



ADVOCATING LOCAL POLICY CHANGE

When approaching schools or school districts to advocate local policy change, you should be prepared to deal with:

- 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) lay the groundwork, and (2) build awareness and support for the policy change.

1. **LAY THE GROUNDWORK**

In most school districts, anyone can usually start the process of creating or revising school policies — school board members, administrators, school staff members, students, parents or anyone else in 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 that can be taken in laying the groundwork for policy change:

- a. **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. Why is it important for the policy to be changed? What purpose does it serve?

School board and administrative support is especially important in creating an environment for making changes happen.

- b. **Assess 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:

- **Compile and review local data that may affect decision making.** For example, find out how the public schools and school grounds are currently being used outside the school day for school-sponsored and community activities and to what extent.



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, do 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.

Review the "Foundation" policies in place in the district for making policy changes. There is usually a policy or process in place for adopting and revising school district policies. Find out what that policy is and be willing to abide by it. School board policies on policy adoption/revision usually provide direction:

- for submitting policy proposals for change,
 - for the review of policy proposals by the administration and school board (or a board standing committee), and
 - for the adoption of new or revised policies (usually 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? [Refer to the attached activity sheet.]

c. **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 dealing with them.

d. **Develop a Strategy to Get the Policy Adopted or Revised** – Ask yourselves, how should we approach policy change in our school community? Seek advice on the best ways to approach school board members and the board as whole. As noted above, it is important for you to understand that individual board members have no power to make decisions for the board; they can, however, influence policy decisions made by the board.

Decide on who should introduce issues to key players and who should make policy recommendations.



Decide on how many policy changes to pursue at a time. Depending upon your current situation, incremental steps may be more appropriate than to present the “dream” policies all at once. Determine what is politically feasible, taking into consideration local policy needs and interests. This requires good judgment and an understanding of your district.

It is extremely important to be realistic in approaching policy change, rather than idealistic. If you “bite off more than the schools are willing and able to chew”, your efforts for policy change and its effectiveness will be reduced, if not, destroyed.

- e. **Respect the Hierarchy in the Organizational Structure.** You need to make sure to inform and involve key administrators in the policy change process.

2. BUILD AWARENESS AND SUPPORT FOR THE POLICY CHANGE

Do not 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 proposes 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.