

THE SCHOOL BOARD: ITS POWER AND HOW TO ADVOCATE

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School boards play a pivotal role in shaping the education that public school students receive. Among their many responsibilities, they set budgets, adopt curriculum, and approve school policies, including disciplinary policies.

School boards are accountable to the residents of the district they serve and who elected them. This means they have a responsibility to keep the community informed and must make their decisions using input from the public and members of the school community.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL BOARD?

A school board is the local legislative body that governs a school district.¹ The board adopts and revises districtwide policies and oversees resources for the schools in the district. Each school board consists of nine members,² and one superintendent appointed by the board.³ School board members are elected by residents of the district, except in Philadelphia, where board members are appointed by the mayor.⁴ School board members serve terms of four years, with roughly half the board up for reelection every two years.⁵

WHAT POWERS DOES A SCHOOL BOARD HAVE?

School boards have the duty to “establish, equip, furnish, and maintain” the schools in their district.⁶ As such, they have numerous powers that include the power to levy taxes,⁷ adopt curriculum and courses of study, establish disciplinary policies and other districtwide policies, and hire school personnel, among others.⁸

THE POWER TO HIRE OR TERMINATE A SUPERINTENDENT: Under Pennsylvania law, the authority to hire a superintendent falls on the school board.⁹ School boards must vote on their choice for superintendent in a public meeting and make the superintendent’s contract available to the public through the PA Right-to-Know Law.¹⁰ School boards in Pennsylvania are required by law to conduct formal superintendent evaluations.¹¹ If a superintendent is not meeting expectations, a school board may vote to terminate the superintendent’s contract for “neglect of duty, incompetency, intemperance, or immorality.”¹²

THE POWER TO ADOPT & CHANGE CURRICULUM: School boards have the power to “adopt and arrange courses of study” for their schools.¹³ Therefore, the school board has the power to make important curriculum decisions, such as whether to fund a new robotics program or whether to approve a new ethnic studies class.

In making curriculum decisions, including whether to remove books, school boards cannot contradict the state’s learning standards¹⁴ or violate the First Amendment by imposing what the

U.S. Supreme Court has called a “pall of orthodoxy” in the classroom.¹⁵ For example, the Supreme Court has struck down a school board’s decision to mandate the pledge of allegiance.¹⁶

For more information on a board’s power to adopt curriculum as well as strategies for advocating for inclusive schools and honest education, [see ELC’s webpage here](#).

For more information relating to book bans, see [ELC’s fact sheet here](#).

THE POWER TO ESTABLISH DISCIPLINARY POLICIES: School boards have considerable power to adopt and enforce districtwide policies regarding student conduct.¹⁷ Under the law, they may regulate student conduct that occurred while the student was at school, including the time spent coming to and returning from school,¹⁸ at any school-sponsored event,¹⁹ or conduct that caused a “substantial disruption or material interference with the operations of the school,” even if it occurred off-school grounds.²⁰ There are important limitations and First Amendment protections against some discipline. You can read more in ELC’s [fact sheet about student expression](#).

LIMITATIONS TO BOARD AUTHORITY: There are important constraints to a board’s power. Boards must follow state and federal laws, including laws that protect students and staff from discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, disability, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation.²¹

Boards cannot issue rules that are vague²² or discipline students for rules not yet listed in the code of conduct. Each school district must publish a code of conduct and give copies to students and their families so that students know what is expected of them.²³ For more information about a school board’s disciplinary power including the rights of students, see ELC’s fact sheets about [suspension](#) and [expulsion](#) hearings.

In addition, a school board may be challenged for acting “arbitrarily and capriciously” or unreasonably, including situations where a school board or superintendent does not follow or enforce its laws.²⁴ “Arbitrary” has been defined as “conduct ... based on random or convenient selection or choice rather than on reasonable nature.” “Capricious” means “erratic, flighty, or unpredictable.” Examples often involve school board policies regarding student discipline but can also include grooming policies or residency documentation requirements.²⁵

Pennsylvania’s school code also requires school boards to establish and make available formal complaint procedures on their websites.²⁶

HOW ARE POLICIES ADOPTED?

School boards are policy-making bodies, responsible for developing and revising policies that govern the actions of board and school district employees. These policies provide the framework or guardrails for district activities and ensure school district actions comply with state and federal law. Policy revisions must go through a public review process, which generally includes review by a committee and consideration at two separate board meetings. The public must have the opportunity to provide input on proposed policy changes, as described more fully below.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS?

