

October 2023 Op-Ed

Local government is the most accessible level of government. It makes communities strong and resilient through shared involvement. To understand the impact of local government, the League of Women Voters of Centre County (LWVCC) has provided a four-part series about local offices. This final installment focuses on school board directors.

The League of Women Voters of Centre County thanks the PA School Board Association for the following information from their website <https://www.psba.org/>

Public education is fundamentally a state responsibility and enjoys special status under the state constitution: “The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education . . .” and “recognizes that school districts have the status of a unit of government.” The powers and duties of school board directors are outlined in the Pennsylvania Public School Code, written in 1949.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and State Board of Education oversees 500 public school districts, more than 170 public charter schools, public cyber charter schools, Career and Technology Centers/Vocational Technical schools, public Intermediate Units, education of youth in State Juvenile Correctional Institutions, Head Starts and publicly funded preschools, community colleges and libraries. The agencies administer the laws and regulations that control all aspects of the state's public education system.

There are school boards for each of the 500 public school districts. A school board is a legislative body of citizens called school directors, who are elected locally and who serve as the governing body of each public school district. School directors function as agents of the commonwealth. There are five school districts in Centre County: Bald Eagle Area, Bellefonte Area, Penns Valley Area, Philipsburg-Osceola Area, and State College Area. For the 2023 school year, there were 34 public schools in Centre County which served 14,283 students (there were 39 private schools, serving 2,523 private students).

Requirements for school board director: must be a U.S. citizen, at least 18 years old by election, resident of the school district for at least one year, be a registered voter and have no felony convictions. The Pennsylvania School Code requires nine school directors are elected for four-year overlapping terms, with five to be elected in one municipal election and four to be elected two years later in the next municipal election. This 5-4 rotation ensures continuity. There are no limits to the number of terms a member may serve. There is no salary.

School districts may adopt one of three types of election plans: at large, by region, or by a combination of regional and at-large seats. At large candidates must be residents of

the school district, but may live anywhere in the district and are chosen by all the voters in the district. Regional candidates are elected by the voters of their respective regions. In combined plans, all regions elect an equal number of school directors who reside in each region and who are elected only by the voters of their region, and some directors are elected at large by voters districtwide. Vacancies are filled by an appointment process conducted by the remaining board directors. If less than two years remain before the former director's term expires, a director appointed to fill that vacancy serves for the remainder of the term.

The focus of school board directors is to give children the best possible education at an affordable cost to the community. School boards have the duty to “establish, equip, furnish, and maintain” the schools in their district. School directors work with the school districts financials, approve policies including disciplinary policies, establish a strategic plan, set budgets and levy taxes for the district, establish curriculum requirements, set health and safety protocols, and hire or fire the superintendent and assistant superintendent. Despite the broad powers delegated to school boards, the work is still highly regulated from the state and federal levels, involving numerous mandates, restrictions and technicalities with which school boards must comply. A school board's authority is exercised through the collective decision making of the entire board.

The Municipal Election will be held on November 7, 2023. Make sure your voter registration is current at www.centrecountyvotes.gov.