will review the program profiles and budget recommendations of our special education/pupil support services program and our proposed summer school program. We will also see Draft 2 of our general fund budget. The administration has been working hard on trimming costs, revising projected revenues, and gathering quantitative and qualitative data to help the board understand various proposals for next year’s education plan. We will highlight significant changes in our projected appropriations and revenues for the benefit of both the board and members of the staff and public that may be present. We will also try to provide explanations of any areas of the proposed budget about which you may have questions. *Please contact me by phone or email on Monday with any questions you have so that we can provide timely information to you at the meeting.*”

In this example, to prepare for a thoughtful review of the budgets related to the special education/pupil support services program, the proposed summer school program, and the general fund budget, read any available background material. If the program profiles and draft budgets are attached to the packet, or provided in a previous meeting, review them in preparation for the meeting on Tuesday. If you find that you have questions about the program and/or the budget that might require some research on the part of the superintendent, or you just don’t understand a particular item, call or email the superintendent on Monday.

Similarly, if you have an issue that you would like to add to the agenda for discussion, be sure to contact the president or superintendent before the agenda is created. It is better for all to be informed about an issue, and to put it on the agenda for the next meeting than to bring up an issue for which no one is prepared or informed. No surprises!

Another kind of preparation might involve checking your calendar to see whether you can attend an event or meeting. For example, there may be an announcement in the packet: “Please come to the meeting prepared to tell the president if you will be able to attend the Brunswick Town Board meeting on April 28 at 7 pm. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss school safety issues.”

**Access to old board packets:** The board went paperless in September 2011 and with that, all past information, attachments, and backup information will always be available on BoardDocs. BoardDocs is searchable and the board secretary does her best to include searchable files on the site. The executive-access files kept on the site are password protected in a similar way to your email account. If you print your board packet, be sure to keep them in a protected place; some of the content (though typically not much) is confidential. If you resign from the board, decide not to run for reelection, or are defeated, be sure to properly dispose of your paper copies when your term is complete.

**To make a positive contribution, do not forget to:**

- Communicate questions to the superintendent and the board.
- Go through the superintendent to ask questions.
- Take note of the superintendent’s explanation of an issue.

## **Participating in School Board Meetings**

This section contains suggested guidelines for communication and discussion among board members during meetings in order to conduct open meetings effectively.

As an elected member of the BCSD Board of Education, you are required to debate most issues in public and vote in public. The state’s Open Meetings Laws require the public bodies conduct nearly all of their business at open meetings so that citizens know what goes on in their government. The exceptions are executive sessions when personnel hiring, firing, or other sensitive staff issues involving specific individuals are discussed.

While staff and the public are invited to attend and participate, at the same time this is the board’s opportunity to conduct business. The board should remain in control of the meeting at all times. In Brittonkill, a loose form of Robert’s Rules of Order are followed, at the president’s discretion. A *quorum* is a simple majority (more than half) of the total number of board members. The president votes in order with the rest of the board. Most votes are cast verbally (yea or nay), but occasionally a role-call vote is taken when the president cannot discern the voice vote.

**Discussions:** Debate and disagreement are natural and should not be avoided. Every member has the right to disagree (but not to dominate). You have the opportunity

voice your concern and your support. Be clear and say, “this is my point of view.” You may want to share your thinking on how you came to your decision.

Although debate can feel uncomfortable at times, it is healthy. It may be time-consuming but in the long run may lead to a better, more inclusive outcome since all issues will have been brought out into the open.

Accept that it is okay to disagree – agree to disagree. Recognize that an argument is not a personal attack but rather involves a set of ideas. Sometimes speaking will show how you arrived at your opinion. But think before you speak.

At all times, be respectful of one another. Realize that everyone comes from a different background but everyone is here to do the same thing: support public education. Try to work together and remember your ultimate goal: offering the best educational experience to our students.

