



Policymaking is the Work of School Boards

Policymaking is one of a school board's most important duties. Through policymaking, a school board defines its vision for the district, the structure for accomplishing its goal — including the allocation of resources, and the system of accountability for achieving those goals. Policies establish a legal record and standard of conduct for the school district.

How a school board approaches its policymaking responsibility is a strong indicator of whether it is an effective board in a high-achieving district. According to the Center on Public Education, “Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement. In interviews with hundreds of board members and staff across districts, researchers ... found that high-performing boards focused on establishing a vision supported by policies that targeted student achievement.”

What kinds of decisions is your board making at board meetings? Are you focused on making policy-level decisions that affect student learning? If you are not, you may very well be focused instead on operational issues and the types of decisions that should be left to the individuals responsible for implementing board policies.

Good policymaking takes work.

With all of the demands facing school districts, boards may be tempted to seek out quick fixes by purchasing ready-made policy manuals or simply borrowing policies written by other school districts. Be careful. Policymaking is the school board equivalent of passing legislation. School boards, administrators and staff have a legal obligation to follow the policies adopted by the board, which will not happen if those policies are not well understood by all. The courts will require school districts to comply with their policies and will hold those who fail to do so accountable.

Purchased policy manuals and sample policies can be a useful starting point in the policymaking process. Boards might use sample policies as the basis for a discussion of what works best in their school district. There is nothing wrong with basing your policies on samples — provided that you understand the policies that you are adopting and have determined that they are the best choice for your district. But adoption of policies written by others without careful review is an abdication of a school board's authority. Just as it's not appropriate for a state legislature to adopt cookie-cutter legislation that doesn't uniquely address the individual state's circumstances and legal precedents, school boards should cautiously approach policy templates

to ensure that the final policy reflects the values of the school district and its community.

Policies are not intended to be approved and sit on a shelf. You are never “done” with policymaking. It is a continuous-improvement, goal-setting process. Policies are the governance framework for the district. They provide direction to administration and staff on the day-to-day operation of the district, guide the board in its adoption of a district budget and its allocation of resources, and form the basis for the board's evaluation of the district administrator and itself.

State and federal laws change frequently and board policies must be reviewed and modified to keep current with those new laws. Review of existing policies and district efforts to achieve board goals for student achievement on a continuing basis is necessary. Boards must regularly ascertain if policies are being implemented as intended and if those policies continue to be right for the district. Again, policies are legal documents and the courts can hold districts liable for their implementation.

How does your board approach its policymaking responsibility? The WASB stands ready to assist you in your policymaking process to ensure that you are a high-performing board focused on student achievement. ■

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