



Brian Battle at Barrington 220 district offices.

Each year, the Barrington Area Development Council selects a local resident who has demonstrated exemplary leadership and made significant contributions to the greater Barrington area. Brian Battle, whose personal passions include his family, local education, and baseball, is the BADC 2020 Citizen of the Year. We spoke with Brian to learn more about his life and insights on leading Barrington 220.

Please share highlights of your personal life.

I grew up in Bridgeview, located in Chicago's Southwest Suburbs, and attended St. Laurence High School. I was the odd ball South Side Cubs fan, and my uncles never allowed my Mom to forget it. I have a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Bradley University in Peoria, and a Master's

in Business Administration from Harvard Business School. My wife Kathleen and I have lived in Barrington since 1991. Kathleen and I grew up in Bridgeview, attended the same grade school, and our families were friends. We re-connected after college and were married in 1985. We have two children, Brendan, and Delaney, who are both proud graduates of Lines, Station, and Barrington High School.

What have been your local activities?

I coached youth baseball at BYB&S for six years and served on the BYB&S Board for two years. I served on Barrington's Sesquicentennial Committee as well as the Barrington 220 School Board from 2003 through 2019. I served eight years on the Board of ED-RED, an educational advocacy group serving the Northwest Suburbs; I served as

the Board President for two years. I co-authored the Evidence-based Funding Formula that was voted into law and currently serves as the funding mechanism for schools in the State of Illinois.

Tell us about your career.

I develop technologies in the renewable energy sector. I am the COO of Beacon Power, Inc. a manufacturer of energy storage systems and am also developing opportunities in wastewater technologies and waste-to-energy systems. Previously, I have served as the CEO of five companies and started my career working for General Motors.

Why did you run for School Board?

I ran for the School Board after co-chairing a community-based group that was successful in advocating the passage of a school referendum. My

mother was an educator, and I am interested in education and finance. Back in 2003, our District was on the State's financial watch list, and had to borrow money each Spring to make its payroll. I was interested in serving on the Board to improve the District's financial management and create a robust educational experience for the community's children. I was elected to four full terms, with my last year of Board service being completed in 2019. I was elected to become Board President in 2007 and served in that capacity for 12 years.

What is the commitment to running a school board for a big district like Barrington 220 while also being a parent, and managing your career?

Great question. Barrington 220 is considered a large unit district (pre-k—12). The commitment for School Board members of large unit districts is often greater than that of smaller districts. Most Barrington School Board members dedicate about 20-40 hours per month to their 220 responsibilities. That level of commitment can increase substantially during periods of increased community engagement or labor contract negotiations. That level of commitment requires a very understanding spouse and family. Often, I had to bring my children with me to meetings. I thank Kathleen, Brendan, and Delaney for supporting my School Board service. Most of my business colleagues were supportive of working around School Board commitments, but they were more understanding of working around youth baseball games!

What is the role of the school board with taxpayers?

A simple question with a complicated answer. It is easy to state that the role of the School Board is to make sure that taxpayer funds are spent wisely and efficiently. But taxpayers are not all the same. Our community is composed of many distinct stakeholder groups, each with a slightly different vision of education objectives and financial accountability. Each Board strives to find a constructive balance of these differing visions, being informed by all community members.

Our elected School Board acts as a bridge between taxpayers and the educational professionals in the District. Sometimes the Board needs to take time to clarify the community's expectations and priorities to our educators. Other times, the Board needs to clarify educational programs and objectives to taxpayers. A successful Board will be adept at both types of communication.

What is the role with teacher's unions?

Illinois state law places the responsibility of negotiating teacher's contract with the members of the School Board. These negotiations must also comply with federal and state laws governing collective bargaining. A Board must determine the educational objectives and financial constraints of each contract negotiation. The negotiations that I participated in were always constructive. Sometimes the conversation would get tense and the rhetoric heated, but it always concluded with a contract that advanced our educational program and lived within the funds provided by our community's taxpayers. During my service, I felt that the relationship between the Board, teachers, administrators, and support personnel was strengthened, allowing for more constructive collective bargaining efforts.



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What is the biggest misconception about the role of a school board?

The biggest misconception is that the School Board can help in changing grades or disciplinary actions. The School Board does not intervene in classroom matters, and parents and students are always directed to work with the appropriate teachers and principals. The second biggest misconception is that School Board members are paid handsomely. School Board members are not paid.

When you first started serving on the school board in 2003, what were the main challenges before you?