What you can expect at a school board meeting will largely depend on the type of meeting you are attending. There are two types of meetings open to the public: general action and committee meetings. A third type, executive sessions, takes place behind closed doors because of the confidential and sensitive nature of the issues involved.²⁷

EXECUTIVE SESSIONS: Executive sessions are meetings in which the board is deliberating on confidential and sensitive issues. Often this involves the termination of an employee, an expulsion hearing, or a private consultation with the board's attorney. Executive sessions are limited to certain subjects, and under the Sunshine Act a school board cannot discuss or take "official action," that is, take a vote or make a recommendation, on an issue that should have been on an open agenda.²⁸

School boards must announce when they are holding executive sessions, identify the matters to be discussed with sufficient specificity to indicate a real, discrete matter, and use such sessions sparingly.²⁹ If a school board is not following these parameters for executive sessions, it may be a violation of the Sunshine Act and can be challenged.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS: Since the tasks a school board must complete are so varied, school boards are typically subdivided into committees. Committees meet at a separate time and may not include the presence of the full board. Committee meetings must be open to the public and school boards are required to post the times committees meet and their agendas ahead of time.

At committee meetings, school board members may discuss and propose initiatives, set and track achievement goals, or hear experts and members of the public express their concerns. Committees often make official recommendations and final revisions on policies for the full board to vote on at general action meetings.

As required by law, committee meetings must be open to the public and must provide a "reasonable opportunity" for the public to comment on matters of concern.³⁰

GENERAL ACTION MEETINGS: General action meetings often take place with the full board present, with the board president presiding. After considering and revising a proposed policy at committee meetings, the board takes final action on new or revised policies at these meetings.

General action meetings must also provide an opportunity for the public to speak on matters of concern and school boards may not take official action without providing any opportunity for input from the public.³¹

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT BOARD ACTIONS OR ADVOCATE TO MY SCHOOL BOARD?

RESEARCH YOUR LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD: School boards are required to post agenda, minutes,³² policies,³³ and votes³⁴ on their public websites. Policies are arranged by topic and identify who in the district is responsible for implementing the policy. Many school districts make their policies easy to access and read.

You can also learn about members of your school board, including their priorities, values, and how they intend to ensure access to a quality education for all students in the district. If a school board member is particularly committed to an issue of interest to you, consider raising your concerns with that person directly.

ATTEND A MEETING: You have the right to attend all non-confidential school board meetings.³⁵ School boards are required to announce when and where meetings will be held and post their agendas on their website.³⁶ During the school term, school boards are required to meet at least once every two months but most meet at least once per month.³⁷ Most school districts provide an opportunity for the public to attend virtually.

TIP: Boards typically follow formal parliamentary procedures, i.e., call to order, reading and approving of prior minutes, committee reports, etc. Print the agenda ahead of time and bring it with you; it will help you follow along and understand what is happening.

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES: School boards have the obligation to engage with the community they represent. Under the Pennsylvania School Code, school board members must post their email addresses on the board's website within 180 days of assuming office.³⁸ Writing an email, giving a call, or arranging a brief meeting with your representative is a common way to engage with your school board.

TIP: Email can be an effective way to communicate with school board members. Here are three tips for writing an effective email:

(1) Introduce yourself and why you are emailing up front: Tell your board members that you are a parent or resident of the district and identify the specific policy or issue you are writing about.

(2) Keep it brief: Limit your email to a few short paragraphs. School board members are often very busy and may not have time to go through more than a few paragraphs.

(3) Personalize your message: Tell a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your community. School board members are more likely to be persuaded by a personal story than facts and data points.

(4) Ask questions: You may ask a board member to propose a recommendation or ask a question at an open meeting relating to your concern.

For a sample email to a school board, [click here](#).

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD: You have the right to speak at a school board meeting regarding matters that are within the authority of the board. School boards can enact *reasonable* rules limiting public comment, but they cannot refuse to receive public input.³⁹

Courts have held that School Board's restrictions on public comment must be viewpoint-neutral and evenly enforced. This means that the school board cannot restrict public comments simply because they disagree with the opinions or ideas of the speaker.⁴⁰

Reasonable and viewpoint-neutral restrictions on public comment include requiring speakers to sign up in advance, restricting speakers to 2-5 minutes, limiting overall time allotted to public comments, prohibiting disruptive conduct, and limiting comments to agenda items only.⁴¹

TIP: Research the board’s rules and procedures ahead of time. Some school boards may require speakers to sign up in advance, while others may distribute speaking slots on a first-come, first-served basis. Keep your message short and simple; it is likely that you will only have a few minutes to speak. Be respectful, school boards reserve the right to eject anyone engaging in offensive or disruptive conduct.

