

School Board: Frequently Asked Questions

Who serves on the school board?

The school board consists of lay representatives – people who live in the community and are selected by the community (or if it's an appointed school board, selected by either the mayor or county freeholders). They're your neighbors: parents, grandparents, local business owners, and retirees – ordinary citizens.

What are the roles of the school board and the superintendent?

The school board has a dual role: To represent the concerns of the citizens, taxpayers, and parents to the school administrators, and to represent the needs of the students and school district to the citizens, taxpayers, and parents of the community. The school board does not operate the district on a day-to-day basis; that is the job of the superintendent, who is the district's chief executive. Rather, the school board sets the policies, goals, and objectives for the district – and it holds the superintendent responsible for implementing the policies and achieving the goals.

I have a problem with my school. Isn't the school board the appropriate body to address it?

Maybe. We recommend working up the chain of command. For instance, if a parent has a problem with a teacher, the parent should first address it with the teacher and, if the issue is not resolved, the parent should turn to the principal or supervisor, and then the superintendent. The school board should be the "court of last resort."

Do I have an opportunity to speak at the board meeting?

"State law requires a public comment period at board meetings. Boards are allowed to establish reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner of public comments. Our district has a public comment section at the beginning of the meeting (per our district policy) that requires an individual to simply sign up to speak as they arrive at the meeting, listing their name and topic. The Board reserves the right to limit comments to a certain time period in order to allow everyone who wishes to speak the opportunity as well as to manage the length of the meetings. Our Board welcomes comments and appreciates community input into matters of the district."

What is proper protocol for public participation?

Comments from citizens generally go through the chair at the board meeting, usually the board chairperson. Boards use the public comment period as an opportunity to listen to citizen concerns, but not to debate issues or enter into a question-and-answer session or a "cross-examination" between the public and individual members. Be aware that not all issues brought before a board meeting will be resolved that evening; boards may respond to a public comment by seeking additional information or by delegating the authority to investigate the issue to the superintendent or his/her designee. While public education can be an emotional issue, and understandably so, the board will strive to maintain a certain level of decorum at the meeting. Many meetings are recorded or televised, and students often attend or participate in the meetings. As such, citizens are expected to maintain a tone of courtesy and civility.

How does the board set its rules at the meeting?

A local school board's parliamentary procedure is a matter of local policy. Most boards follow Roberts Rules of Order, which describes how meetings are run, how motions and votes are taken and other procedures.

The board goes into a closed-door meeting each meeting. Why can't the public witness what occurs there?

MCSO South Carolina Open Meetings Act (also known as the Sunshine Law) specifies areas that are to be discussed in "executive" or closed-door session. Among the most common are privacy issues (including employee privacy as well as matters dealing with individual students and student discipline); anticipated litigation and issues involving attorney-client privilege; negotiations with labor unions and negotiating strategy; matters involving the purchase of property; and any issues dealing with security that could undermine safety if made public. Sometimes, citizens will want to know why a school board took a vote regarding a particular staff member (e.g., not re-hiring a teacher or principal). However, school board members are not allowed to publicly discuss evaluative aspects of the staff member's employment, unless the employee authorizes it.

What is the board agenda?

While school boards publicly post an annual notice describing the date and location of meetings, they are also required by law to post an agenda for each meeting. The Board Agenda is a document that outlines what will happen at the board meetings. It is set, according to our policy, by the Board Chair and Superintendent. Anyone can suggest items include by following the proper procedure that is listed in our board policies. All meetings (regular, called, committees, workshops, etc.) will have an agenda that is posted on district buildings, the district website, and sent to the local papers. Items can be added to the agenda after the 48 hours in cases of emergency or by a majority vote of the board members present at the meeting. All additions or changes must be made prior to the approval of the agenda at the meeting.

My school board seems to rapidly work through the agenda, without much debate. Why is that?

Most items that are presented on the agenda are informational items that do not lead to much debate. Some matters, such as personnel decisions, contractual matters, or legal issues, are discussed legally in the executive session. Such discussions are due to legal issues surrounding protection of individual rights. No votes or decisions are made during these sessions, but opinions are expressed and questions asked. Sometimes the board has a committee that meets publicly (with an agenda) to investigate or discuss certain issues and return with a recommendation to the whole board to vote on. The board also has public "workshops" and "called meetings" to review and discuss information and may vote on any decisions or information outside of policy changes. The intention is not to "hide" from the public, but rather to streamline the regular meetings and present as much information as possible to the public in a reasonable time frame.

What is the difference between school board's policy and state regulations and statutes?

Statutes are the laws that are enacted by legislators in South Carolina. Usually the law will contain broad language on an issue, and it will authorize the appropriate state agency (which would be the South Carolina Department of Education, or SCDE, in the case of school law) to write regulations, also called "administrative code," that detail how the law will be carried out. Local public schools must adhere to state statute and regulations. There are many aspects of school management that the state does not manage. Those are covered by the local school board's policies, which are the school board's rules and guidelines that detail how the district will operate. Policies address many issues ranging from student discipline and dress codes to whether the district will rent the gym to community groups after school hours. The state generally does not delve into the oversight of local board policies unless there is a specific law requiring boards to have policies on an issue (such as school bullying), or if the local board's policies are found to be arbitrary or capricious, or have otherwise run afoul of state laws and regulations.