

# Developing and Adopting School Board Policy

*In recent years, developing education policy has been commonly regarded as the most important function of local school boards. This chapter shows how, through their policymaking role, school boards make important decisions on the education matters the state has left to their discretion.*

*Terms found in this section, such as policy, are defined within the context of the discussion.*

## What is Policy?

Let's consider the term *policy* and distinguish between a policy, a *procedure*, and a *regulation*, because these terms are often confused. Policies are variously defined as:

- broad guidelines established for effectively operating the school system.
- statements reflecting the principles that guide staff as they carry out their duties.
- principles that chart a course of action for the superintendent and define the limits within which he or she can exercise judgment.
- statements of principle intended to promote progress toward the school district's goals.

Concisely stated, a policy is a general statement the school board makes to indicate a desired condition, direction, or belief. The policy may also explain the reasons behind it.

Procedures are the methods or steps for carrying out a policy in accordance with its letter and spirit. Procedures are *specific* rather than general, translating the basic policy into action by designating *how*, *by whom*, *where*, and *when* certain actions are to be carried out or limited.

Procedures may be contained within a policy or developed by administrators to put policy into practice. Because procedures are based on policies, they must be consistent with them. The board should be sure to examine and approve all procedures to ensure they accurately express the intention of the policies they're based upon.

Regulations, which stem from state statute or federal law, are issued by ADE to guide, mandate, or limit school district operations. Regulations may identify procedures, but most often ADE describes procedures in the directives it issues to school districts. Local boards adopt policies that are consistent with the law and the related ADE mandates.

ADE has begun to issue its regulations under the heading of *rules* and to phase out the term *regulations*. While ADE prefers the “rules” terminology, many school districts continue to favor “regulations.” Both of these terms are acceptable, as they have the same purpose and weight.

### Why Have Policies?

A well prepared set of written policies is extremely valuable in clarifying school operations, deepening understanding, promoting good will, providing direction, and establishing control and efficiency. Moreover, in relation to district employees, state law mandates that every district develop personnel policies according to specific guidelines, as explained later in this chapter.

According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), written policy statements help to:

- clarify roles and responsibilities, which promotes positive working relationships among the board, superintendent, and staff, as well as within the staff itself.
- foster more consistent decisions, thus improving understanding and morale.
- save the board time, money, and effort by settling questions that might otherwise repeatedly surface.
- improve public relations, because written policies are reassuring evidence of responsible board action and the reasons behind it.
- reduce pressures on the board and prevent criticism when decisions are based on established policy rather than expediency or pleas for favoritism.
- give the board a sense of direction based upon a solid policy foundation.
- promote continuity of action in the district, which is especially important when board members and administrators change.
- facilitate orderly review of the board’s practices. Comparing past board action with present situations, the board can modify or adopt policies to keep abreast of new conditions.
- ensure a better informed board and staff.
- speed the orientation of newcomers.

NSBA also points out that the process of developing policy is a part of healthy board operations, because it helps members sort out their differences long before angry citizens have “gathered at ringside.” As policies are considered, differing views surface for contemplation and reconciliation. Without ongoing policy development, some significant differences among members are likely to remain buried until the board encounters an issue that uncovers substantial disagreement. Then the board may find itself sharply divided and forced to thrash through matters in the public arena.

## Developing Policy

Whether written or unwritten, consistent or inconsistent, policies are either implied or clearly defined by board action. That's because virtually every action of the board tends to have some affect on policy, either confirming established policy, modifying or reversing it, or establishing new policy.

School board policy can be prompted in numerous ways, including:

- recommendations from the superintendent.
- positive or negative experiences in the school district.
- action taken by the board on an important problem or issue.
- study and long-range planning that involves the board, superintendent, teachers, student groups, and citizens' committees.
- suggestions from a personnel policies committee.
- negotiations with employees' representatives.
- recommendations from the ASBA Model Policy Service.

AASA and NSBA suggest that boards consider the following to help shape their policies:

- Identify problems to resolve, especially those that recur and demand a great deal of attention.
- Review past minutes to see what problems have surfaced, how earlier boards dealt with them, and what policies might be indicated by those actions.
- Study the policies of other boards as a source of ideas for policies that can be adapted to local needs.
- Check established practices and traditions as a basis for formalized statements of policy.
- Ask for suggestions from staff, students, and citizens, especially when policy areas affect any or all of those groups.
- Consult the studies and writings of others, such as those found in numerous articles on policy development in professional magazines.

Additionally, boards can use the ASBA Model Policy Service that is described later in the chapter.

Regardless of how the board approaches it, policymaking takes a great deal of time. The process requires patience and careful consideration from all those involved, as haste and snap judgments often prove to be counterproductive. People tend to support what they help create, so those who will be affected by policies should have input into crafting them. Moreover, diverse perspectives and collective wisdom tend to produce more effective policies that are better understood, accepted, and followed.

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### Policy Form and Content

What to include in policies is a decision each board must make based on the characteristics of the individual school district. Board policies will vary somewhat from district to district due to differences in size, student populations, and unique needs, problems, and resources.