Know the difference between asking important questions and over-analyzing something. Rely on the administration and others to provide good information, e.g., the cost-benefit analysis underlying a decision or proposal. It is not the board’s job to manage the operations of the school. Micromanaging administration helps no one.

**Be aware of the public attending board meetings:** Community members and school staff are encouraged to attend board meetings and learn what is going on in their schools. It is important to be conscious of their presence in positive ways:

- Be conscious of how your behavior in meetings affects the public and school staff.
- Be respectful. Sarcasm shows a lack of respect and usually helps no one. Be aware of the perception that the board is powerful. It is important to not abuse that power, e.g., with a condescending attitude.
- Keep interchanges between members to the business at hand (whispering to your neighbor, or sidebar conversations, can be misinterpreted as well as distracting).
- Having food at meetings can be viewed as unprofessional as well as rude (when the food is not shared with the public!). Candies and mints are acceptable, but please make an effort to share with the attending public.
- Do not campaign for a favorite issue or stand on an issue. When speaking, be brief. Even though there may be an audience, board members should not put on a show.
- Do not be quick to table items. When items are tabled, the reason should be given. Otherwise, people who are affected by the issue may get the wrong idea and feel slighted.
- Recognize that decision may affect people in the audience. Be careful about levity.

- Remember that in many cases, perception on the side of staff, the public, etc., is more important than reality. To get stakeholders to understand your intentions, make them well-known. Otherwise a misperception can get around the community quickly.

**To make a positive contribution, avoid:**

- Making assumptions based on rumor (in fact, rarely is it a good thing to bring up rumor at the table before bringing it to the superintendent and board president first).
- Complaining about the length of meetings (if you believe meetings are going on too long, discuss this with the board president; it is the president's responsibility to ensure healthy discussion but keep discussion from droning on).
- Expecting meetings to go quickly so you can leave (you were elected to do the public's business, expect to do that business).

**Voting:** Before voting, think carefully about the implications of your vote. Study and learn as much as you can about the issue.

Sometimes you may vote for something you didn't really want to vote for originally. In these cases, you may admit, "I may not like it, but we can't get a better solution." Even when you vote the same way as others, their reason for voting in favor may not be the same as yours.

You have the right to abstain. In fact, in cases where the vote may affect you (e.g., you're a retired member of the staff, it affects a family member that is a staff member or student, etc.), it's probably the best plan to avoid the perception of a conflict. Laws pertaining to conflicts of interest on the school district level are not very restrictive in many cases due to the fact that many school communities are small and the chances of a vote affecting a school board member personally is actually quite good. That doesn't mean you can't argue the merits of the topic before the vote. However, the courts have ruled that board members cannot abstain simply because they have a philosophical problem with what they are being asked to vote on (e.g., teacher tenure) and may face possible removal from office for "dereliction of duty".

**President's role:** The board president has several other roles and responsibilities in addition to those outlined in this handbook. The president has equal standing and votes as a member of the board. Additional roles include:

- Providing leadership.
- Facilitating the process; having patience.
- Assigning committee structure.
- Keeping communication open.

- Meeting with the superintendent to set the agenda, also on a regular basis.
- Sharing and developing consensus.
- Serving as a mentor.
- Developing alternatives for people to consider. What are our choices?

## Conduct During School Board Meetings

During board meetings, members will:

