



# READY.SET. GOVERN!

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education earns the Leading Edge Award for its innovative approach to board development

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School board members are the representatives of their communities, and they come from many different backgrounds and professions. When they're elected, they can be unprepared for the complexity of school board governance. Training and onboarding are essential for new board members to participate fully in the governance process.

The Connecticut General Assembly in June 2023 recognized the importance of school board training by passing a new law that requires all first-time elected local or regional board members to participate in training within one year of taking office, and required the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to make training available.

CSDE tapped the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) to serve as the provider of the training program. It is designed to help new board members understand the roles and responsibilities of the governing bodies for school districts and the individuals who serve on them.

CABE earned the 2025 National School Boards Association (NSBA) Leading Edge Award for creating this professional development program for school board members: Ready. Set. Govern! This award recognizes state school board associations for programs that advance public education through coordinated advocacy, strategic partnerships, and essential support for local school boards.

"CABE's commitment to equipping school board members with high-quality professional development and leadership training exemplifies the power of collaboration between state agencies and education leaders," said NSBA Executive Director and CEO Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs.

"Their work sets a standard for supporting school boards in ways that directly benefit students, schools, and communities."

#### **A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION TO GOVERNANCE**

The objectives of CABE's partnership with CSDE was to deliver a robust professional development program that met the requirements of the legislation and reflected CABE's mission. Commissioner of Education Charlene Russell-Tucker stated that "the training is an intentional effort to ensure that every board member is prepared to navigate the complexities of educational leadership with a baseline knowledge and a shared understanding of their work."

The Department of Education wanted to ensure there were no financial barriers to school board participation in the Ready. Set. Govern! programs. It provides funding for all school boards to take advantage of the training.

The services provided include webinars and in-person sessions focused on board member roles and responsibilities, mentors for board chairpersons, and an updated board member handbook. Webinars enhance the professional development already offered by CABE and provide additional training on the topics of school budgets, financing, and the use of educational data. Four webinars were designed specifically for board chairpersons. The webinars are archived on the CABE website.

Ready. Set. Govern! is a layered approach to professional development. For new members stepping into a role with a steep learning curve, the program offers timely and accessible training that accelerates their readiness



to engage in board discussions and decision-making. The training sessions and webinars lay the groundwork for effective service. The in-person sessions are not one-size-fits-all. Instead, they are personalized to meet the needs of the board and its members.

The sessions are led by experienced school board members, superintendents, school business officials, and CABE staff. Topics include the legal duties of board members, ethical obligations, and the roles and responsibilities of the board.

Board members—new and veteran—often need support when dealing with the complexities of finance and budgeting. To provide this support, CABE partnered with the Connecticut Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) to produce five webinars on budget and finance. Topics included the board’s role in school finance; budget development and adoption, as well as the board’s oversight role; and best practices for financial oversight. Extensive resource links also were provided.

The recorded financial webinars are appreciated by

both new and more experienced board members. A board member commented, “We are in the throes of a challenging budget season as we work on recovering from the huge deficit of the 2024-25 budget. It was a great comfort to listen to the superintendents and financial officers who presented. They were articulate, competent, and informative.”

### **SUPPORT FOR BOARD CHAIRS**

Board chairs carry an especially critical responsibility, serving as the public face of their boards and facilitators of effective meetings and decision-making. Recognizing this, CABE offers a support system tailored to their leadership role.

#### **Webinars:**

The targeted series of webinars deepens their capacity and enables them to better guide their boards in setting direction and navigating challenges. All training is accessible and archived on the CABE website, creating an ongoing resource for continuous learning.

The webinars were valuable for new board chairs, while

providing an opportunity for experienced board chairs to share their leadership experiences. A board chair who presented at one of the webinars said, “We really appreciate the support we receive in so many ways from CABE, and it is nice to find ways to offer support to others.”

**Mentors:**

CABE contracted with former board leaders to create a cadre of 19 mentors to provide individualized leadership development, support sessions, and consultation to board chairs upon request. Mentors provide regular updates to inform CABE staff on local issues faced by boards. The mentees have found the support from in-person and virtual meetings to be very helpful. A board chair said, “CABE is a resource to make us more effective in our role.” Another board chair said, “My mentor’s counsel has been invaluable to me. He’s a great listener, asks smart questions, and offers useful insight and practical advice.”

**Listserv:**

CABE’s board chair email listserv enables board chairs to seek input from colleagues and CABE staff on a multitude of issues. Recent discussions included how to handle disruptions during public comment; superintendent search processes; field turf, track, and stadium lighting usage; the merits of asking for feedback from unions/union members/staff for the superintendent’s evaluation; how to handle financial oversight at board meetings; the best way to hold community listening sessions; student cellphone use; and board self-evaluation and goal-setting.

A board chair offered this comment about the listserv. “Having this ability to connect with fellow board chairs is such a great resource, and it helps to be able to share information, good practices, and more.”

**Monthly Zoom check-in:**

CABE offers a monthly board chair check-in via Zoom to enable board chairs to network and solve problems. CABE senior staff members participate in the calls to provide support and better understand local issues.

School security concerns came to the forefront in fall 2024, and board chairs requested more information on the topic. CABE designed a webinar, “School Threats—Best Practices to Address and Communicate with Your Constituencies.” It was designed to help board members and superintendents navigate these complex situations. Presenters included state Department of Education staff,

Connecticut Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection staff, and a school board attorney.

**INVESTING IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Feedback from board members who have participated in the professional development programs, supported through the state education department, has been overwhelmingly positive. Many have expressed gratitude for the opportunity to sharpen their leadership skills and understand their roles. A board member shared that the training sessions have provided them with a new perspective on governance and equity and have been instrumental in shaping policies to the benefit of their students.

An important element of the program is that the in-person sessions and webinars are open to all board members, not just new ones, so board members can participate together. The Iowa Association of Schools Boards’ Lighthouse Study research on effective school boards showed that boards of education that learn together as a team perform at higher levels and have a greater effect on student learning. Providing school boards with the option of receiving new board member training in-district, and for all board members, was highly effective in building a more cohesive team.

CABE’s collaboration with CSDE ensures that board members receive high-quality, relevant training aligned with state and national standards.

CABE recently presented a workshop to New England school board association leaders, highlighting the program’s impact. The strong interest from attendees suggests its potential for adoption by other state associations.

In addition to receiving the NSBA Leading Edge award, CABE also has been recognized by the New England Society of Association Executives for the Ready. Set. Govern! program.

The results are clear: New members emerge with a strong foundation, empowered to participate meaningfully and responsibly from the beginning of their terms. CABE’s leadership in delivering these services further establishes its role as the leading voice for public education in Connecticut.

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