

A Guide to Working with School Districts¹

There are several reasons why you might want to advocate for policy change in schools:

- to improve students' health, education, the school environment and classroom culture
- to meet the needs of particular groups
- to safeguard students' rights
- to protect students and staff from harm.¹

Regardless of what your reason(s) might be, you should be prepared to deal with several important elements when approaching schools or school districts to advocate local policy change.

These elements include, the organizational structures in place; individual personalities and relationships within the school system and between the schools and outside agencies; and the realities of school operations and making changes that affect such operations.

Although the specific internal processes by which policies are changed may vary from district to district, there are two common tasks for pursuing any policy change: (1) laying the groundwork; and (2) building awareness and support for the policy change. This resource provides an overview of best practices when working with school districts to advocate for policy change.

¹ This resource is adapted from the Wisconsin Association of School Board's resource entitled, "Advocating Local Policy Change" available at, http://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/AdvocatingLocalPolicyChange_wasb2012.pdf

Laying the Groundwork

In most school districts, anyone can usually start the process of creating or revising school policies. This includes school board members, administrators, school staff members, students, parents or members of the community.

It is always important to remember, however, that the school board is responsible for adopting official school district policy and that school administrators are responsible for seeing that the policies are implemented once they are adopted. There are several steps you can take in laying the groundwork for policy change.

1. Recognize the Problem and Make a Commitment to Take Action.

You must clarify the need for the policy change and be willing not only to commit to pursue the cause, but also to work in cooperation with school district officials in making it happen. School board and administrative support is especially important in creating an environment for making changes happen. When clarifying the need for the policy change, it is important to think about why it is important for the policy to be changed and what purpose it serves.

2. Assess the Local School Community's Situation.

Before making decisions about what actions to take, it is important

to evaluate the current school environment to see what is going on now, what is going well, and what needs improvement. Specifically, you should do the following:

- Compile and review local data that may affect decision making. All good decisions should be based on the available facts.
- Check whether there are any district policies or procedures already in place that address the issue(s) to any extent and whether it would be feasible to modify them to reflect the new policy concerns.
- Ask yourselves if you need to create a new policy or revise an existing policy to meet the need for policy change. It is often much easier to revise existing policies than to establish brand new policies. But both can be done if pursued in the appropriate manner.
- Most districts have guidelines or a specific process for adopting and revising their policies. Find out what they are and be willing to follow the rules.

School board guidelines on proposals for new or revised policies usually provide direction for how advocates should submit proposals; how and when administration and school board (or a board standing committee) will review the proposals; how new or revised policies will be adopted

(often, policy change proposals are presented at one school board meeting and adopted at a subsequent board meeting).

Consider the needs, interests and requirements of the district related to the issue. How ready are school officials and others for the proposed policy change(s)? What factors, if any, exist in the district that may restrict or hamper the actions that can be taken (i.e., facility limitations, financial limitations, environmental conditions)? What can be done to overcome such barriers?

3. Become Familiar with the Political Dynamics within Your School Community.

Find out how various factions within the district, if any, influence policy. Anticipate who is likely to support or oppose the policy proposals. Ask someone “in the know” who can offer candid information and advice.

Some policy changes that you may be pursuing can raise unexpected reactions. Try to be prepared for those reactions and for dealing with them.

4. Respect the Hierarchy in the Organizational Structure.

You need to make sure to inform and involve key administrators in the policy change process.

Build Awareness and Support for the Policy Change

Don’t assume that everyone will see the same value and importance in the policy changes, particularly if the changes affect policies and practices “close to their hearts.”

Support and collaboration needs to be demonstrated during the policy making process. The quality and usefulness of policies depend on who proposed it and who supports it. School board members are more likely to support the policy change if public and school support is generated for it.

Maintain open and clear communications between all the parties involved. By doing so, you can avoid miscommunications and misunderstandings which often derail efforts for policy change.

ⁱ University of Kan., Section 9. Changing Policies in Schools, COMMUNITY TOOL BOX, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/changing-policies/school-policies/main>