1. State their position.
2. Vote their conscience.
3. Move on to the next item.
4. Avoid springing any surprises on other members or the superintendent
5. Avoid hidden agendas.
6. Use Robert's Rules to guide board action on motions, amendments, etc.
7. Address problems and not attack people.
8. Not debate issues with members of the audience.
9. Treat all present with respect.
10. Focus on an agenda item until it is resolved or until a specific time has been reached to resume the resolution process.
11. Support the president's attempts to control conflicts at meetings.
12. Ensure deliberations/activities are limited to board work and not administration/staff work.
13. Ensure only one person speaks at a time.
14. Listen to each other and not engage in side conversations.
15. Respect each other's opinions/comments.
16. Not waste time repeating what has already been communicated.
17. Not have long, unnecessary speeches.
18. Ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.
19. Role model the behaviors expected of students, staff, and community members.
20. Stay on task.
21. Avoid focusing on and/or criticizing things that are unchangeable.
22. Avoid trying to persuade and advise by using aggressive tactics.
23. Avoid rigorously agreeing or strongly disagreeing.
24. Avoid approving someone for conforming to my stance on opinions.
25. Ensure meetings start on time.
26. Ensure meetings end on time.
27. Support the president when presiding at the meetings.
28. Ensure there is no discussion of items without a motion made and seconded before the item is discussed.
29. Agree to limit your comments, on any item, to those that are pertinent to the decision-making process.
30. Agree to be concise and avoid redundancy.
31. Not speak without first being recognized by the president.
32. If needed, paraphrase or check impressions of the speaker's meaning.
33. Describe observable behaviors that influence your feelings.
34. Share your own feelings.
35. Agree that only the president is authorized to respond to comments received during the privilege of the floor/public comments.
36. Use a consent agenda within the regular board meetings, whenever possible.
37. Support the superintendent's administrative procedures and decisions to the public and staff and communicate disagreements privately.

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| <p>38. Refrain from taking definitive action until the superintendent has been given the opportunity to make a recommendation on the action.</p> <p>39. Refrain from committing to a position on an agenda item or issue before all relevant information is presented.</p> <p>40. Work to reach consensus on important items. If no consensus is reached, then the vote of the majority will determine decisions/outcomes.</p> | <p>41. Refrain from public criticism of one another.</p> <p>42. Monitor and enforce compliance with legal, regulatory, and school district board policies.</p> <p>43. Adhere to decision-making practices that are based on data, policy, and best practices.</p> <p>44. Avoid communicating one position in private conversations/communications and a different position in public communications.</p> |
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### **Communicating Outside of School Board Meetings**

At social or school events, you may want to take the opportunity to know your fellow board members better. Socializing without discussing board business is a good idea.

But school board members are strongly encouraged *not* to engage in discussion and debate about board business outside of board meetings. This is because the board is a decision-making body. The Open Meetings Law states that a discussion of board business by a quorum outside a board meeting would violate the law.

**Using email:** Email is a good way to communicate, but it is not a legal way for the board to conduct business that results in decisions. In addition to the Open Meetings Law, most email message regarding school business are probably subject to Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requirements, which allow public access to government records. As such, you may want to consider creating a new email account for board communication. Use of a personal or work email account could, in an extreme situation, lead to the State Education Department searching it for proof of the existence of a message.

So watch what you say, how you say it, and what the subject matter is all about. Share information broadly, among board members and the superintendent. Avoid promoting an opinion or lobbying other board members. Remind each other if you receive a message that is becoming “business”.

**Gathering and sharing information:** Every board member is equally elected by the public and has a right to equally share in the process of governing and leading the district. When information is not equally shared, then some board members are disenfranchised from their right to officially conduct district business.

If you need information from another board member, ask for it. Recognize that if that information has the potential to create a board action, you have an obligation to

bring it to the board for assimilation and ultimately some action. Each board member can gather information, but to the extent that it will result in some issue, concern, or need for action to come to the board, all board members need to be informed and equally prepared to use the information.

The superintendent is both a partner in managing the affairs of the district and a vehicle for board members to gather information, discern facts, and create opportunities for board action. Keep the superintendent and the president in the loop so that they are informed of communications about concerns, rumors, issues, and needs.

Finally, if there is a concern about a health, safety, financial, or district reputation issue, all board members should ask the superintendent to gather information, distill facts, develop an official district positions, and have a common message to the community that can be delivered by everyone, including all board members.

**Confidential information:** In light of the fact that board meetings are public, it makes sense that you may discuss any board business *except* information a) covered in executive sessions, or b) involving personnel issues or student records. Any topic discussed in executive session is confidential and should never be discussed with anyone other than a board member or the superintendent. No board member will be involved in any decision involving a spouse who is an employee.

