

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

Barbara Sykes picked as Akron school board president, makes changes



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Key Points

The Akron school board has picked Barbara Sykes as its new president.

The board picked Rene Molenaar as its vice president.

Sykes has pledged to make board meetings shorter, more productive and more transparent.

The new leaders of the [Akron school board](#) have pledged to make the board meetings quicker, more productive and more transparent than the often divisive, hours-long meetings the board has known for more than a year.

With three [newly elected faces](#), the seven-member board unanimously picked [Barbara Sykes](#) as board president and Rene Molenaar as vice president during its first meeting of the year on Jan. 12.

Sykes, a school board member since 2024 who unsuccessfully [sought the president appointment](#) a year ago, was sworn in as president by Akron Municipal Court Judge David Hamilton, with her husband of 50 years, former state Sen. Vernon Sykes, and daughter U.S. Rep. Emilia Sykes by her side.

She then administered the oath of office to Molenaar, who was joined by her husband, Barret, and two children, Langdon and Ivar, who are both students at Akron Public Schools.

After accepting the board president's gavel, Sykes thanked many of the people gathered in the packed board room, including nonprofit, political and community leaders, local and state elected officials, current and former board members, union leaders and district employees and families.

"I pledge to listen to your concerns, your ideas, your aspirations," Sykes said. "I pledge to lead with integrity, transparency and focus on what is best for our students."

Sykes, a former state representative and Akron council member, pledged to work with Superintendent Mary Outley to promote policies that foster innovative teaching, support educators and help the district face the challenges ahead.

Barbara Sykes makes immediate changes

Sykes' impact on the board meeting was immediate.

She changed the format of the meeting by eliminating sections previously called "board member reflections" and the "president's report" where members often would share some of the school-related events they attended and other information. Board members can now share information during the "new business" section of the agenda, Sykes said.

She also reduced the number of times board members vote. Previously, board members would review agenda items, such as resolutions, employee hires, transfers, resignations and retirements and contracts, by department or employee category. The board will now use a single vote to approve those types of agenda items, unless a member asks to pull a specific item off the consent agenda.

Sykes has previously said she believes board members should thoroughly discuss issues during their committee meetings and not wait until the general board meetings.

Sykes also added two committees – policy committee and rules committee – to the board’s four existing committees that include finance and capital management, instructional policy and student achievement, legal and contracts and student success celebration committee.

The policy committee will review proposed new and revised policies, while the rules committee will manage the school board's agenda and review which legislation is ready to go to the full board for a vote. A list of when each committee will meet will be posted on the school board’s website at akronschools.com/district/board-of-education.

Sykes also stopped enforcing the board’s three-minute limit for speakers to address the board. Sykes said speakers should aim to keep their comments within three minutes – and the treasurer will signal when they have a minute left – but she will not stop a speaker as soon as the time expires.

She also pledged to keep executive sessions, which are closed-door sessions to discuss certain issues, to less than an hour, or at least provide updates to meeting attendees and online watchers if the closed-door sessions are expected to extend longer than an hour.

The board will meet on the second and fourth Mondays of each month, except in May and December when the board will meet on May 11, May 26, Dec. 7 and Dec. 21 to avoid the holidays.

Here's which school board member represents your school cluster

School board members have been appointed to represent the following [school clusters](#):

East cluster: Summer Hall

Garfield cluster: Gregory Harrison

Firestone cluster: Nathan Jarosz

North cluster: Karmaya Kelly

Ellet cluster: Phil Montgomery

Specialty cluster: Rene Molenaar

Buchtel cluster: Barbara Sykes

This story has been updated with additional information.

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