VOTE & RUN IN A SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION: School board elections are held every two years with roughly half the positions up for election. There are no limits to the number of terms a member may serve and there is no compensation for the time spent on the board.⁴² Just about anyone can become a school board member. The main qualifications are that you must be 18 years or older, have good moral character, and have lived as a resident of the district for at least one year.⁴³

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, community engagement, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness.

ELC’s publications provide a general statement of the law. However, each situation is different. If questions remain about how the law applies to a particular situation, contact ELC’s Helpline for information and advice — visit www.elc-pa.org/contact or call 215-238-6970 (Eastern and Central PA) or 412-258-2120 (Western PA) — or contact another attorney of your choice.

¹ See 24 P.S. § 3-301 (“The public school system of the Commonwealth shall be administered by a board of school directors, to be elected or appointed...”).

² See 24 P.S. §§ 3-302-303.

³ 24 P.S. § 10(e)-1071.

⁴ Generally, school boards are elected by the residents of the district. School members may be elected in at large, regional, or a combination of both election plans. If elected at large, candidates must be residents of the school district, but may live anywhere in the district and are chosen by all the voters in the district. If elected by region, school directors who reside in each region are elected by the voters of their respective regions, with each region electing an equal number. See 24 P.S. §§ 3-302-303; PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION, *How To Run for School Board*, <https://www.psbpa.org/advocacy-and-news/resources/run-school-board-guide-school-board-candidates-pennsylvania/> (last visited July 2022). In the City of Philadelphia, school board members are nominated by the Educational Nominating Panel and finalists are appointed by the mayor. See [Philadelphia Home Rule Charter Article XII § 12-201](#).

⁵ 24 P.S. §§ 3-302-303.

⁶ See 24 P.S. §§ 5-501-528.

⁷ 24 P.S. § 5-507.

⁸ See 24 P.S. § 5-508 (listing actions a school board can take: fixing length of school term; adopting textbooks; appointing or dismissing district superintendent; adopting the annual budget; levying and assessing taxes; purchasing or selling land; locating new buildings; dismissing a teacher after a hearing; adopting courses of study; establishing additional schools; fixing salaries etc.)

⁹ 24 P.S. § 10(e)-1071.

¹⁰ 24 P.S. § 10(e)-1073.

¹¹ 24 P.S. § 10(e)-1073.1.

¹² 24 P.S. § 10-1080.

¹³ 24 P.S. § 15(b)-1512.

¹⁴ See 22 Pa. Code § 4.12.

¹⁵ See *Zykan v. Warsaw Community School Corporation & Warsaw School Board of Trustees*, 631 F.2d 1300 (7th Cir. 1980) (holding school boards have the right to establish a curriculum on the basis of its own discretion, but forbidden to impose a “pall of orthodoxy” over the classroom”); see also *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982) (holding “school boards have broad discretion in the management of school affairs,

but such discretion must be exercised in a manner that comports with the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment.”).

¹⁶ 22 Pa. Code § 12.10; *Circle School v. Pappert*, 381 F.3d 172, 174 (3d Cir. 2004) (holding that state law that required school officials to notify guardians of students who declined to recite the pledge of allegiance or salute the flag violated the students’ First Amendment right to free speech); *West Virginia State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

¹⁷ 24 P.S. § 5-510 (“The board of school directors... may adopt and enforce such reasonable rules and regulations as it may deem necessary and proper, regarding... the conduct and deportment... of all pupils...”).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ 24 P.S. § 5-511.

²⁰ See 22 Pa. Code § 12.9(b) (“Students shall have the right to express themselves unless the expression materially and substantially interferes with the educational process, threatens serious harm to the school or community, encourages unlawful activity or interferes with another individual’s rights.”); *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) (holding that student action of wearing political armbands was protected by the First Amendment because it was disruptive).

²¹ 42 U.S.C. § 2000d; 20 U.S.C. § 1681; 43 P.S. Ch. 17.

²² Courts must balance the requirement of putting students on fair notice of proscribed behavior with the school’s need to impose sanctions for a “wide range of unanticipated conduct.” See *Sypniewski v. Warren Hill Reg’l Bd. of Educ.*, 307 F.3d 243, 260 (3d Cir. 2002); see also *Killon v. Franklin Regional Sch. Dist.*, 136 F. Supp.2d 446, 459 (W.D. Pa. 2001) (holding rule prohibiting “verbal/written abuse of a staff member” to be unconstitutionally vague); *Flaherty v. Keystone Oaks Sch. Dist.* 247 F. Supp.2d 698, 704 (W.D. Pa. 2003) (holding that a policy that prohibited “abuse, offense, and harassment” was overly vague because the terms were not defined in any way); *Miller v. Penn Manor Sch. Dist.*, 588 F. Supp.2d 606, 610 (E.D. Pa. 2008) (holding that a rule prohibiting student dress that is “a distraction to the educational environment” was void for vagueness).