## **Communicating with the Public**

As noted previously, board members are encouraged to attend school events and be visible in the school community. In this way, they are exercising symbolic leadership and demonstrating their commitment to the education life of Brittonkill.

You should be accessible to answer questions from community members. You may be their only source of information since they do not have access to school administrators or staff. But be wary of addressing sensitive topics. A good base response to those types of questions is, “The board is aware of the situation and is looking at all the issues.”

If you are given new “information”, you may say, “I’m glad you told me. I’ll find out more and get back to you or have someone contact you. Have you talked to the teacher/administrator and gone up the chain of command?”

Sometimes a student may call you. Be appreciative of the effort the student took and handle the question in the same way as you would if coming from an adult.

Above all, be respectful in any interaction with the public or school staff and administrators. A good rule of thumb is, “don’t say anything you wouldn’t say to your mother or father.” Even if you feel strongly about a topic, never lose your temper.

With any issue being put to the public or vote, learn as much as you can about it and explain the issues to the public (even if you might disagree with the plan).

After the board has voted, it is best to say, “The board decided X because of Y....” If you voted no, you can say, “I voted against it, and here’s why, but I support the board’s decision.” Remember that information on voting is in the minutes of the board meeting, which are public and accessible on the district website.

### **School Board Member as a Parent**

Sometimes school board members currently have children attending school. In fact some people want to serve on the school board *because* they are parents. However, you will find that serving on the board as a parent can be complicated, but not impossible.

When serving on the board, you need to think in terms of what is best for all children in the school district. Think in terms of policy, not in terms of your child. Don’t expect or ask for special treatment for your child.

**Communicating with teachers:** You are always a parent first and a board member second. You will need to find a way that works for you when communicating with a teacher about your child. First and foremost, talk about *your* child and your child’s situation.

As a board member, you don’t leave behind your parental rights, but you do lose some ability to be a parent advocate. Err on the side of being less of an advocate. Cultivate a careful consciousness of your role since teachers may perceive that you have power as a board member.

Be mindful of *how* you approach a problem related to your child. In interactions with teachers, usually problems are not as simple as they seem: ask questions first, approaching the problem in terms of seeking information, rather than seeking to change a situation. This approach may result in the teacher gaining a new understanding.

When contacting a teacher, you might say, “I am calling you as a parent. I hope you’re comfortable with that. If not, how should we proceed? Do you want a third party?” Another option is to request the help of the guidance office when setting up a meeting with a teacher. Married members may want to ask their spouse to interact with teachers.

### **Responsibility Regarding Sexual Harassment Policy**

The BCSD Board of Education recognizes that harassment of students and staff on the basis of sex or sexual orientation is abusive and illegal behavior. All such behavior

is strictly prohibited. The BCSD Policy Manual includes the policy and regulations on the definition, compliant procedure, investigation, and discipline regarding sexual harassment (policy 0115).

Because of your perceived position of power, you need to be especially careful about what you say and how you say it. You may not think the situation involves sexual harassment, but others may see it that way. School board members are strongly urged to attend training in this area.

#### **4. BRITTONKILL BASICS**

This section provides Brittonkill-specific information and resources.

##### **The Schools**

Brunswick (Brittonkill) Central School District  
Louis C. McIntosh, Jr., Superintendent  
3992 NY 2  
Troy, New York 12180  
(518) 279-4600 x2602  
[www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us](http://www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us)

Tamarac Elementary School  
Karen Lederman, Principal  
(518) 279-4600 x2003  
[www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/esweb](http://www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/esweb)

Tamarac Secondary School  
Richard Pogue, Principal  
Christopher Rockwell, Assistant Principal  
(518) 279-4600 x2402  
[www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/hsweb](http://www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/hsweb)

##### **School Board Elections**

The elections of members of the Board of Education are held on the third Tuesday in May, unless this date conflicts with religious observances on that day, in which case it will be held on the second Tuesday in May (state law). The polls will be open for those hours designated by the district. The following items will be voted upon:

- The annual budget
- Three seats on the Board of Education
- Any additional vacancies to be filled on the Board of Education

- Any special propositions

Board members serve three-year terms. There is no limit on the number of terms that a board member may serve.