All school districts need to establish policies addressing these major categories:

- organization of the school district.
- school board operations.
- general school administration.
- financial management.
- facilities.
- personnel.
- instructional philosophy and programs.
- students, including discipline, grading, attendance, and graduation requirements.
- internal and external communications.
- parent involvement and volunteer programs.
- relations with other education agencies and organizations.

As they determine the content of various policy areas, boards must remember that policies set forth fundamental principles of control, management, and operation. And, while policies can contain procedures, they should not include the details of management. Such details may be developed separately as administrative procedures or directives that are within the framework of board policies and subject to board approval.

Formatting and organizing policies into a manual will make them easy to catalog, access, and review. Below are some suggestions for creating a user-friendly policy manual, whether published on paper or electronically, that is, online or digitally on a computer disc.

- To make changes easy, keep policies in a loose-leaf notebook or maintain them electronically.
- In paper copies, use paper of sufficient weight to withstand repeated reference.
- Include a table of contents.
- Organize the manual according to a system that makes topics easy to locate and permits flexibility in changing the contents.
- Use indexing to separate and identify each section.
- Identify the topic of each page with a general heading and appropriate index number.
- Indicate the date the board adopted each policy and the date of any amendments.
- Limit topics to their own page or pages for ease in locating and changing items.
- Include a reference to any laws or ADE rules that prompt a policy.

## Personnel Policies

Arkansas law requires each public school district in the state to have a set of written personnel policies for all of its employees. The legislature hasn't officially defined *personnel policy*, but a workable definition is *the guidelines to be followed by employees in carrying out their work*. By law, personnel policies include the district's salary schedule.

If a district doesn't officially recognize a group, such as a union, that represents a majority of the teachers for the purpose of negotiating personnel policies (and most of them don't), then that district must have a personnel policies committee, commonly referred to as the PPC.

The composition and function of this group are specified by law. The PPC elects a chair and a secretary and develops a calendar of meetings. Minutes of those meetings must be distributed to the school board and posted in every district building. This committee doesn't have the power to veto a personnel policy, but it can communicate its position on proposed and existing policies to the board and also suggest changes in them.

Both the PPC and the school board can propose new or amended personnel policies. A policy originating with the board must be referred to the PPC, and the committee chair or designee can address the board about the committee's views on the proposed policy. Once the PPC has discussed a proposed policy with the board, the board must either accept, reject, or refer the policy back to the committee by the next regular board meeting.

The law guarantees that employees who are classified (that is, not licensed educators) must also have written personnel policies. They are to have a *classified* or *non-certified* personnel policies committee, unless they are represented by a board-recognized group that negotiates for them. The law prescribes the composition and function of this committee, giving it the option of proposing policies to the board.

Personnel policies are considered terms of personnel contracts, so they're binding on both the school district and the employees. Every year, the current personnel policies must be distributed to all new employees and also must be available at each building for employees to review.

School boards can change personnel policies during the year, but unless a majority of employees vote to be bound immediately by the altered policy, the change won't take effect until the following fiscal year. This vote must be conducted by the personnel policies committees according to prescribed law. No personnel policy can be considered properly adopted unless the legal requirements have been followed.

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### **Review and Evaluate Policies**

The board needs to continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its policies in relation to the district's progress toward its goals. Monitoring will reveal the extent to which policies are being followed, and evaluation will show how well policies are promoting achievement of the goals. Identifying the strong and weak points of the school system and the policies that are to support it will indicate where changes are needed and establish a basis for future action.

The superintendent and professional staff are responsible for helping their board evaluate policies in relation to the district's programs and operations. Staff also must alert the board to changing circumstances, such as new issues, legislation, or court decisions that make existing policies obsolete. As programs or functions are added and old ones modified or deleted, corresponding changes in board policy may be warranted.

To be of any value, policies must be communicated, understood, and used. To be used, they must be consistent with current needs and aims. Thus it is imperative for each board, in cooperation with staff, to systematically review and update policy statements.

### **The ASBA Model Policy Service**

The need for keeping board policies current and relative to developments in education is crucial, challenging, and time consuming. To meet that need, ASBA has developed a Model Policy Service and a Model Policy Manual.

ASBA's Model Policy Manual contains samples of all the policies a district must have, as well as others that, while not required by law, we recommend for prudent operation of the district. ASBA has coordinated its staff's special knowledge of school law, district operations, and policy writing into a generic manual that meets the basic needs of all districts. Yet the model policies allow for flexibility so a district can customize them according to local needs and preferences.

After the close of each legislative session, ASBA reviews all new laws pertaining to public education. Based on these laws, we formulate sample policies that specifically relate to the new laws. Then we review and revise the Model Policy Manual accordingly and distribute it to all subscribers. Any time that court rulings or changes in state and federal laws or ADE directives trigger the need for new or revised local policies, ASBA furnishes subscribers those updates.

ASBA offers its Model Policy Service at one reasonable price for each subscribing district, making it a wise investment of public dollars. The annual fee is contractually renewable, and the service is ongoing as long as the district subscribes to the program.