

**PARENTS' GUIDE TO
SCHOOL BOARD ADVOCACY
IN WASHINGTON**



Parents' Guide to School Board Advocacy in Washington

This publication is designed to serve as a tool for parents who want to communicate and advocate before their school board. *It is not meant to provide legal advice.*

For more information, please see the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington publications, **Parents' Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington**, **Parents' Guide to Truancy in Washington**, and **Know Your Rights – A Guide for Public School Students in Washington**, available on our Web site: www.aclu-wa.org.

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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 when they are in school. School boards set policies and make decisions on a wide range of issues that impact your child'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 you resolve many issues that come up at school. But only the school board can approve changes to district policies or approve 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 then guides you through some simple steps to make your voice heard. It can also help you prepare to raise concerns or make suggestions first with 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 and family members about what is working, what is not working, what services are needed, and what your priorities are for your child'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, 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 policies that require parent contact before police interview children at school
- ▶ improving communication with parents, including parents who do not speak English
- ▶ providing programs and training to make the school environment safe and welcoming for all students

HOW DO SCHOOL BOARDS FUNCTION?

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

1. **Who are school board members?**
2. **What are school boards' 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 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 boards' 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, parent 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 from 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 **Parents' Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington**, available at our Web site: www.aclu-wa.org.

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.

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 and community members.

Watch for public notices and listen for announcements at school board meetings for opportunities to get involved!

Exceptions for privacy

School boards must also 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 generally not discuss complaints about a particular district employee in an open public meeting.

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. Each district has procedures for handling student discipline hearings. Your board should also have a procedure that you can follow 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.

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:

- ▶ Writing to Your School Board Members
- ▶ Calling Your School Board Members
- ▶ Meeting with Your School Board Members

Careful preparation can help you make an effective presentation to the board. But if you have a concern, a question or a 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 an issue.

Speak Up!

Do not be shy about calling your school board members or going to a board meeting! Remember that you have unique insights into what is happening with your child.

WRITING TO YOUR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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

E-mail can be another effective way to communicate with school board members. Remember to be just as careful about what you write in an e-mail as you would in a letter.

If you prefer to write in a language other than English, check with the district office to see if they have someone who can translate your letter or e-mail for the board members.

Here are six tips for writing an effective letter or e-mail:

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 child 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.
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 fam-

ily. **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 him or her about the issue.

CALLING YOUR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

You can also call school board members and let them know where you stand on the issues. If school board members find that their positions are unpopular, your call 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, call the district office to see if they can help you arrange to have an interpreter available on the phone or at an in-person meeting.

Back up a letter, e-mail or phone call with face-to-face communication at a school board meeting!

MEETING WITH YOUR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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

- ✓ 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.** It 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 first.

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 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, look for our **Parents' Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington**, available at our Web site: www.aclu-wa.org.

To learn more about the steps for bringing concerns and ideas to your school board, call your district office and ask for the district's policies on public participation in board meetings or 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 wise move.

Because many school boards rely on their superintendent's recommendations, you might find that

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.

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

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, by name and number if you can, you wish to discuss. Make sure they know that you are a parent or family member of a child in their district.

If you will need an interpreter, contact the district office as far in advance as possible to see if they can make someone available.

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 look in 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 Web sites. If not, ask the district office where you can find a hard copy of the policy manual.

Translations: If you need a translation of a policy or procedure, call the district office to ask if they have copies in your language or can provide an interpreter to translate them for you.

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.

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 Web site: www.aclu-wa.org:

- ✓ Parents' Guide to Public School Discipline in Washington,
- ✓ Parents' Guide to Truancy in Washington, and
- ✓ 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 the board can contact for more information.

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

Washington State Report Card Web Site

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 Web site at: <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>.

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 child. As you prepare, however, remember to consider how the change you are proposing would affect all children in the district. School board members are charged with making decisions that will be 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 or 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 child care responsibilities or meet for dinner ahead of time so you can all make it there together.

If you have set up 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 support 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 when 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
- ✓ 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

2. Making an effective presentation

Be prompt and patient

At some school board meetings, you must arrive on time to get on the agenda to speak. 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 have arranged an individual meeting with a school board member, remember 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 yourselves and thanking the board members for taking the time to hear from you.

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.

Stick to your talking points

Follow a prepared outline so you will be sure to hit your most important points. Stay on topic, and back your points up with no more than five pages of materials 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 he or she distribute copies to the others.

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 and families feel very strongly about the lives and education of their children.

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 one of the keys for resolving conflicts is to allow people the time and information 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 can get additional information for them. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments on the table and allows you to contact them again about the issue.

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.

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
- ✓ Be respectful
- ✓ Offer to follow up with additional information
- ✓ Confirm a plan for going forward

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 took part in the meeting should promptly send 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 child'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 children in school.

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

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington Foundation is the legal, research, and educational arm of the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization devoted to protecting and extending the civil liberties of all people in Washington.

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