**Oath of office:** Newly elected or appointed school board members must take their constitutional oath of office within 30 days of the beginning of their term in office. They will be sworn in by the district clerk or any notary public, and the oath will be filed with the district clerk.

### **School Board Legal Status**

The legal status of the board is that of a corporate body established pursuant to the laws of New York State. Any liability of the district is a liability of the Board of Education as a corporation and not that of the members of the board as individuals.

### **Schedule for School Board Meetings**

Meetings take place twice a month, on the first and third Thursdays of the month, all year. The annual reorganizational meeting of the Board of Education is held in the beginning of July (by state law). The purpose of the reorganizational meeting is to elect officers of the board and appoint and designate other district employees for the proper management of the school during the school year. Meetings are held in the Secondary School library unless otherwise designated.

### **Committee Structure**

The BCSD board's standing committees are the Policy and Facilities committees. In addition, the board may establish ad hoc committees. The board reserves the right to terminate any committee at any time. The president serves as an ex officio member of all committees to which s/he is not appointed.

School board members are expected to serve on at least two committees. The president of the board will appoint you to the committees. In deciding where members should serve, s/he takes into consideration the member's requests and expertise – as well as the opportunity for members to diversify – and the number of people already on the committee (committees are limited to three members).

### **More on School Board Membership**

**Resignation:** A member of the Board of Education may resign his or her office by filing his or her resignation with the district clerk. The effective date of the resignation must be within 30 days after the date of filing.

**Removal from office:** A member of the Board of Education may be removed from office for willful violation or neglect of duty, or for willfully disobeying any decision, order, or regulation of the Commissioner of Education. Notice of the charge and an opportunity for defense must be provided. Official misconduct may be grounds for removal by the board after a hearing.

A vacancy on the board may also be declared if it is clearly established that a member has failed to attend three consecutive meetings without sufficient excuse or if a member has changed his/her legal residence from that of the school district.

**Unexpired term fulfillment:** The Board of Education has the power to fill any vacancy which may occur on the board by reason of death, resignation, removal from office or from the school district, or refusal to serve, of any member or officer of the board by a majority vote or a special election. The person so appointed in the place of any member of the board will hold his or her office until the next annual elections of board members.

**Fiduciary responsibility:** School board members in Brittonkill, operating under the highest ethical standard, should:

- Assure the opportunity for high quality education for every student.
- Observe state and federal laws and regulations pertaining to education.
- Accept office as a board member as a means of unselfish service and leadership to the district.
- Take official actions only in public sessions, except where otherwise provided or required by law.
- Represent the entire community without fear or favor.
- Maintain confidentiality of privileged information.
- Delegate authority to the superintendent as the board executive and confine board action to policymaking, planning, and appraisal.
- Employ only competent, trained personnel.
- Preserve the obligation of having all issues considered fairly and without bias.
- Instill respect toward our country one's fellow person.

### **School Board Officers**

The president and vice president of the board are elected by members of the board at the annual reorganizational meeting in July.

The BCSD Policy Manual (policy 2220) states that the duties of the president of the board are as follows:

1. To preside at all meetings;

2. To call special meetings s/he considers necessary or on request of one member of the board;
3. To appoint committees with the advice of fellow board members;
4. To act as an ex-officio member of all committees;
5. To execute all documents on behalf of the board;
6. To perform the usual and ordinary duties of the office;
7. To set the agenda, in conjunction with the Superintendent, for all meetings; and
8. Approve attendance at workshops and conferences for board members and the Superintendent.

The vice president is authorized to act for the president in case of the president's absence or inability to act, within statutory limitations.

