



Safe and Welcoming Public Meetings to Bridge Divides

Overview:

Local school boards are the driving and implementing the goals and visions of our public schools. Across the country they are among the most local governing bodies to impact policy and practice in their communities. School board members determine local school policy and ensure it is implemented effectively and judiciously. They are primary touch points for community input and can determine just how intentionally local families, students and neighbors are engaged. They recruit, support, and retain superintendents and set expectations for performance. They are elected as public servants to advocate and work on behalf of children and families in their communities, and they bring their steadfast commitment to this leadership role day in and day out.

Given the role school boards play in setting and implementing policy agendas, it is no surprise that school board meetings have become yet another political arena for discussions related to contentious issues from mask mandates to conversations on race, gender, and equity.

This resource offers a starting point for school board members interested in policy improvements that foster inclusive and ongoing engagement of students in public meetings. It is a living document co-developed with students from the Georgia Youth Justice Coalition and benefitting from feedback from Ben Bowman and Andrew Brennen, and with grounding in equity supported by the Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

Policy:

Under School Board Operations, Boards are legally required to announce and hold meetings in accordance with local board policy and each respective state's open meetings law.¹

The board adopts a policy defining the process for developing board meeting agendas, to include, but not limited to:

- how the agenda is prepared and by whom
- a process to remove or place items on the agenda
- a process to allow requests for additional information on agenda items; and
- procedures through which the public can provide information, ideas, or input on agenda items

1. For example, in Georgia this would pertain to the Georgia Open Meetings Law (O.C.G.A. §50-14-1).



These broad guidelines for policymaking allow local boards to create policies that are inclusive of its stakeholders and can create an ongoing community feedback loop.

Policy Recommendations and Guidelines:

The following recommendations draw additional attention to students as key stakeholders and partners for local governance and policy-making. The sample policy that follows is intended to be a starting point for board policy development and includes suggestions for enacting the recommendations below into procedures.

- Establish an explicit allotment of time for student speakers during Public Comment Forum
- Provide virtual and teleconference options for participation
- Advance a youth-friendly setting that welcomes young people and recognizes the importance of their contributions to local public policy and decision-making
- Adopt a policy or resolution that explicitly invites student voice and participation in school boards

Sample Policy Template

Model Policy: Public Comment And Participation At Board Meetings

The [School Board] cordially invites the public to attend all regular meetings. Legal notice of the meetings will be as prescribed by the statutes.

The Board values receiving feedback from students, staff and members of the public regarding matters pertaining to the operation of [insert public school district].

In order to ensure that persons who wish to appear before the Board may be heard and, at the same time, conduct its meetings properly and efficiently, the Board adopts as policy the following procedures and rules pertaining to public participation at Board meetings:

1. **Public Comment On Agenda Items:** Thirty minutes will be provided at the beginning of the Board's Monthly Business Meeting for public comment on matters appearing on the agenda for Board consideration. Each speaker will be allowed three minutes to speak to the Board on any matter appearing on the agenda, unless either the time is limited or an extension of time is granted. The speaker will be expected to conclude his or her remarks promptly when the allotted time has expired.
 - a. Requests to provide public comment to the Board are submitted through email to XX, **no later than 4:00 PM** on Board meeting day, and provide your

Name, Community, and the reason/topic for your public comment. The Chairperson will call on each speaker who signed up.

- i. At least 10 % and up to 50% of the slots available to speak will be
- ii. allocated to students wishing to address the Board.²
- iii. Individuals will be called upon to speak by the Chair and will be prioritized in the following order: students, residents, and those that have not been heard from in the two previous meetings.