In 2003, Barrington 220 was experiencing both financial and educational challenges. Financially, 220 was a regular occupant on the State’s Financial Watch list for the Districts with the weakest financial positions. Each Spring, 220 had to borrow funds for payroll before June tax receipts. The referenda approved in 2002 helped. For the next 5-6 years, the Board had the discipline to build up the District’s fund balance to 20-30% of annual operating expenses. We were one of the first Illinois School Districts to author and adopt a Fund Balance Policy that required saving before spending. We conducted a complete review of the District’s financial policies leading to our first AAA bond rating. We still maintain that rating today. I am proud of that first Board I served with for the discipline it took to achieve the financial stability we enjoy today.

Academically, 220 educates students in pre-k—12. But in 2003, we did not articulate our curriculum as well as we could. As an example, the District had eight elementary buildings and probably 12 different elementary math programs, none being consistent with the math programs at the middle schools, which were not aligned with the math programs at the High School. The Board engaged in a long-term effort to align our curriculum for a consistent pre-K through 12 experience for the students. I was proud to work with my Board colleagues and Superintendents Mary Hermann, Tom Leonard, and Brian Harris on this effort that continues to evolve today.

What is the role of the school board versus that of the superintendent? Who works for whom?

Illinois state law is clear that the Superintendent works for the Board of Education. In fact, all employee hires must be approved by the Board. Most School Boards delegate the responsibility

of running the schools to the Superintendent. A healthy relationship between the Board and Superintendent is vital for any successful School District. Boards and Superintendents with good working relationships will continuously discuss the boundaries of Board work and Superintendent work.

You’ve said it’s important to listen honestly and not emotionally, and to embrace different opinions.

An early lesson that every School Board member learns is to not accept as truth everything that is told to you. While it is important to listen to all, it is more important to ask the right questions to determine the facts needed to make a Board decision. I always tried to establish a culture that emphasized a willingness to listen to all voices, and then encourage the Board to ask questions and seek data to inform our response and decisions.

During Board deliberations, it is important to include the perspectives of all our friends and neighbors, recognizing that these opinions will often conflict with each other. It is very rare that Board decisions will receive universal support. Good Board governance requires that Board decisions should be made with an awareness of the dissenting views within our community, and that those views are given proper consideration at the Board table.

You’ve said there is no one single way to “do school” and that students all find their strengths at different ages, and times. How has the pandemic informed Barrington 220 on teaching models going forward?

This is a key question for our Barrington 220 community. Barrington 220 has embraced different educational delivery models for many years. Students’ learning styles are diverse, and flexible education models are critical to effective education for all. The introduction of instructional technology and 1:1 devices has forced everyone in education to design an education model that is relevant to all students in 2020 and beyond.

The changes brought to us by the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated our learning on the proper role of remote and hybrid learning models. I expect there will be a time for reflection by all when the 20-21 school year ends.

The District will have a new Superintendent for the ‘21-’22 school year. It is my sincere hope that the community will join with the new Superintendent in crafting the community’s next long-term

strategic plan. We have a great opportunity ahead of us.

What will you remember about your life here in Barrington, and 16 years of school board service—and your continuing service now in support of the upcoming board elections—in the years ahead?

I have great memories of coaching youth baseball with my friend Todd Bellis. During a trip to play a tournament in Cooperstown, New York, the coaches bunked with the 12-year-old players in a barracks-style room. Everyone should have the experience of rooming with a group of 12-year-old boys. I think that was the most I have ever laughed in one week.

Barrington 220 has eight neighborhood elementary schools, and each one has a distinct personality. I attended many meetings of the Barrington Area Council of Governments (BACOG), and each village has a distinct personality. I will always remember how the unique personalities of the Barrington 220 community would unify.

I will remember the three Barrington 220 Superintendents I worked with: Dr. Mary Hermann, Dr. Tom Leonard, and Dr. Brian Harris. While each has a distinct style, they all cared deeply for education and our community. I learned important lessons from them. The School board members who I worked with had a significant impact on me. I learned so much from them, and they have provided a richer texture to my life. I am profoundly thankful for them.

My fondest memories of Barrington originate from the 16 graduation ceremonies I participated in. I love graduation night. It is festive. Everyone is happy. Students and parents come together to celebrate a significant achievement and a rite of passage. As parents, we can see how the children in our community have grown up. I would always be amazed how the children I knew in elementary school would walk across the stage as young adults, ready to start the next chapter of their lives. I will always value the memories of handing a diploma to my two children, as well as their friends, and the children of my friends. It is a reminder that Kathleen and I are lucky that our children were raised in Barrington. 

Barrington 220 will vote in April 2021 for new School Board members. To learn about Brian Battle’s top 10 most important skills for School Board members, turn to page 71.