

## School Board

### Communications To and From the Board <sup>1</sup>

The School Board welcomes communications from staff members, parents/guardians, students, and community members. Individuals may submit questions or communications for the School Board's consideration to the Superintendent or may use the electronic link to the Board's email address(es) posted on the District's website.<sup>2</sup> The Superintendent or designee shall:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> State law controls portions of this policy but does not require a policy on any topic covered.

An alternative to the opening sentence follows: "The School Board welcomes communications from the school community."

<sup>2</sup> School districts that maintain an Internet website, other than a social media or social networking website, must post a "mechanism, such as a uniform single email address, for members of the public to electronically communicate with elected officials." 50 ILCS 205/20. The sample policy's default language may be used even when the district provides each board member with an individual email address. The language permits every board member to read all emails sent to the electronic link. This aligns with IASB's *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* ([www.iasb.com/conference-training-and-events/training/trainingresources/foundational-principles-of-effective-governance/](http://www.iasb.com/conference-training-and-events/training/trainingresources/foundational-principles-of-effective-governance/)) because all members receive the same information and communications as illustrated below:

- a. When the district provides individual email addresses to board members, it can post a hyperlink on the district home page to an email address that will forward the communication **to all** board members' email addresses simultaneously.
- b. When the district does **not** provide individual email addresses to board members, it can post a hyperlink on the district's home page to one email address that every board member may access.

Other ways to comply should ensure that all board members have equal access to communications. For example, posting a hyperlink on the district home page **to a list of** individual board member email addresses would **not** ensure that all board members have equal access to questions or communications for the board's consideration.

Whenever a district provides email addresses to individual board members, all emails sent to individual email addresses are subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). *City of Champaign v. Madigan*, 992 N.E.2d 629 (Ill. App. Ct. 2013). Public bodies must also conduct a reasonable search for public records responsive to a FOIA request, which includes searching public employees' communications on personal devices or accounts for records pertaining to the transaction of public business. See PAO 16-6. Consult the board attorney when searching board members' personal email addresses and/or devices may be necessary to respond to a FOIA request.

If the district does not maintain an Internet website, delete all text in the first paragraph after the word *Superintendent* and delete numbered paragraphs 1 and 2:

~~or may use the electronic link to the Board's email address(es) posted on the District's website.~~

~~The Superintendent or designee shall:~~

- ~~1. Ensure that the home page for the District's website contains an active electronic link to the email address(es) for the School Board, and~~
- ~~2. During the Board's regular meetings, report for the Board's consideration all questions or communications submitted through the active electronic link along with the status of the District's response in the Board meeting packet.~~

<sup>3</sup> Directive #1 to the superintendent restates the statutory requirement to post a hyperlink to the email address on the district's home page. 50 ILCS 205/20. Directive #2 is optional and adds a step to increase efficient responses to communications concerning the operation or management of the district or a school. Adding this text allows a board to (1) monitor its compliance with 50 ILCS 205/20, (2) ensure that all board members stay informed of all questions and communications to the board, (3) align with IASB's *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance*, and (4) mirror a School Code requirement (105 ILCS 5/10-16) for the superintendent to report any FOIA requests during the board's regular meetings along with the status of the district's response.

Before adoption of this text, each board may want to have a conversation with the superintendent about the difference between "staff work questions or communications" that do not need to be submitted to the board and "questions or communications submitted for the school board's consideration" that do need to be submitted to the board.

For districts that maintain an Internet website but do not wish to adopt Directive #2, delete Directive #2 and amend the policy as follows:

The Superintendent or designee shall ensure that the home page for the District's website contains an active electronic link to the email address(es) for the School Board.

1. Ensure that the home page for the District's website contains an active electronic link to the email address(es) for the School Board, and
2. During the Board's regular meetings, report for the Board's consideration all questions or communications submitted through the active electronic link along with the status of the District's response in the Board meeting packet.

