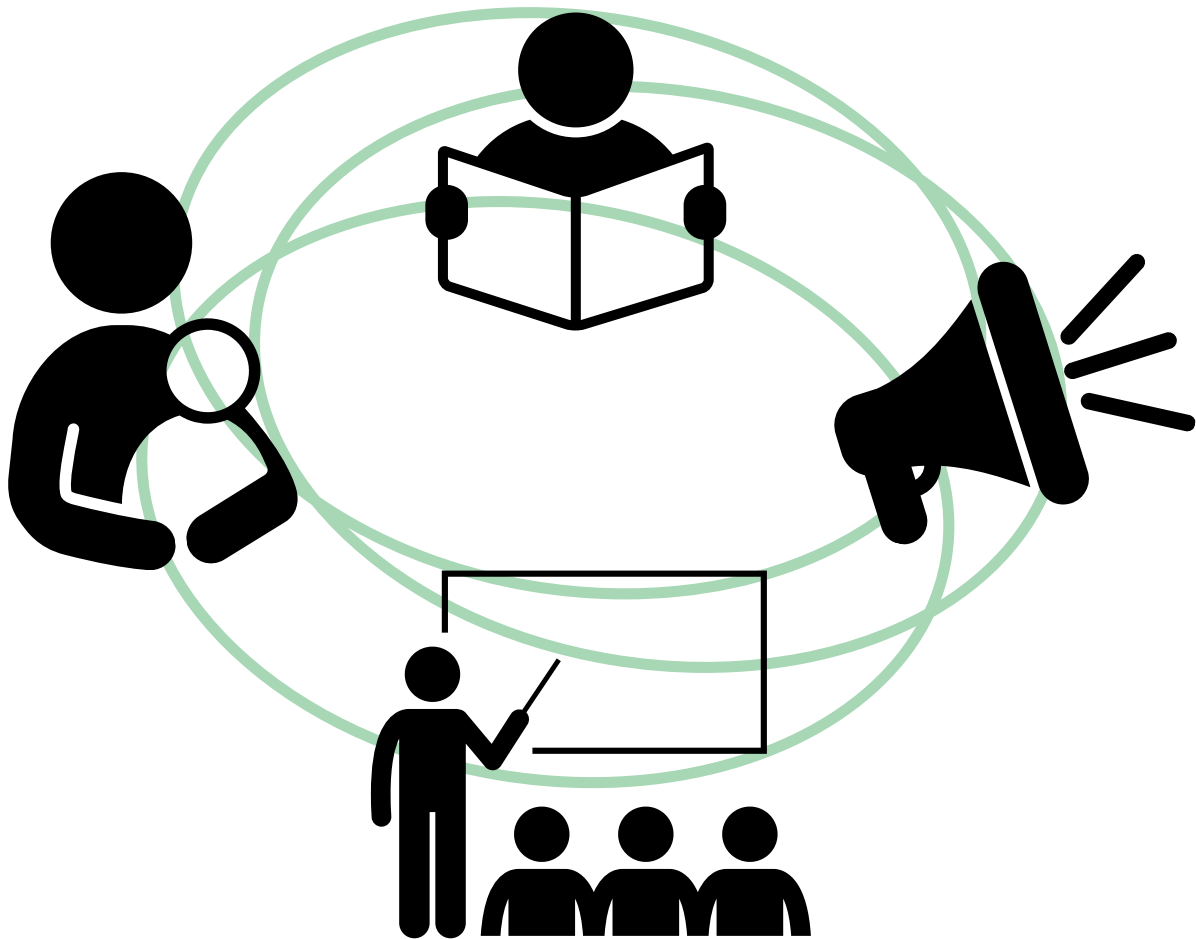


Guide to School Board Advocacy in Washington





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This publication is designed to serve as a tool for students, parents, guardians, and other community members who want to communicate and advocate before their school board. It is not meant to provide legal advice.

For additional resources and guides, visit our website: www.aclu-wa.org.

INTRODUCTION

School board members make important decisions that affect children's lives and education.

Under Washington law, children have a constitutionally guaranteed right to an education. They also have many other rights while enrolled in school. School boards set policies and make decisions on a wide range of issues that impact children's rights, including what curricular and extra-curricular programs are available, how and when students are disciplined, and how the district's funds are spent.

