



Texas Public Policy
Foundation



Provided by the Texas Public Policy Foundation

SCHOOL BOARD TOOLKIT

MISSION + VISION

Vision

Improving the quality of Texas public schools through transparency and respect.

Mission

To provide school board members with the intellectual and practical tools needed to participate in and lead effective school boards.

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SCHOOL BOARD TOOLKIT

PREFACE

School board members perform a great act of civil service by taking on the responsibility to ensure that our schools are running smoothly. With this responsibility comes the duty to govern well, be good stewards of the budget, promote transparency, and act with respect—without these essential qualities, school boards lose the faith of the parents, students, and taxpayers they serve.

A Note on the Chain of Command for Texas School Districts

At first glance, the chain of command for Texas school districts seems simple—the principals run their individual schools, while the superintendent runs the district. While this is true, looking at district structure in this way creates the false impression that the district superintendent is the ultimate authority for the district.

The true ultimate authority of the school district is the school board. As a result, the school board possesses both the final say and the final responsibility. It is the school board's obligation to manage the superintendent, school governance, and budget—if the board handles its obligation poorly, then it not only does a disservice to the students and parents of the district, but also betrays the trust of district's taxpayers and voters.

It is important to note that while the school board is the ultimate authority for the school district, school board members may only execute this responsibility during the meetings of the school board. Outside of school board meetings, members of the school board have no individual authority and cannot direct school district employees on how to execute their duties.

A General Note on School Board Responsibilities

School boards have a few core responsibilities, as explained by the Texas Education Code:

- 1 — Work with other public entities to make effective use of community resources and serve the needs of students in the community.
- 2 — Adopt a vision statement and comprehensive goals for the district.
- 3 — Monitor progress toward the adopted goals.
- 4 — Hire a superintendent and ensure that they are accountable for achieving performance results, recognize performance accomplishments, and take action as necessary to meet goals.
- 5 — Adopt an annual budget, set a tax rate, and steward district funds.
- 6 — Hold public hearings, conduct elections as required by law, and provide an end-of-year financial report for distribution in the community.

A successful and respectful school board executes all these tasks with a focus on transparency, good governance, and budgetary stewardship.

School board members also have the responsibility to hold each other accountable. According to state statute, school board members must police the conduct of other school board members by addressing failures to adhere to the code of conduct or the board operating procedures. This can take the form of private warnings, special meetings to address repeated violations, or, in especially egregious cases, public reprimand and censure.

Specific School Board Officer Duties

While all school board members are required to participate in school board meetings, some members have additional duties beyond that. Below are, in list form, the additional duties of the president, vice president, and secretary:

The Duties of the President of the School Board:

- Preside at all school board meetings
- Appoint committees
- Call special meetings
- Sign all legal documents as required by law

The Duties of the Vice President of the School Board:

Act in the capacity of the president of the school board during the absence of the president

Sign or countersign documents as necessary

The Duties of the Secretary of the School Board:

Ensure that accurate records of all school board meetings are kept

Serve as the president pro tempore of the school board during the absence of the president and vice president

Sign or countersign documents as necessary

SCHOOL BOARD PROCEEDINGS

As previously discussed, the school board operates as the ultimate authority of the district—it is the board’s duty to ensure that the district serves its students, and their parents, well. The primary way a school district does this is through providing a quality education, free of political agenda or bias. However, this is a difficult task that invites significant disagreement. As a result, it is also necessary to provide parents with a means to help the board make informed decisions and a way to redress grievances. This is done in two major ways: by promoting transparency in the classroom and board proceedings and by respecting the voices of the parents.

Transparency is vital to building community trust. The past few years have brought about an increased demand from parents to know what is happening in their schools and in their district, and the school boards need to react to that demand by implementing necessary changes. Such changes include easy access to classroom materials, access to curriculum upon request, and the removal of roadblocks to information. These actions would go a long way to rebuilding public trust. When parents are able to see and know what is happening in their children’s schools, then they will rest much easier.

In addition to increasing parent access to the curriculum, school boards must increase parental access to the school board itself. While school board meetings are open to the public and published online, the calendar and agendas can often be hard to find. By taking steps

to improve website design and increase communications, the school board will be able to make parents more aware of when meetings are happening and make the school board agenda easier to access. This, in turn, will allow more parents to attend, a critical factor in building trust between parents and their school boards.

However, transparency is just one part of the equation. The other part is respect for all parties involved, including parents, students, teachers, taxpayers, administration, and the other school board members. Too often do school boards across the nation forget this respect, assuming that since they are the final authority for the district, they are above question or reproach by parents.

Parents, like school board members, are passionate about children and education. This passion can result in heightened emotions, which can escalate to anger or conflict when parents feel ignored or disrespected. Thus, the best way to head off conflict is to respect the parents, handling their heightened emotions with kindness and understanding. In doing so, school board members can de-escalate intense or emotional situations and help refocus the conversation and direct that energy and passion toward actionable solutions.



