

SCHOOL BOARD POWERS AND PLANNING

BY AMY KLARUP

The workings of a school district can appear mysterious to the uninitiated. School boards most often appear in the public eye when they make a controversial decision or take a position on something of a political nature, like a ballot measure or federal mandate.

In its most rudimentary function, a school board sets a school district's budget, chooses its superintendent and sets policy, but local school board members say there's a lot more to it than that.

"We're kind of the eyes and ears in the community," says Laurie Adams, a member of the Springfield School Board. "I feel like, in a district of 11,000 kids, you need as many eyes as possible out there watching and seeing what's going on."

The Springfield School District has five school board members, but many districts have seven, like Eugene School District 4J. Board members are elected by their constituents and typically serve four-year terms. Most small-district board members are not paid, according to the National School Boards Association.

School board members field questions from the public and keep apprised of conversations happening within the district. They typically meet every other week during the school year.

"Class size, class size, class size," says 4J board chair Mary Walston when asked what issue she's recently heard about from the 4J community. "We all know class sizes are too large. We're trying to chip away at it, but we didn't get here overnight, so we can't get out of it overnight."

Walston says part of being a school board member involves "having some thick skin" and acknowledging that not everyone in the community will agree with the

board's choices. It also involves a hefty time commitment, she says.

"I think last week I had something every night connected to the school board," Walston says. "Part of our role is to be advocates and sponsors and boosters of public education, and it's important to show up at different school events."

Since public schools fall under local, state and federal jurisdiction, sometimes school boards get blamed for problems they are unable to fix.

"Much of our budget comes from the state, and we're limited in our ability to raise any type of revenue," Walston says.

She adds that some policies are mandated at the state or federal level, meaning a local school district doesn't have the power to change that policy.

"There's often federal money involved in our nutrition program, so if we get commodity dollars from the federal government, we have to provide so many vegetables and fruits," Walston says. "We do it a certain way because we're driven by federal requirements."

School boards can play a role in advocating for students by making statements, speaking to legislators and communicating the needs of their school district.

The Springfield School Board earlier this year took a position on the Smarter Balanced standardized test, recommending that parents opt their children out of the test.

"We felt that it wasn't good for our kids to be taking that test," Adams explains, adding that the Springfield School Board has also traveled to Washington, D.C., to speak with legislators and advocate for more education funding.

Walston says the 4J board has played a similar role in lobbying for increased funds, especially during Oregon's legislative sessions.

"We'll be up in Salem in February talking to our Legislature to express our concerns about funding for schools," she says.

School boards can offer a dose of realism to the legislative process, Walston adds.

"We advocate for no unfunded mandates," she explains. "The ideas can be great, but in Salem, it's theory. In 4J, it's reality."

School boards are responsible for hiring a superintendent, setting the district budget and making policy, but they don't have control over everything that happens in a school district –

**LARGER FUNDING DECISIONS
ARE OFTEN MADE AT THE
STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL.**

Adams tells a story about a parent who contacted her with a complaint about her son's individual education plan. Adams couldn't do anything as a board member, she explains, but she did reach out to the superintendent, who was able to deal with the problem.

"We can't handle things at that level, and that's not our job," Adams says. "But we can get it to where it needs to go." School boards also hear complaints about funding.

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