School administrators, including the principal and superintendent, can help resolve many issues that come up at school. But only the school board can approve changes to district policies and funding for new programs. Although superintendents and other school administrators cannot change policies, they can often be your strongest allies in advocating before the board.

This pamphlet provides a brief description of how school boards function and guides you through some simple steps to make your voice heard. It can also help you prepare to raise concerns or make suggestions to the principal or superintendent.

WHY IS SCHOOL BOARD ADVOCACY IMPORTANT?

The school board needs your experience and insight.

You can play an active role in setting policies by communicating your concerns and ideas to board members. School board members cannot be in the schools every day. They need to hear from students, parents, guardians, and community members about what is working, what is not working, what services are needed, and what your priorities are for your student's education. Personal stories are powerful tools for change. School board members can learn from your story.

You can help protect your child's rights and find real solutions when problems arise.

Parents, guardians, and relatives, working together with board members and school administrators, can come up with innovative solutions and create successful programs. These can include:

- Creating after-school and tutoring programs
- Designing effective and culturally relevant curriculum

- Adopting student discipline policies
- Improving communication with parents and guardians, including parents and guardians who do not speak English
- Providing programs and training to make the school environment safe and welcoming for all students

What are school boards and how do they work?

The following section contains general information about how school boards function, including:

- 1. Who are school board members?**
- 2. What are school board duties?**
- 3. How do school boards function?**

Remember, each school board may work a bit differently.

Be sure to contact your school district office to get the details on your board's members, meetings, and policies!

1. Who are school board members?

Every school district in Washington state is governed by an elected board of directors, commonly called a “school board.” Most school boards are made up of five individuals, most often volunteers, who live within the school district and are elected by voters of the district. Districts serving large urban areas have seven elected board members.

2. What are school board duties?

School boards have the final say on a school district’s policies and procedures, and on the district’s budget.

District policies

Each school board adopts a set of policies that control its actions and provide standards for students and school staff. School board policies cover a variety of issues, including curriculum and grading systems, book ban challenges, parent/guardian involvement plans, attendance, school discipline, harassment, freedom of expression, student records, and student dress. Other policies relate to a district’s internal operations, like hiring and firing, vacation time, building maintenance, and so on.

District procedures

Most school district policies are accompanied by related procedures. Procedures give detailed information about how a policy will be implemented in the schools. Many districts give the superintendent authority to develop the district’s procedures. If your superintendent is responsible for drafting procedures, be sure to talk to the superintendent as well as the board.

Appeals in school discipline cases

Some school boards also hear appeals in individual student discipline cases. If you have a complaint about the discipline imposed on your child in a particular instance, you must follow the school district’s formal steps in the grievance and appeal processes. You can find more information about these procedures in our [Parent's Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington](#).

Appeals in discrimination cases

Some school boards also hear appeals regarding complaints about discrimination in schools. If you have a

complaint about discrimination based on a protected class (like race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or religion), you must follow the school district's formal steps in the grievance and appeal processes. You can find more information about these processes on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's website: [Complaints and Concerns About Discrimination \(osp.k12.wa.us\)](https://osp.k12.wa.us).

Get involved!

In some cases, school boards are required to involve committees of various people in developing and reviewing district policies. Those committees often must include teachers, students, parents, guardians, and community members.

Watch for public notices and listen for announcements at school board meetings for opportunities to get involved! You can also sign up for email announcements on your school district's website.

3. How do school boards function?

School boards, like other governmental bodies in Washington state, are governed by our state's [Open Public Meetings Act](#).

Open public meetings

With few exceptions, the board must conduct its business in open public meetings. The board's business includes more than just the casting of final votes. It also includes the discussions between board members as they reach their decisions on how to vote.

Since the 2020 pandemic, most school boards continue to operate on a hybrid basis, meaning you can participate either in person or virtually. Make sure to check your school district's website to see what steps you need to take to participate virtually.

Exceptions for privacy

School boards must respect the privacy of individual students and of school personnel. School boards should not discuss the discipline of individual students in an open public meeting. They also will not generally discuss complaints about a particular district employee in an open public meeting. When matters like these need to be discussed, the school board usually enters what is known as an "executive session."

Public participation

The Open Public Meetings Act guarantees the public an opportunity to observe their elected representatives as they consider and make decisions. It does not give the public a right to speak at meetings. However, most school boards do allow members of the public to comment on agenda items at some point during their meetings. They may also allow members of the public to add new items to the agenda.