### **More on School Board Meetings**

**Notice of meetings:** The Board of Education believes that public notice of its activities is essential to ongoing, proactive cooperation between the board and the community it serves.

To this end, and in accordance with state law, notice of meetings will be sent to all members of the board, Superintendent of Schools, district treasurer, and to the newspapers of the district. The time, date, and place of regular board meetings is established at the reorganizational meeting. If a meeting is scheduled at least a week in advance, notice must be given to the public by posting at designated public places not less than 72 hours prior to the meeting.

When a meeting is scheduled less than a week in advance, the board will provide public notice to the extent practicable. The notice must be posted on the district signboard and website.

**Regular meetings:** At the annual reorganizational meeting, the Board of Education will set the date, time, and place of regular semimonthly board meetings.

**Special meetings:** Special meetings of the board may be called by any member of the board. Public notice of such meetings will be given not less than 24 hours before the time fixed for the meeting except in cases of emergency. The notice should state the specific matter or matters to be presented for consideration.

**Public participation at board meetings:** Recognizing its responsibility for proper governance of the schools and respect for district residents, the board usually schedules two public comment sessions. Individuals are expected to give their name, address, and affiliation to the district and are each limited to 3 minutes. The president or a designee will keep track of time. The president will be responsible for recognizing speakers.

**Executive sessions:** The BCSD Policy Manual (policy 2330) states as follows:

The Board of Education may hold executive sessions at which only the members of the Board or persons invited by the Board shall be present. However, the executive session is only available for the purpose of discussion, and except as the law allows, formal action must be taken in an open session.

Executive sessions can be requested by any member of the board or the Superintendent of Schools.

A Board member must make a motion during an open meeting to convene in executive session. Upon a majority vote of its members, the Board may convene in executive session at a place which the Board President or said members may designate within the district to discuss the subjects enumerated below. Matters which may be considered in executive session are:

1. Matters which will imperil the public safety if disclosed;
2. Any matter which may disclose the identity of a law enforcement agent or informer;
3. Information relating to current or future investigation or prosecution of a criminal offense which would imperil law enforcement if disclosed;
4. Discussions regarding proposed, pending, or current litigation;
5. Collective negotiations pursuant to Article 14 of the Civil Service Law (the Taylor Law);
6. The medical, financial, credit, or employment history of a particular person or corporation, or matters leading to the appointment, employment, promotion, demotion, discipline, suspension, dismissal, or removal of a particular person or corporation;
7. The preparation, grading, or administration of examinations; and
8. The proposed acquisition, sale, or lease of real property or the proposed acquisition of securities, or sale or exchange of securities, but only when publicly would substantially affect the value thereof.

The Board may not take action in executive session except to vote on disciplinary charges against a tenured teacher.

Pursuant to the Federal Educational Records Privacy Act (FERPA), discussions about individual students or the disclosure of a student record that would lead to the identification of a specific student, shall be held in executive session. The board must consider the following matters in executive session:

1. Probable cause to bring disciplinary charges against an employee; and
2. Findings or placements of students by the Committee on Special Education.

Minutes shall be taken at executive sessions of any action that is taken by a formal vote and should consist of a record or summary of the final determination of such action and the date and vote thereon, provided, however, that such summary shall not include any matter which is not required to be made public by the Freedom of Information Law. Minutes taken shall be available to the public within a reasonable amount of time from the date of the executive session.

### **Listening: A Survival Skill for Board Members**

For members of a school board, good listening habits can save money, promote solid relationships, and foster effective decision making. Here are some tips:

- **Take notes.** Writing down what you hear can improve your chances of learning, but beware that too much note taking can interfere and can disturb the speaker.
- **Control your emotions.** Reserve judgment and listen to the full story before you respond.
- **Question carefully.** Questioning can help break deadlocks, introduce new ideas, clarify points, improve rapport, and enhance understanding. However, beware the perception of your questions to the public.
- **Concentrate on the speaker.** Look directly at the speaker and focus on the message, even though you think you already know what it is. Don't interrupt or permit unnecessary interruptions or distractions.
- **Listen responsively.** Let the person speaking know that you are hearing what they say by nodding, restating main points, and reaching agreement as to what has been said.
- **Evaluate what you hear.** Review mentally the key points and then question to validate your conclusion. Listen between the lines for what isn't said.
- **Keep track of what you hear.** Try cataloguing what you hear, including compliments, complaints, and questions.

