

Parents' Guide to School Board Advocacy in California and How to Use the ACLU's Model Board Policies and Resolutions

- Writing to Your School Board Members
- Calling Your School Board Members
- Meeting with Your School Board Members

Careful preparation can help you make an effective presentation to the board. But if you have a concern, a question, or a compliment, go ahead and get in touch with them. You do not have to be an expert on education policy, or have all the answers in advance. You can let the board members know that you are still exploring an issue.

Write Them

Letters sent by mail or facsimile are an effective way to communicate with your school board members. Often a letter will be seen as representing not only the position of the writer, but also many other parents who did not take the time to write.

E-mail can be another effective way to communicate with school board members. Remember to be just as careful about what you write in an e-mail as you would in a letter. If you prefer to write in a language other than English, check with the district office to see if they have someone who can translate your letter or e-mail for the board members.

Here are six tips for writing an effective letter or e-mail:

1. Keep it brief: Letters should never be longer than one page and should be limited to one issue. School board members often have separate full-time jobs and have a lot of reading material to go through before each meeting.
2. State who you are and what you want up front: In the first paragraph, tell your board members that you are a parent or family member of a child in their district. Identify the issue you are writing about. If your letter relates to a specific policy or procedure, identify it by its name and number.
3. Hit your three most important points: Choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading your school board members to support your position and explain these to the board.
4. Personalize your letter: Tell your school board member why this policy matters in your community. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your family. **Do not underestimate the power of your own story. Personal stories have a strong impact.**
5. Personalize your relationship: Did you vote for the school board member you are writing to? Are you familiar with him or her through any business or personal relationship? If so, say so.
6. You are the expert: Remember that the school board's job is to represent you. Be courteous and to the point, but do not be afraid to take a firm position. You may know more about the issue than the board member—this is your chance to educate him or her about the issue.

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Call Them

You can also call school board members and let them know where you stand on the issues. If school board members find that their positions are unpopular, your call may contribute to a change in policy. If a board member asks you to put your concerns in writing, follow up with a brief letter.

If you will need an interpreter, call the district office to see if they can help you arrange to have an interpreter available on the phone or at an in-person meeting.

Back up a letter, e-mail, or phone call with face-to-face communication at a school board meeting!

Participate in a Board Meeting

School board meetings are public, and speaking in public can be intimidating. But there are ways to overcome your fears and speak up for children.

- ✓ First, remember that the board members work for you!
- ✓ If you have never spoken at a school board meeting, you might want to go to one or two meetings just to observe. You can get a sense of the individual board members and watch how the board conducts its business.
- ✓ Try to work with another parent or an organized group. It can strengthen your message and give you more confidence.

You can always start by trying to set up individual meetings with board members to see where they stand on an issue. But you should also follow up by raising your issue at a school board meeting.

School boards are made up of at least five people, so if you have even one or two board members on your side, your presence at a school board meeting can help them gain the support of their fellow board members and the public.

Before you meet with your school board members, it is a good idea to check in with your principal and superintendent first.

Why Direct my Advocacy Efforts Towards the Superintendent?

Who is the Superintendent?

Local school boards elect their district's superintendent, who serves as the school district's chief executive officer.

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What are the Superintendent's Policy Responsibilities?

Some of his/her duties involve preparing budgets for the school board and developing and implementing the local control and accountability plan.¹⁰ The superintendent is also often responsible for implementing board policies. After the school board adopts a new board policy, it is sometimes the superintendent's responsibility to adopt and implement administrative regulations that describe in more detail how the policy will be implemented (in other words, put the policy into action). Administrative regulations explain school staff's roles and responsibilities and, if necessary, provide a timeline for implementing the new policy.¹¹ Not all policies have a corresponding regulation. The superintendent will typically create a regulation when the school board policy specifically calls on the superintendent to develop additional rules to implement the policy.

Policy Advocacy Can Begin with the Superintendent

The school board has exclusive authority to adopt board policies, but the superintendent is a key person to communicate your concerns to because he/she generally plays a big role in the process. For example, some school board bylaws require that the superintendent identify and communicate to the board issues that affect the community and suggest new policies or revise old policies.¹² Board bylaws can even assign responsibility to the superintendent to research the issues and gather fiscal data, staff and community input, "related district policies, sample policies from other organizations or agencies, and other useful information to fully inform the Board about the issue."¹³

Often, the superintendent can be your strongest ally because many school boards rely on their superintendent's recommendations. Superintendents can also be powerful allies during your advocacy efforts because they are responsible "for writing the procedures that implement the policies" (i.e., administrative regulations).¹⁴ Thus, "[i]t is important to talk with the superintendent [] to have input in how the procedures are written."¹⁵

¹⁰ CAL. EDUC. CODE § 35035.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² CYPRUS SCH. DIST., BB 9310 BOARD BYLAWS BOARD POLICIES (2015), *available at* <http://www.gamutonline.net/district/cypressesd/DisplayPolicy/1015527/9>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* (alterations added).

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Quick Reference Guide for the Four Types of School Board Policies

Here is a quick reference guide to help you easily identify important information about each type of policy, including who adopts the policy, when they can adopt the policy, whom the policy governs, and how you can advocate for changing the policy.

Quick Facts about the Four Types of Policies			
	Board Policies and Resolutions	Administrative Regulations	Memorandum of Understanding (“MOU”)
Who Adopts the Policy?	The district’s school board.	The superintendent.	The district school board and external agencies.
When is the Policy Adopted?	During a public school board meeting where the agenda has been publicized ahead of time (usually on the district’s website).	When the school board passes a board policy that directs the superintendent to develop a regulation or ensure implementation of the policy.	The school board, district superintendent, and any external agency can adopt an MOU at any time during their relationship. It is best practice, however, for the parties to adopt an MOU at the beginning of their relationship.
Whom Does the Policy Govern?	School employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, school resource officers who are paid by the school).	School employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, school resource officers who are paid by the school).	School employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, school resource officers who are paid by the school) AND employees of the contracting external agency.
How Can I Change the Policy?	Speak with your superintendent about issues with existing policies or the need for a new policy; Talk with your school board about issues with existing policies or the need for a new policy; and/or Add your concern to the school board’s meeting agenda.	Speak with your superintendent about adopting new policies.	Initiate meetings with the school board and superintendent to discuss your district’s existing MOU or to propose adopting an MOU.

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Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources that explain the roles and responsibilities of different school officials and describe the procedures that districts follow when adopting new policies and holding public meetings:

- CAL. SCH. BDS. ASS'N, FACT SHEET: EFFECTIVE POLICY MAKING (2013), *available at* http://csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/DistrictPolicyServices/~/_media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/DistrictPolicyResources/201302GPSEffectivePolicyMakingFactSheet.ashx.
- CYPRUS SCH. DIST., BB 9310 BOARD BYLAWS BOARD POLICIES (2015), *available at* <http://www.gamutonline.net/district/cypressesd/DisplayPolicy/1015527/9>.
- INGLEWOOD UNIFIED SCH. DIST., BB 9322 AGENDA/MEETING MATERIALS (2014), *available at* <http://www.gamutonline.net/district/inglewoodusd/DisplayPolicy/945312/9>.
- [Link to ACLU's sample letter to the district from The Right to Remain a Student toolkit].