

Policy News

Washington State
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Association



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New School Director Orientation

New school director orientation is an essential first step to familiarize school directors with their duties. It is also a great opportunity to acquaint them with board policies and procedures. WSSDA's model policy 1112, Director Orientation, lists several key topics that should be addressed in the board orientation.

There are no laws that govern board orientation; therefore the board has a great deal of discretion in determining what issues are to be covered. It may be advisable to have a series of topics that are covered over a period of weeks or months.

This issue of *Policy News* will review and update the Director Orientation policy and identify key policies in the WSSDA Policy Reference Manual 1000 series that are helpful for new school directors to be aware of and understand.

Model Policy 1112 – Director Orientation

This policy is updated to include several complimentary publications provided by the WSSDA that are

crucial to help familiarize a new school director with their duties and responsibilities. The *Open Public Meetings Act, A Guide for School Directors and Superintendents*, outlines the laws regarding open meetings, executive sessions and private meetings. This area of the law is essential for a new school director to understand and apply appropriately. Currently, there is heightened scrutiny on all public officials and the way they conduct public meetings.

Conflict of Interest is another complimentary publication that will assist the new or experienced school director in understanding their role and limitations. The conflict of interest law seeks to prohibit school directors and other elected officials from benefiting from their positions personally or financially. There are certain exceptions when school directors may receive financial benefits, but even in those limited situations, the school director is required to disclose their interest and refrain from participating in voting on those issues.

WSSDA also offers *Governing through Policy*, a guide on how boards use policy to set the direction for their districts. This concise, easy-to-read primer describes the WSSDA Policy Reference Manual and how the board should use the sample policies provided by WSSDA to develop their customized district policy manual. The task of using policies to govern and manage decision making within an organization is not innate or intuitive; therefore this publication guides school directors and others through the process.

The *Parliamentary Procedures* guide for school directors is an essential resource for new school directors, but also for the board chair. Board meetings usually do not involve complex parliamentary maneuvers; however, proper conduct of the meeting requires a thorough knowledge of the appropriate procedures.

We recommend review of each of these publications in the board orientation process. The publications are available in a downloadable

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1112 Director Orientation

Policy News

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About the WSSDA

Founded in 1922, the Washington State School Directors' Association is comprised of all 1,477 school board members from Washington's 295 school districts. The districts they lead serve more than one million students, have a combined annual budget of \$6 billion, and employ nearly 100,000 people. WSSDA's core mission is focused on ensuring that school board members have the knowledge, tools and services they need to effectively govern their districts and improve student learning.

Adobe PDF format at www.wssda.org. In addition, a new school director should receive an introduction to the strategic plan and goals of the district. Typically, those goals and strategic plan are used as the foundation for the boards' self evaluation and ultimately to measure the superintendents' success in meeting district wide goals.

Further, the board orientation includes review of essential board and district publications. Among those to consider for review are the board policies and administrative procedures. The new school director also receives a complete set of the board policies and the administrative procedures. Simply receiving the policies is insufficient — there should also be an identification of, and an explanation for, essential board policies. This issue of *Policy News* highlights those policies that are crucial to review in a new school director orientation.

Policy 1112 lists other documents, such as the staff handbook, the student handbook, financial reports, district budget, board minutes and staff member job descriptions. All of these documents prove helpful in assisting new school directors in obtaining the knowledge necessary to perform their job.

The board decides the process used for the new member orientation. However, the board chair, or a designee, usually chooses to conduct the orientation along with the district superintendent. A joint approach to the board orientation will provide the newly-elected school director with the administrative, as well as the elected official perspective. Inasmuch as the board and superintendent will work together as a team, it is beneficial for the new school director to see that relationship in opera-

tion as both conduct the orientation. The WSSDA model policy is modified to clarify that the board chair and superintendent provide the new member orientation.

The new school director orientation need not consist of a one-shot opportunity. The breadth and depth of information does not lend itself to a single approach. Further, the first year of a school director's term is definitely a year of growth and substantial learning about the district and educational issues on state and national levels. The board chair or another individual on the board identified as a mentor should be available to respond to a new school director's questions throughout the year. Or a more formal schedule can be established to meet with the new school director to discuss questions or areas of concern.

WSSDA provides several training opportunities for new school directors as well as the full board. These opportunities are available at regional meetings, the annual conference or specialized workshops to address school directors' needs. Additionally, school directors may contact the association to ask a question or obtain resource information.

Essential Policies to Review in a New Director Orientation

A new school director should be familiar with all of the policies in the board's policy manual, at least to the point they know the issues addressed in policy. Once the issue is identified, further clarification can be obtained by review of the specific policy and legal references. However there are certain policies that are of significant importance and are worth mentioning during a new director's orientation. Most

of these policies are in the 1000 section of the WSSDA policy reference manual.

Model Policy 1210 – Annual Organizational Meeting, Election of Officers

One of the first official duties of a newly-elected school director may be to participate in the election of board officers and the WSSDA legislative representative. The election of the chair and the vice chair are required by law to be conducted at the first meeting of the board. As part of the orientation the new member should be informed of this event and whether the board process is to rotate the chairperson's role or whether the elections are open to all school directors.

Model Policy 1220 – Board Officers and Duties of Board Members

The newly-elected school director can use this policy to understand the role of the board chair, vice chair and legislative representation. Although the legislative representative position is not statutorily required it is an extremely important position. The legislative representative keeps the members of the local board informed of statewide issues that could impact the board's local governance role. Major issues on the state level have the potential to dramatically impact boards' decisions regarding funding, statewide testing, facilities financing, school director training and school director elections. The local legislative representative keeps the local board informed, but also assists the WSSDA by conveying the locally elected school director viewpoint.