Individual vs. general concerns

Individual grievances will generally be heard in a closed session, also known as an "executive session." Each district has procedures for handling student discipline hearings and discrimination complaints. Your board should also have a procedure that outlines how to bring up concerns about particular employees, generally in a closed session with the board.

If you are raising general concerns or suggestions regarding district policies, you should be able to present

your ideas at an open school board meeting during its public comment period.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SCHOOL BOARD

The next sections of this guide describe several steps that can help you effectively communicate your concerns to school board members in writing or at a school board meeting. There are tips for:

1. **Writing to your school board members**
2. **Calling and meeting with your school board members**

Careful preparation can help you make an effective presentation to the board. But if you have a concern, question, or compliment, go ahead and get in touch with them. You do not have to be an expert on education policy or have all the answers in advance. You can let the board members know that you are still exploring the issue.

Speak up!

Do not be shy about calling your school board members or going to a board meeting! As a parent, guardian, or family member, remember that you have unique insights into what is happening with your student.

1. Writing to your school board members

Letters, sent by mail or email, are an effective way of communicating with your school board members. Often a letter will be seen as representing the position of not only the writer, but also of many other parents who did not take the time to write. Remember to be just as careful about what you write in an email as you would in a letter.

If you write in a language other than English, check with the district office to request help finding someone who can translate your letter or email for the board members.

Here are six tips for writing an effective letter or email:

1. **Keep it brief:** Letters should never be longer than one page and should be limited to one issue. School board members often have separate full-time jobs and have a lot of reading material to go through before each meeting.
2. **State who you are and what you want up front:** In the first paragraph, tell your board members that you are a parent or family member of a student in their district. Identify the issue you are writing about. If your letter relates to a specific policy or procedure, identify it by its name and number. Be direct and specific with your ask.
3. **Hit your three most important points:** Choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading your school board members to support your position, and explain these to the board.
4. **Personalize your letter:** Tell your school board member why this policy matters in your community. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your family. *Do not underestimate the power of your own story. Personal stories have a strong impact.*
5. **Personalize your relationship:** Have you ever voted for the school board member? Are you familiar with him or her through any business or personal relationship? If so, say so.
6. **You are the expert:** Remember that the school board's job is to represent you. Be courteous and to the point, but do not be afraid to take a firm position. You may know more about the

issue than the board member – this is your chance to educate them about the issue.

2. Calling and meeting with your school board members

Calling and scheduling meetings with your school board members are effective ways to let them know where you stand on an issue. Phone calls and meetings can also provide an opportunity to have a nuanced conversation. If school board members find that their positions are unpopular, your call or meeting may contribute to a change in policy. If a board member asks you to put your concerns in writing, follow up with a brief letter.

If you will need an interpreter on the phone or at an in-person meeting, contact the district office to see if they can help you arrange to have an interpreter available.

Support your letter, email, or phone call with face-to-face communication at a school board meeting!

SCHOOL BOARD MEETING ADVOCACY TOOLS

School board meetings are public, and speaking in public can be intimidating. But there are ways to overcome your fears and speak up for students.

- First, **remember that the board members work for you!**
- If you have never spoken at a school board meeting, you might want to **go to one or two meetings just to observe**. You can get a sense of the individual board members and watch how the board conducts its business.
- Try to **work with another parent or an organized group**. This can strengthen your message and give you more confidence.

You can always start by trying to set up individual meetings with board members to see where they stand on an issue. But you should also follow up by raising your issue at a school board meeting.

School boards are made up of at least five people, so if you have even one or two board members on your side, your presence at a school board meeting can help them gain the support of their fellow board members and the public.

The following sections include suggestions for:

1. **Preparing for a school board meeting**
2. **Making an effective presentation**
3. **Following up after the meeting**

Before you meet with your school board members, it is a good idea to check in with your principal and superintendent.

Check in with your principal and superintendent!

Many districts have policies describing how parents and others can bring concerns and suggestions to the board.

If you have an individual complaint about a school staff member, the policies may require that you first file a complaint online or raise your concerns with the principal and then the superintendent before bringing them to the board.

If you are interested in changing an existing school policy or proposing a new program, your district's policy might encourage you to bring your ideas directly to the school board.