²³ 22 Pa. Code § 12.3(c); see also 22 Pa. Code § 12.6(a) (explaining that the school board must “define and publish the types of offenses that would lead to exclusion from school.”).

²⁴ See 24 P.S. § 5-510; 22 Pa. Code § 12.3(b); *Katzman v. Cumberland Valley Sch. Dist.*, 479 A.2d 671, 675 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 1984) (reducing student’s grades for entire marking period as punishment for having a glass of wine while on school trip held unreasonable because punishment misrepresented academic achievement).

²⁵ See e.g., *Thunberg v. Strause*, 682 A.2d 295, 299 (Pa. 1996); *First Phila. Charter Sch. for Literacy v. Dudely (In re C.D.)*, 2011 Phila. Ct. Com. Pl. LEXIS 136 (Phila. Cty. Ct. C.P. May 23, 2011) (finding the permanent expulsion of a kindergartener who touched teacher’s thighs to be arbitrary); *DeCaro v. Pocono Mountain Sch. Dist.*, No. 5561-cv-2010, 15 Pa. D. & C.5th 388, 392 (Monroe Cty.Ct. C.P. June 18, 2010) (punishing vandalism of non-school property more harshly than vandalism of school property held to be arbitrary); *Bender v. Exeter Township Sch. Dist.*, 63 Pa. D. & C.4th 414, 425 (Berks Cty. Ct. C.P. July 18, 2003), *aff’d mem.*, 839 A.2d 486 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2003) (holding that a transfer to an alternative school for minor misbehavior was arbitrary and capricious).

²⁶ 24 P.S. § 5-510.2(5)(v).

²⁷ 24 P.S. § 4-425(a).

²⁸ 24 P.S. § 4-425(c); 65 Pa. C.S. § 708.

²⁹ 24 P.S. § 4-425(b); *Reading Eagle Co. v. Council*, 156 Pa. Commw. 412, 416-17 (Pa. Cmmw. Ct. 1993) (finding that when an executive session is called, the Sunshine Act requires the agency to describe with specificity what is being discussed, and “legal matters” is insufficient).

³⁰ 65 Pa. C.S. 710.1

³¹ *Id.*

³² 65 Pa. C.S. § 706.

³³ 24 P.S. § 5-510.2.

³⁴ 65 Pa. C.S. § 705.

³⁵ 65 Pa. C.S. § 704.

³⁶ 65 Pa. C.S. §§ 709(a)-(c.1).

³⁷ 24 P.S. § 14(b)-421.

³⁸ 24 P.S. § 3-329.

³⁹ 65 Pa. C.S. § 710.1 (“the board... shall provide a reasonable opportunity at each advertised regular meeting and advertised special meeting for residents... or for taxpayers... to comment on matters of concern, official action or deliberation which are or may be before the board or council prior to taking official action.”); *but see* 65 Pa. C.S. 710 (nothing in this chapter shall prohibit the agency from adopting...rules and regulations necessary for the conduct of tis meetings and the maintenance of order.”); *Sklaroff v. Abington Sch. Dist.*, 2017 WL 4582638 (Pa. Cmwlt. 2017) (holding “the denial or a right to speak before a board...may give rise to cause of action under the [Sunshine] Act,

limiting comments is not violative thereof as long as a person is afforded a reasonable opportunity to comment on matters of concern.”).

⁴⁰ *City of Madison, Joint Sch. Dist. No. 8 v. Wis. Emp. Rels. Comm’n*, 429 U.S. 167 (1976) (holding First Amendment protections apply to speaking at public school board meetings; *Marshall v. Amuso*, 2021 WL 5359020 (E.D. Pa. 2017) (“viewpoint discrimination, which is presumed impermissible when directed against speech otherwise within the forum’s limitations”) (citing *Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 829-30 (1995))).

⁴¹ 65 Pa. C.S 710; *Sklaroff v. Abington Sch. Dist.*, 2017 WL 4582638 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2017) (holding policy limiting speakers to 3 minutes and to agenda items only, not violative of the Sunshine Act); *Duff v. City of Philadelphia*, 2015 WL 4644138 (E.D. Pa. 2015) (holding that policy limiting public comment to agenda items did not violate First Amendment because it was narrowly tailored to serve an important government interest); *Alekseev v. City Council of Philadelphia*, 976 A.2d 1253 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2009) (holding that limiting public comment to the “subject of the legislation under consideration by the committee is patently reasonable).

⁴² 24 P.S. § 3-321.

⁴³ 24 P.S. § 3-322.