GOOD GOVERNANCE

The ultimate goal of the public education system is to ensure that all students, regardless of wealth, social standing, race, or sex, receive a quality education that provides them with the opportunity for success. That said, the definition of success varies wildly from district to district. Additionally, many students will choose not to capitalize on the opportunities, and success looks different for each individual student. As such, it is impossible to provide a universal template for school district governance. However, it is possible to provide foundational principles and a measure of practical recommendations.

The first principle of good school district governance is to ensure that all students are served. This service looks different from student to student, but these students can be generalized into a few groups: above average, average, below average, and requiring special attention. Each group has different needs—while it would be simple to focus on the average student, this disadvantages the high performers,



low performers, and those who need special help, whether that be in the form of English as a second language, special needs, or behavioral concerns. While the school board is not involved in the day-to-day running of schools, it needs to ensure that district schools have plans and procedures to serve all students, regardless of achievement, background, or capability.

The second major principle of good school district governance is to ensure that district and school administration is acting appropriately. This principle primarily entails ensuring that school and district administration, including the superintendent, are performing their jobs satisfactorily and meeting necessary goals. It also entails ensuring that administrators and other school board members are not abusing or misusing their power and influence.

The third major principle of good school district governance is to ensure that the school district's funds are being used properly. This requires that the school board root out inefficiency and waste through internal means and judicious use of external means such as efficiency audits. Specific principles of budgetary stewardship will be discussed in depth in a following section.

The fourth major principle of good school district governance is to ensure that the district agenda is free of political or ideological mandates. Students come to school to be educated, not indoctrinated. As such, careful thought must be given to district-wide goal setting as well as individual school goal setting so as to ensure that no political or ideological agendas are being pushed upon the students. Specific goal setting will be discussed in depth in a following section.

BUDGETARY STEWARDSHIP

Government spending is often a cause for concern, anger, and outrage. This is especially true when it comes to school spending. In Texas, school districts are a major driver of property taxes, the rates of which are set by the school board. Accordingly, school districts often come under scrutiny for their use of public funds. As each district is unique, it is impossible to provide a universal budget. However, it is possible to provide some important considerations and practical recommendations.

One of the most important principles of good budgetary stewardship is to remember that the school board is spending not just the money of other people, but also its own tax dollars. Several questions must be asked for every appropriation, such as:



Is there a good reason for the use of these funds?
Could these funds be better used somewhere else?
Is the use of these funds truly necessary?

In addition to limiting spending, there are other ways the school board can ensure that it is using public funds properly. One of these ways is to conduct internal investigations and audits to ensure that individual schools and administrators are using funds appropriately. Another way is to conduct an efficiency audit, through which the school board can be made aware of redundancies and inefficiencies. By eliminating the redundancies and inefficiencies, the school district can save significant funds—some districts have managed to save millions of dollars. These savings can be passed on to the taxpayers or directed toward underfunded projects and schools.

Most funds should go directed directly towards the classroom. In too many districts, the superintendents make incredibly high salaries while the teacher pay remains abysmal. As a general rule, at least 80% of the budget should be directly connected to the classroom, while no more than 10% of the budget should be spent on central administration. School districts that follow these guidelines are more likely to see reduced teacher turnover, increased academic performance from students, and generally higher district satisfaction.



SETTING, MEASURING, AND ACHIEVING DISTRICT GOALS

School boards are responsible for setting district goals, evaluating district data to measure progress towards goals, and ascertaining as to whether these goals are achieved. Each district will have unique goals; however, it is important that all goals follow the following core principles:

GOALS MUST —

☑ be practical.

☑ be measurable.

☑ be attainable.

☑ to the greatest extent possible, serve all students.

☑ be free of political or ideological agenda.

☑ advance the school district's mission to serve.

Goals are not set in stone—they can change as circumstances change. However, it is important to be consistent with goal setting so as to keep the school district moving in a coherent direction.

In evaluating district data, it is important to keep in mind that the numbers do not always paint a complete picture. As a result, it is crucial to also get feedback from administrators, teachers, and parents as to any mitigating or unique circumstances that may change the way in which the data is interpreted.

TPPF SCHOOL BOARD CODE OF CONDUCT

Each school board will have its own code of conduct, primarily centered on school board policy and operating procedures. To supplement this code of conduct, the Texas Public Policy Foundation has developed its own code of conduct for school board members:

- + I will always act in a way that advances my mission to provide all students, regardless of race, sex, background, or political ideology, with a quality education.
- + I will always endeavor to be a faithful steward of public funds, and to eliminate waste wherever I detect it.
- + I will act with the utmost respect towards parents, students, taxpayers, and staff.
- + I will promote and protect transparency in all my actions and in those of the school district.