## **The Most Difficult Thing to Learn...**

Experienced board members from across the nation were asked to identify the most difficult lesson they had to learn about board service. Here's what they said most often:

- Determining your function on the board and how to accomplish it effectively.
- That no matter what you think you know about board service when you first com on the board, you still have a lot to learn.
- Learning to acknowledge publicly that you have no power and authority as an individual board member and that only the board as a whole can make policies and decisions for the school district.
- Recognizing the difference between setting policy (the board's job) and administering the schools (the superintendent's job).
- That you must think deeply and sometimes accept board decisions that are contrary to your own beliefs.
- That you must represent all the students. Your decision must be made in the interest of the total school system and not made solely for special groups or interests.
- Learning how to respond appropriately to the complaints of citizens, school administrators, and other staff.
- That change comes slowly.
- That you can't solve everyone's problems by yourself.
- That boardsmanship means being able to hold the minority viewpoint when voting on an issue, then openly supporting the majority in your community.
- Discovering how schools are funded.
- That board service is more than you expected it to be.

### **Additional Resources**

New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA)  
24 Century Hill Drive, Suite 200  
Latham, New York 12110-2125  
Tel: (518) 783-0200  
Fax: (518) 783-0211  
Email: [info@nyssba.org](mailto:info@nyssba.org)  
[www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)

Capital District School Boards Association (CAPSBA)  
c/o Niskayuna Central School District  
1239 Van Antwerp Road  
Niskayuna, New York 12309  
Tel: (518) 377-4666  
Email: [jms125@hotmail.com](mailto:jms125@hotmail.com)  
[www.capsba.net](http://www.capsba.net)

National School Boards Association (NSBA)  
1680 Duke Street  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314  
Tel: (703) 838-6722  
Fax: (703) 683-7590  
Email: [info@nsba.org](mailto:info@nsba.org)  
[www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

Questar III BOCES  
10 Empire State Boulevard  
Castleton, New York 12033  
Tel: (518) 477 -8771  
Fax: (518) 477-9833  
[www.questar.org](http://www.questar.org)

New York State Education Department (SED)  
Education Building  
Albany, New York 12234  
Tel: (518) 474-3852  
[www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov)  
[www.engageny.org](http://www.engageny.org)

## 5. List of Enclosures

1. Glossary of terms
2. Acronym dictionary
3. Committee Handbook
  - a. Explain different committees and time requirements
4. Curriculum Guide
5. Organizational Chart
  - a. [www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/district/Policies/OrganizationalChart.pdf](http://www.brittonkill.k12.ny.us/district/Policies/OrganizationalChart.pdf)
    - i. Include names under titles
6. Sample agenda/minutes
7. Board goals
8. District goals
9. Report Card
10. BOE Calendar (one sheet)
11. BCSD by the numbers
  - a. Student Enrollment by grade level and building
  - b. District Employees (Directory)
    - i. Teachers
    - ii. Administration
    - iii. Support Staff
    - iv. CSEA (Transportation, Cafeteria, Building & Grounds, Custodial)
  - c. Budget numbers
    - i. Total budget
    - ii. General Break down as presented to voters
12. Board-specific policies (§1 of Policies)
  - a. Code of ethics
  - b. Visitation of School District
13. Copies of Contracts
  - a. Superintendent
  - b. Assistant Superintendent for Business
  - c. Brittonkill Teachers Association
  - d. Administrators Association
  - e. Civil Service Employees Association
  - f. Management/Confidential
  - g. Copies of Memorandum of Agreement(s) and Memorandum or Understanding(s) for each unit