Remember!

There are specific rules that apply when you are challenging a specific disciplinary incident! For more information, review our [Parent's Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington](#)

To learn more about the steps for bringing concerns and ideas to your school board, contact your district office and ask for the district's policies on public participation in board meetings and taking complaints from citizens. If your district's policies ask you to take concerns first to the principal, and then to the superintendent, you should follow those steps.

Even if your district's policy does not require it, talking to your principal and superintendent first can be a good idea.

Because many school boards rely on their superintendent's recommendations, you might find that the superintendent will be your strongest ally in advocating before the board. Also, superintendents are generally responsible for writing the procedures that implement the policies. It is important to talk with the superintendent in order to have input on how the procedures are written.

The principal might also support your position and be able to help you identify what policies already exist and how they might be improved.

The tips in the next sections can be helpful in communicating effectively with your superintendent and other school administrators before you go to the board.

Follow your district's policies!

Even if you expect that the principal or superintendent will not support your position, it is important to follow the steps set forth in your district's policy. Otherwise, the board might turn you away for failing to follow their policy.

1. Preparing for a school board meeting

Request time on the agenda

Contact the district office to find out how to get on the agenda for one of the board's monthly meetings. Let them know what issue and policy you wish to discuss, by name and number if you can. Make sure they know whether you are a parent, guardian, or family member, of a student in their district.

If you need an interpreter, contact the district office as far in advance as possible to request one.

Look at the district's policies and procedures

Find out whether there is already a policy and procedure in place that addresses your issue. You can review your parent/student handbook or ask your principal or superintendent. You can also look through the district's policy manual yourself.

Some school districts have their policies and procedures available on their websites. If not, ask the district

office where you can find a hard copy of the policy manual.

If a policy or procedure addresses your issue, review it to see if it seems reasonable and if it is being followed properly by the district.

Translations

If you need a translation of a policy or procedure, contact the district office to ask if they have copies in your language or will translate them for you.

Find out about your rights relating to the issue

Information about students' and parents' rights can be found in parent/student handbooks, district policies and procedures, and in the ACLU of Washington's guides, available on our website:

- [Parent's Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Truancy in Washington](#)
- [Know Your Rights – A Guide for Public School Students in Washington](#)

Gather information

If you are asking the school board to support a new program, try to gather information about “best practices.” If you know people in nearby or similar districts with programs that are working, be ready to describe them to the board and recommend people to contact for more information.

Washington State Report Card Website

For information on academic testing results, teaching staff, budget, and student demographics for your district and school and how they compare to others, you can go to the [Washington State Report Card Website](#).

If you have access to the Internet, you can find a variety of reports describing successful programs and problem-solving approaches in schools.

Connect with other parents and families

What do others in your community think? Work with other parents, families, and students to define the problem and discuss possible solutions. Think about who your allies might be in seeking the change you want.

You might find support from existing parent groups, teachers, or community leaders.

Think about the big picture and anticipate objections

When you decide to bring an issue to the school board, it will usually be because it affects your student. As you prepare, consider how the change you are proposing would affect all students in the district. School board members are charged with making decisions that are in the interest of the entire district and are often concerned with how a change will affect the district's budget.

One or more school board members may have already taken a position on the issue. Talk to others to learn more about your board members' views. Try to anticipate what reasons school board members, school administrators, and other community members might have to oppose your position and be ready to answer

them.

Recruit others to attend

If you are going to a school board meeting, bring along as many other parents, students, and community members as you can! Not everyone needs to speak; just being there will let the board members know you care. Plan a carpool, share childcare responsibilities, or meet for dinner ahead of time so you can all make it there together.

If you scheduled an individual meeting with a board member, bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage. Keep it small, and bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the issue. Let the board member know ahead of time how many people will attend the meeting.

Decide what you want to achieve

Make a clear outline of what changes you want to see. What is it you want the school board to do – vote for or against a policy? Make a commitment to introduce a new program or better fund an existing one? Asking the school board to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been.

Agree on what to say

It is tough to make a strong case for your position if you are disagreeing with other members of your group during the meeting. Identify your most important points; these can be your “talking points.” If a point is causing tension within your group, leave it out of your presentation to the board.

