

# Engaging with School Boards for Food Security



**School meals are one of the most important tools in the fight against childhood hunger and ensuring future student success.** Students who participate in school meals benefit from improved health outcomes, better test scores, fewer school absences, and less behavioral referrals. A school meal is a critical educational tool, just as critical as a desk or a textbook.

School meal programs are critical to Kansas kids' educational success and overall well-being, especially with childhood hunger rapidly increasing.

- 131,430 kids in Kansas – 1 in 5 – are food insecure and may not know where their next meal will come from.
- 50% of all Kansas students receive assistance through the free and reduced-price meal program.
- School lunches provide most students one-third of their daily recommended nutritional intake.

**School board members can be leaders as anti-hunger advocates.** Their role includes setting policy along with budget authority. All aspects of the school meals programs fall under the school board's purview, including which federal programs they participate in (such as the Community Eligibility Provision).

School boards set the unpaid meal fees policy, can determine if they will eliminate the reduced-price copay, and set the cost of each meal. They have the power to truly prioritize the needs of students, create a better future for our youth, and ensure they have resources necessary for success.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

School boards play a vital role as advocates for students and their schools. Members are responsible for planning the district's future, hiring superintendents, setting policies, and managing budgets to ensure high educational standards. They also engage with stakeholders, foster community understanding, and maintain accountability by focusing on student achievement and continuous improvement.

## TERMS AND ELECTIONS

In Kansas, school board elections are nonpartisan, so candidates do not run under any political party designation. Elections occur every two years in odd-numbered years. Elected school district boards can have seven members. Terms are staggered, so voters elect three or four members who serve four-year terms. Elections are held the first Tuesday in November. Newly elected school board members take office on the second Monday in January following the election.

## ENGAGING WITH SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES AND MEMBERS

Local elections are a great entry point for civic engagement. The objective is to work towards school boards that are more representative of the student body and responsive to the needs of students. Here are a few ideas to consider:

- Attend candidate forums or debates in your area
- Connect in person with candidates by setting a time to meet for coffee
- Research candidates platforms by reading candidate surveys, newspaper or radio interviews, and their websites
- Ask candidates specific questions about their stance on issues you care about and what initiatives they support
- Attend school board meetings
- Consider if your school board needs a candidate like you!

## ENGAGING WITH SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

As an elected official, school board members are accountable to the voters and to the community they serve. While school boards must balance a wide array of issues and priorities for their district, it is important that they hear from students, parents, educators, and community members as they make decisions.

- Educate and inform: Some members may not be aware of what is possible.
- Find your champion on the school board. Engage outside of large school board meetings.
- Email or contact your members to share what is important to you, but also show up in person. Don't allow your priorities to be dismissed or overlooked. Ensure that school board members give your matter the attention it deserves.
- Work on parallel paths with the superintendent and school board. Don't circumvent one or the other. While school boards typically set policy, the superintendent is then accountable to implement policies and programs.
- Maximize reach and impact by coordinating with local coalitions or active groups, when it is feasible. There may be other champions that support the same policy or program who could gather support and lend diverse voices to the discussion.
- Hold school board members accountable when needed.
- Show up to meetings, multiple times if needed.
- Share your appreciation of the school board's commitment to uplift students.

## PREPARING FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

- Review the district website. Know when and where your school board meets, and any meeting parameters.
- Understand how to get an item on the agenda, how to submit comments (written or oral), or how to ensure you are able to speak at the meeting
- Understand the context: Research past or current stances on issues or past votes.
- Understand your proposal and request.
- Make sure you use the right language in referring to programs or budget considerations.
- Consider the timing: District budgets are typically set in July and August for the coming school year.

## EFFECTIVE MESSAGING

- Concise and clear message
- Ensure your request is specific to your district.
- Identify your issue: Make it clear what you are asking the board to consider and how it impacts your school and students.
- Balance data and stories:
- Data can help show trends and demonstrate local impact
- Elevate voices from diverse perspectives, including students, families, and educators
- For emails: put all information in the body of the message, avoid multiple attachments
- May be helpful to have examples of similar policies implemented near you or among peers.



### Resources to Support Your Nutrition Advocacy with School Boards:

- ✓ One Year After the End of Universal School Meals: Kansas Schools and Families Feel the Burden of Meal Debt
- ✓ Kansas Appleseed Path to Universal Free Meals
- ✓ Child Eligibility Provisions Toolkit
- ✓ School Fees Policy/Unpaid Meal Debt Toolkit

### ***Kansas Appleseed can lend support in your nutrition advocacy efforts!***

Contact Jessica Kejr to discuss policy/program proposals or school board engagement strategies.

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