

Guide to Defining Your Organization's Membership Model

There are five basic membership models that most SBAE partner organizations use, based on their programmatic and policy reform goals. This guide briefly covers how each works and the advantages and disadvantages of each. They do not necessarily have to be implemented in a linear progression, although it is natural to do so as an organization evolves. Contact SBAE any time for more information or help in implementing these models at info@sbaenetwork.org.

1. No Memberships

- a. Structure: Information and programs are displayed and distributed publicly and for free, often hosted on the organization's website.
- b. Advantages: Easy to implement, especially to get a new effort off the ground. Benefits school board members widely, including those who are not already on your radar. Wide flexibility to provide information related to campaigns and elections, regardless of tax status.
- c. Disadvantages: Not controlling access to resources allows unaligned school board members to use resources to promote harmful policies. Low sense of community among members, compared to other models. Difficult to establish and track metrics for engagement levels, number of school boards affected, etc.

2. Basic Contact List

- a. Structure: Information and programs are delivered to school board members as part of an informal network, affiliated with or created by your organization.
- b. Advantages: Can be organized with simple and cost-effective tools such as a mass email platform and spreadsheets. Allows for a degree of control over content. Very low cost.
- c. Disadvantages: Informality may be perceived as less polished. Expanding membership is generally limited to word of mouth campaigns. Difficult to scale up without automated processes or



significant dedicated staff. Introduces a basic membership metric but is less defined than those of more advanced membership models.

3. Unpaid Individual Memberships

- a. Structure: Members must take some form of action to join officially, such as completing a webform, signing up for a special email list, or making a verbal commitment. Some or all resources are shared only with members.
- b. Advantages: Allows for greater control of the distribution of resources. Low barrier to entry. Depending on intake processes, can be easy and inexpensive to implement.
- c. Disadvantages: May be perceived as less official than paid memberships. Less buy-in from members may lead to low levels of engagement. Defining what constitutes a member may be challenging. Does not present financial competition to the establishment school board association, but a similar level of infrastructure is required.

4. Paid Individual Memberships

- a. Structure: Sitting school board members pay a fee to officially join the organization. Some or all resources are offered only to members.
- b. Advantages: Perceived as more official than less advanced models. Allows for more sophisticated recruitment techniques, such as offering "freemium" resources. Resources are perceived as higher value. Members are incentivized to participate in programs and creates a strong sense of community. Allows the organization to apply with the state to become an officially recognized association or provider of required services (such as training). Creates an additional revenue stream. Lends itself to clear metrics of success. Allows for school board members in the minority to benefit from resources, if they don't have the votes to get the entire board to affiliate.
- c. Disadvantages: More challenging and expensive to implement than less advanced models. May require one or more nonprofit tax statuses, depending on the organization's activities and state law. Requires ability to accept membership dues, typically online, and track them accurately. Competes less directly with establishment school board association, compared to whole school board membership.

5. Whole School Board Memberships

- a. Structure: The school board as a whole votes to join your organization officially, often while disaffiliating from the establishment state school board association. Can be done in conjunction with individual paid memberships to allow members in the minority to benefit from resources.
- b. Advantages: Directly competes with and may divert resources from establishment state school board association. Allows the organization to provide state sanctioned services. Maximizes revenue. Creates the strongest sense of community and buy in among members. Adds an important organizational success metric.
- c. Disadvantages: Requires significant infrastructure to provide competitive services compared to establishment state school board association, possibly including legal aid and insurance. Most expensive and challenging to implement. Whole board membership is a cost to the district and may be politically difficult to get approved. May require multiple nonprofit tax statuses. Opens organization up to public scrutiny and sometimes unfriendly media attention.