2. **Public Comment On School Policy Or Operations:** Sixty minutes will be provided for public comment on matters pertaining to the operation of the [Insert Public School] or policy relating to such operation during the Monthly Business Meeting. Each speaker will be allowed three minutes to speak to the Board on any matter appearing on the agenda, unless either the time is limited or an extension of time is granted. The speaker will be expected to conclude his or her remarks promptly when the allotted time has expired.
 - a. In the event more speakers have signed up for an opportunity to speak during this section that can be accommodated, speakers will be selected randomly not more than 24 hours prior to the meeting.³ The Board will notify those who have been selected to speak prior to the Board Meeting.
 - b. At Least 10% and up to 30%⁴ of the slots available to speak will be prioritized to students wishing to address the Board.
3. Individuals wishing to speak may submit a request in writing to the XX via letter, fax, e-mail, or by filling out an online form⁵ no later than XX on the day of the Public Meeting. Such requests shall include the individual's name, address, topic to be addressed, previous steps taken to resolve the concern, accommodations needed (translation, remote connection) and the group (if any) that the individual is representing. If an individual is unable to attend the meeting after signing up in advance, he/she may appoint a substitute speaker by calling the XX by noon of the meeting day.
4. The speaker's comments shall be directed to the Board as a body and not to an individual Board member. The speaker may not ask direct questions to the board during their speech. The Board members or Superintendent may ask questions for clarification but will not necessarily engage in discussion with the speaker.
5. Speakers may offer objective criticisms of school operations and programs, but in public session, the Board will not hear personal complaints regarding school personnel or against any person connected with the school system. Other channels provide for Board consideration and disposition of legitimate complaints involving individuals.
6. All speakers are to conduct themselves in a civil manner. Obscene, slanderous, defamatory or violent statements will be considered out of order and will not be

2. These percentages were recommended by students based on observation of the quantity of students who attend and wish to speak at meetings, as well as the need for prioritizing a portion of slots as a minimum.

3. Students recommend more lead time for planning to attend meetings. Ideally, a one week notice would suffice.

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5. Example of form used by Forsyth County Schools Board of Education:

<https://www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/cms/module/selectsurvey/TakeSurvey.aspx?PageNumber=1&SurveyID=536>

tolerated. The Board Chairperson may terminate the speaker's privilege of address if the speaker does not follow this rule of order, this includes interrupting the speaker during their comment.

7. If requested, a speaker may receive a written response from the appropriate district administrator within fifteen(15) calendar days
8. The Board commits to making all attempts to digitally stream all portions, allowable by law, of its monthly board meetings.

Model Policy: Student Representatives To The School Board

The Board recognizes and values student input in the decision-making process. To support and encourage a student voice in matters brought before the Board, the Board invites student representatives to serve as advisory members of the Board. The student advisory committee shall select representatives from district Student Unions and district-students from Youth Civic Engagement Groups in the community⁶

Student representatives to the Board will:

1. Speak to the interests of district high school students expressing the views of the students as well as the student's own views.
2. Serve on the Board and have voting rights.
3. Serve for a one-year term starting the month of XX.
4. Receive notice of meetings, the agenda and the appropriate agenda materials.
5. Be provided a place at the Board table.
6. Be expected to attend Board meetings on a regular basis.
7. Have the same privileges of discussion as apply to Board members.
8. Provide student input in the decision-making process at the Board level.
9. When appropriate, student representatives may exercise a non-binding (advisory) recommendation on matters brought before the Board.
10. Student representatives to the Board may be asked to serve on Board committees and/or task forces when appropriate.

Selection of Student Representatives

1. Students who wish to participate as student representatives to the Board shall apply for participation, using the appropriate application form, by XX of the year immediately preceding the new school year or at a date established by the Board.⁷

6. This item is partially drawn from Oregon's Tigard-Tualatin School District 23J policy for student representatives.

<https://policy.osba.org/tigard/AB/BCBA%20R%20D1.PDF>, and students recommend selection of representatives from suggested organization types. These organizations do not necessarily have to be affiliated with the district; nonetheless, they can provide a strong bench of potential student representatives. It is also strongly recommended that student advisors have a substantive and proven background in change making, community advocacy, or other student-need oriented civic engagement.

7. Students recommend a strong student leadership program be the basis for this form of participation rather than voting, which can end up feeling like a popularity contest or dominated by students with college application motivations for extracurriculars rather than grounded in representing other students as a leader.

2. A committee consisting of the superintendent, up to two Board members and the current student representatives shall conduct interviews and select the student representative.
3. The selection of student representatives to the Board shall be based on the completed application and materials supplied by the applicant, and the interview.
4. Should the position of a student representative to the Board become vacant prior to January 1st, the Board may appoint a replacement who will serve until the end of the school year.

Responsibilities of Student Representative to the Board

1. Attend meetings of the Board. The student representative may miss up to XX board meetings during the student's term as student representative.
2. Read the Board packet and be prepared to discuss agenda items.
3. Elicit input from middle and high school-level students regarding board agenda items.
4. Meet with the superintendent and board secretary as needed.
5. Express to the Board their views and the views of other high school-level students on issues.
6. Maintain confidentiality.
7. Serve as a liaison to keep channels of communication open between the Board and students.