Lay out the plan for the meeting

People can get nervous in a meeting and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the plan for presenting your issues beforehand, including who will speak first and what you will say in closing. Designate someone to talk and a different person to take notes.

Checklist: Preparing for a School Board Meeting

- ✓ Request time on the agenda
- ✓ Look at the district’s policies and procedures
- ✓ Find out about your rights relating to the issue
- ✓ Gather information
- ✓ Connect with other parents and families
- ✓ Think about the big picture and anticipate objections
- ✓ Recruit others to attend
- ✓ Decide what you want to achieve
- ✓ Agree on what to say
- ✓ Lay out the plan for the meeting
- ✓ Decide who will take notes and follow up with action items

2. Making an effective presentation

Be prompt and patient

At some school board meetings, you must arrive on time – preferably a few minutes early – to get on the

agenda to speak. If you are participating virtually, make sure to check the district's website in case you need to sign up ahead of time. School board meetings can run long. If you did not get added to the agenda ahead of time, be ready to wait until the end of the meeting to present your issue.

If you arranged an individual meeting with a school board member, remember that many of them have separate full-time jobs. Be sure to show up on time and be patient; it is not uncommon for meetings to run late.

Keep it short and focused

You may have only a few minutes to present your concerns. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic. Start by introducing yourself and thanking the board members for taking the time to hear from you.

Stick to your talking points

Follow a prepared outline so you will be sure to hit your most important points. Stay on topic and support your points with no more than five pages of material that you can leave with the board members. If you can, bring copies for each board member. Otherwise, you can give one to the chair or president of the board and request that they distribute copies to the other members.

Effective Speaking

- ✓ *Make it easy for people to hear you by standing and speaking clearly and distinctly.*
- ✓ *Keep focused on the board members and make eye contact with them.*

Provide personal examples of the impact of the policy

This is the most important thing you can do in the presentation. When you are telling your story, it is okay to be nervous and emotional; people understand that parents, guardians, and communities feel very strongly about the lives and education of their students.

If you get emotional, try to take a few deep breaths, and focus on a written outline to get you through your points.

Remember to always be respectful

Showing respect toward the board members, school administrators, and other people in the audience – even if you disagree with their positions – will make it more likely that your concerns will be heard and taken seriously.

If a board member or other person is responding in anger, do your best to keep your cool and see if you can find points of agreement. Review the things you do agree on – including that you all want to figure out what will work best for the students – and try to narrow down your points of disagreement.

Realize that a key for resolving conflicts is to give people the time and information needed to consider your point of view.

If the board is reluctant to support the change you are seeking, you can ask them to explain their reasons and offer to provide additional information to support your position.

Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart move

You do not need to be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell the board members that you will follow up with additional information. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments on the table and allows you to contact them again about the issue.

Never make up an answer to a question; giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!

Confirm a plan for going forward

If the board is not going to act immediately, ask them what their next steps will be and request that they set a date when the issue will be on the agenda again.

Often, if a board member has not taken a position on a policy, he or she will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. The board members may want time to consider a new proposal and research the potential impact on the district. They may also want to put the issue on the agenda for a future meeting to give other members of the public a chance to comment.

Checklist: Making an Effective Presentation

- ✓ Be prompt and patient
- ✓ Keep it short and focused
- ✓ Stick to your talking points
- ✓ Speak clearly and distinctly
- ✓ Provide personal examples of the impact of the policy
- ✓ Remember to always be respectful
- ✓ Offer to follow up with additional information; Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart move
- ✓ Confirm a plan for going forward

Brainstorming Solutions

Remember, you do not need to have a solution in mind before you talk with your school board members. You can let them know that you are raising an issue because you want to work with them to brainstorm ideas about how to resolve it.

3. Following up after the meeting

Review and reflect

Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to understand what the board has committed to do and what follow-up information you committed to send. If a board member took the time to meet with you individually, each person who attended the meeting should promptly send the board member a personal thank-you note.

Follow up in a timely fashion

If you need to get information to your school board member, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. If a board member has promised to get back to you, follow up with them. Be flexible, but persistent.

CONCLUSION

Remember: you can impact the policies that shape your student's education!

Your school board members need your experience, ideas, and expertise to make sure your children are getting the education they are guaranteed by our state's constitution. When problems arise, you can help find real solutions to the issues facing your students in school.

By speaking up, you can be a powerful advocate for your student's rights!