This policy is also important because it explains that the individual school director's authority is limited because only a majority of the board can act on behalf of the

board. This is true when taking official action or when directing the superintendent to take action.

Fundamentally, this policy restates the importance of school director preparation and attendance at board meetings. It is the expectation that each school director will review information prior to the board meeting and attend the meeting prepared to participate in the discussion and make a reasoned decision.

Model Policy 1310 – Policy Adoption, Manuals and Administrative Procedures

The newly-elected school director will receive their own policy manual, but it is also important that they understand how the manual operates. For example, the member should understand that the board adopts the policy, but the procedure is an administrative document. Therefore procedures need not be reviewed by the board prior to their issuance. However, in the case of a highly controversial issue on which the board may receive questions, the superintendent may request prior board review of a procedure. Or if an issue arises about whether an administrative procedure is consistent with the policy intent of the board, then the board may review the procedure to ensure that there is proper alignment between the board policy and the administrative procedure.

Model Policy 1320 – Suspension of a Policy

It is important for the board to understand that if they no longer need a particular policy, it takes official action of the board to remove that policy from the policy manual. A policy is not automatically removed or administratively deleted; it takes affirmative action by a majority of the board.

Model Policy 1330 – Administration in the Absence of Policy or Procedure

Occasionally, issues arise that are not addressed by board policy. In order not to hinder the efficient, expedient operations of the schools this policy allows the superintendent and other staff to use their best judgment when those circumstances arise. However, any decision that is made must be consistent with local, state and national laws and rules. If the action that is taken in the absence of a policy will have a significant impact on the staff, students or community, the issue should be brought to the attention of the board of directors at the next board meeting or earlier if the circumstances deem that is appropriate.

Model Policy 1400 – Meeting Conduct, Order of Business and Quorum

Many school directors are experienced community volunteers and have participated in numerous meetings. This policy provides a concise overview of some of the nuances that may exist in meetings of elected public officials, for example, the distinction between a regular meeting and a special meeting. Regular meetings are those for which the board established a schedule at the beginning of the year and must be held within the school district boundaries.

Special meetings are those that may be called with 24-hour notice to all school directors and members of the media who have requested notice. The board may only take final action on those items that are listed in the special meeting notice.

The provision for emergency meetings is rarely used, but in the event of a major catastrophe involving fire, flood, earthquake or other emergency, the board may take immediate action without providing prior notification to the public.

Elected school directors are also required to take a vote on certain issues by roll call. The majority of motions and resolutions may be voted upon by “voice” vote. However, in three situations an oral roll call must be taken. Those circumstances are: (1) the election of board officers; (2) filling a vacancy on the board; and (3) the selection of the school district superintendent. The board secretary is usually aware of these legal voting requirements, however, it is also beneficial for members of the board, newly-elected as well as veteran school directors, to understand their legal obligations.

Model Policy 1410 – Executive or Closed Sessions

The law allows school directors to conduct certain business outside of the public view. These meetings are called executive sessions. Each legitimate executive session purpose is clearly defined in the law. (They are also contained in the WSSDA *Open Public Meetings Act* handbook). We advise districts who are contemplating going into executive session to review the legal reasons and see whether the issue they plan to discuss is appropriate. For example, if a board is interviewing candidates for a vacant board position, that discussion meets the requirements of RCW 42.30.110 (f):

“To evaluate the qualifications of a candidate for appointment to the board; however, any interview of such candidate and final action appointing a candidate to the board shall be in a meeting open to the public; or ...”

This is an activity that the board may conduct in executive session, but the law also clarifies that the interviews and the final decision must be in public. Each time the issue of executive session arises, the board, in consultation with the superintendent, should analyze the rationale for the executive session against the stated permissible reasons.

If an executive session is permissible, the board chair must announce the reason for the executive session and the anticipated amount of time that the board will spend in the executive session. If the executive session is not concluded at the anticipated time, the board must make an announcement of the new projected ending time.

Often the distinction between executive sessions and private meetings is confused. Executive sessions are public discussions that the law allows to be held in private. Private meetings or closed sessions are not covered by the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA). Closed sessions are not required to be announced, i.e. public notice is not necessary. Two examples are student hearings and collective bargaining sessions with employee organizations or professional negotiations with an employee.

Model Policy 1420 – Proposed Agenda and Consent Agenda

Often a newly-elected school director is interested in placing an item on the agenda. This policy explains the process for placing items on the agenda. In most districts, the board chair, in consultation with the superintendent, develops the board agenda. If school directors would like items to be considered for a board meeting agenda, those items are shared with the board chair. The issue of the consent

agenda and removing items from the consent agenda is also an area that new school directors frequently ask about. This policy explains that a member may request that an item be removed from the consent agenda, the removed item becomes part of the regular agenda and the board votes on the remaining items on the consent agenda.

Model Policy 1430 – Audience Participation

A new school director may be called upon by constituents to explain the opportunities for members of the public to participate in board meetings. This policy assists school directors in explaining to members of the public the opportunity to share their opinions.

Many boards provide for public comment either at the beginning or the end of the board meeting. Some boards also allow members of the public to express their opinion prior to board action on agenda items that the board believes warrant public comments.

Model Policy 1810 – Annual Goals and Objectives

Along with this policy, a new school director should be introduced to the specific annual goals and objectives for the district. The policy is simply a reminder that the driving force behind the board’s actions and decisions originates from their districtwide goals and objectives.

In summary, we recommend these policies as part of the new school director orientation, because they will provide a solid overview of board operations. This will help the new directors get off to a good start by focusing on governing through policy, using their skills and expertise to fulfill the public trust and satisfy their obligation to govern the district efficiently.