

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Make time to review, revise district policies

Outdated district policies may spell trouble for a school board, especially if those policies fail to account for current norms or evolutions in technology.

For example, recent incidents, including the discovery of hidden surveillance cameras in a high school, prompted the Madison Metropolitan (Wis.) School District to reassess its privacy policies. Although board officials noted that current policy prohibited cameras in areas where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, it permitted the superintendent to authorize the use of hidden cameras in certain circumstances. Moreover, the board acknowledged that the policy had not been updated since 2001.

To prevent a similar mishap in your district, board members should make it a priority to review and revise obsolete policies. Stick to the following three tips to ensure your policies are efficient and modernized:

1. Set up a date for review. At least once a quarter or semester, set aside time to review

your policies one section at a time. If a policy is more than a few years old or contains ambiguous language, it's likely time for an update. Remember that policies relating to the use of technology, both in and out of the classroom, may need to be revised and updated on a more frequent basis.

2. Assign the policy to a committee. If an outdated policy needs a lot of revision, consider sending it to a committee. The committee can create discuss the policy in detail, draft revisions, and then submit those recommendations to the whole board.

3. Ask the superintendent, legal counsel for recommendations. Revamping an outdated policy may be intimidating for board members, especially if the purpose of that policy is to ensure the district's compliance with federal, state, or local requirements. If board members are unsure whether proposed revisions to the policy are appropriate, ask the superintendent and the district's legal counsel to look over the proposal. They will help the board formulate a policy that checks all the boxes. ■

Recognize interim superintendent's accomplishments

An interim superintendent's time in office may be fleeting, but her contributions may leave a lasting, positive impact on the district. If your board has tapped a different candidate to lead the district as its permanent superintendent, make sure to honor your interim superintendent before her departure.

On Oct. 12, 2021, the school board of Washington Township (N.J.) Schools recognized Interim Superintendent Laura Morana during her last board meeting. Board President Jessica DeCicco thanked Morana for all that she had done for the district. She also highlighted Morana's accomplishments, stating that Morana had devel-

oped rapport with the community, helped reopen schools safely during the pandemic, and assisted the board in navigating updates to policies and regulations.

Consider doing the same for your interim superintendent during her last board meeting. For example, your board may:

- Write an appreciation letter for the interim superintendent and read it out loud.
- Have a commemorative plaque made in

advance and present it to the interim superintendent.

- Invite students and members of the community to thank the interim superintendent during the public comment portion of the board meeting.

This will not only help show your interim superintendent how much your board appreciates her time and effort, it may also leave the door open for her to return (as interim superintendent or another position) in the future. ■

Make sure each board member gets a say

Although most school board members likely share a passion for education and a desire to serve the community, they may completely differ in their communication styles. For example, some board members may be vocal about their opinions while others may just sit back and quietly observe. However, because it's important for each board member to participate in decision-making procedures, don't let this become the norm.

Consider this idea to ensure each board member gets a say. During the board meeting, allow each board member to make one comment or express one idea about an item on the meeting agenda.

Go around the meeting table, either clockwise or counter-clockwise, and ask each board member for their thoughts on the same agenda item. Give board members approximately a minute to speak their minds. Once every board member at the table has provided feedback about a particular issue, repeat the process or open up the floor to discussion.

With this approach, each board member will have an equal opportunity to be heard without being interrupted by a more outspoken colleague. What's more, this tactic will encourage thoughtful deliberation and discussion among board members and prime the board to make better decisions as a group. ■

Prevent social media from stoking public tensions

Nowadays, almost every school district uses social media to share information and interact with members of the community. Unfortunately, like school board meetings, a district's social media page can become ground zero for combative dialogue and hostile remarks regarding controversial issues such as mask mandates, vaccination requirements, and critical race theory.

However, there are some preliminary steps school boards can take to prevent social media from stoking unnecessary conflict. Consider these two tips:

1. Tailor social media posts to promote positive responses. Use social media as a means to highlight positive events throughout the district, such as details about a community service event organized by a middle school club or news about a high school basketball team's recent victory. If the board needs to disseminate

important information that may be controversial or unpopular, such as updates to a mask mandate, it should consider using other communication methods such as individual phone calls or emails to parents or a public statement on its website.

2. Develop a code of civility for online discourse. If members of your social media community are engaging in name-calling, cyberbullying, or other antagonistic behaviors, the board may develop a code of civility. For example, the code may ask all individuals who are part of the district's online community to treat each other with respect. The code may also set out procedures for reporting or addressing threatening or abusive comments.

If the board continues to see vitriol on social media, it may need to consult legal counsel to determine its next steps. ■