If contacted individually, Board members will refer the person to the appropriate level of authority, except in unusual situations. Board members' questions or communications to staff or about programs will be channeled through the Superintendent's office. Board members will not take individual action that might compromise the Board or District. There is no expectation of privacy for any communication sent to the Board or its members, whether sent by letter, email, or other means.

#### Board Member Use of Electronic Communications<sup>4</sup>

For purposes of this section, *electronic communications* includes, without limitation, electronic mail, electronic chat, instant messaging, texting, and any form of social networking.<sup>5</sup> Electronic communications among a majority or more of a Board-quorum shall not be used for the purpose of discussing District business. Electronic communications among Board members shall be limited to: <sup>6</sup> (1) disseminating information, and (2) messages not involving deliberation, debate, or decision-making. The following list contains examples of permissible electronic communications:

- Agenda item suggestions
- Reminders regarding meeting times, dates, and places
- Board meeting agendas or information concerning agenda items
- Individual emails to community members, subject to the other limitations in this policy

In accordance with the Open Meetings Act and the Oath of Office taken by Board members, individual Board members will not (a) reply to an email on behalf of the entire Board, or (b) engage in the discussion of District business through electronic communications with a majority of a Board-quorum.<sup>7</sup>

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A public body is not required to reply to communications. Likewise, the FOIA does not require questions to be answered. Chicago Tribune Co. v. Dept. of Financial & Professional Reg., 8 N.E.3d 11 (Ill. App. Ct. 2014). For more information about districts governed by a board of school directors, see f/n 6 of sample policy 2:220, *School Board Meeting Procedure*.

<sup>4</sup> With some exceptions, OMA requires that a board conduct its deliberations and business during meetings that the public may attend. A meeting means "any gathering, whether in person or by video or audio conference, telephone call, electronic means (such as, without limitation, electronic mail, electronic chat, and instant messaging), or other means of contemporaneous interactive communication, of a majority of a quorum of the members of a public body held for the purpose of discussing public business or, for a five-member public body, a quorum of the members of a public body held for the purpose of discussing public business." 5 ILCS 120/1.02. Thus, any *electronic communication* discussing district business that circulates among a majority of a quorum of the board (or majority of the Board, in case of a five-member board) may qualify as a meeting for purposes of the OMA and may be illegal. A violation of OMA is a Class C misdemeanor. 5 ILCS 120/4.

The Local Records Act (50 ILCS 205/) governs retention of district records; its definition of *public record* is more narrow than the definition in FOIA. These communications must be retained only when they contain: (1) evidence of the district's organization, function, policies, procedures, or activities, or (2) informational data appropriate for preservation. While this is a slippery slope without definitive parameters, electronic communication among board members that are permissible under this policy may generally be deleted; consult the board attorney for a more thorough analysis and a legal opinion. See also sample exhibit 2:140-E, *Guidance for Board Member Communications, Including Email Use*.

<sup>5</sup> The examples of *electronic communications* are optional and may be amended. For a discussion about board member use of social media when communicating with the community, see sample policy 8:10, *Connection with the Community*, and its f/ns 3 and 4.

<sup>6</sup> Complying with these restrictions will help avoid an OMA violation.

<sup>7</sup> The oath of office in 105 ILCS 5/10-16.5 requires board members to swear or affirm that they "shall recognize that a board member has no legal authority as an individual and that decisions can only be made by a majority vote at a public board meeting." Deliberations of the board must be conducted openly; a meeting occurs whenever a majority of a quorum discusses public business; meetings must occur at a properly noticed board meeting that is open to the public. 5 ILCS 120/1, 1.02, and 2. For additional information, see f/ns above and sample exhibit 2:140-E, *Guidance for Board Member Communications, Including Email Use*.

LEGAL REF.: 5 ILCS 120/, Open Meetings Act.  
50 ILCS 205/20, Local Records Act.

CROSS REF.: 2:220 (School Board Meeting Procedure), 3:30 (Chain of Command), 8:110 (Public  
Suggestions and Concerns)

APPROVED: