

PAA's Local School Board Advocacy Toolkit

*How YOU can have an impact on education policy
in your district and school!*



■ Why get involved with your local school board?

Many key decisions about public education are made at the local level.

- Your children's school may be governed by a city or county school board with elected or appointed members. This school board sets general policy, oversees curriculum, assessment and staffing, and establishes an overall program and facilities budget for the year.
- The school itself has decision making authority over certain areas – in many cases these decision are made by the school principal, and in others they are made with the input or authority of a local school council or advisory board.

■ What are some of the basics to know before getting involved?

Open Meetings and public records laws: Most states have Open Meetings laws that require all public bodies such as school boards to conduct business in public. This means that you have the right to attend school board meetings and meetings of board committees, local school councils or advisory boards. These laws specify how and when notice of these meetings must be publicized. (There are specific exceptions to open meetings rules, such as when the board needs to discuss private issues of a student or staff member, or real estate transactions, but all votes must be taken in public.)

- They also may require minutes of these meetings to be kept and made available to the public, along with written policies and other documents. In most states, you can request copies of these documents under Freedom of Information laws. There are steps you need to take to do this which are generally detailed on a web site for your state's attorney general. PAA has a [tip sheet](#) on how to do that (<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/sample-foia-requests/>).

Regular meeting schedule: Open Meeting laws usually also require public bodies to set a calendar of regular meetings for the year and to give ample notice of any changes in the schedule. This makes it easier for the public to know when to expect meetings to happen and to make plans to attend the meetings. The regular meeting schedule is usually posted on a web site for the board and in its main office.

Governance rules: Most boards of education are required to have by-laws and a set of rules and policies that govern the district in areas such as student discipline, assessment, promotion, staffing, etc. Most boards will have these rules posted on their web site.

- Other important sets of rules include your state's **school code**, which details all laws that pertain to schools in your state, and your school's rules, usually called the **student handbook**.

Public participation rules: Not all school boards are required to allow the public to speak at their meetings, but many do. The public participation rules for your school board should be posted on their web site. In larger systems, members of the public are often required to sign up to speak ahead of time and are limited to 2 or 3 minutes to speak. Some boards are more relaxed or generally have few people attend the meetings, so rules are less strict. Public comment may take place before the regular board meeting, after each relevant agenda item, or at the end of the meeting – sometimes all three.

■ What are some of the best ways to have a voice in local school policy making?

Regularly attend school board meetings. Even in large school districts, regular attendance is noted. Regular attendance tends to give your participation more credibility. It will also help you become familiar with the way the board operates.

Do your homework: If you are concerned about a specific issue, find out as much as you can about the issue. PAA has a lot of resources on our web site, www.parentsacrossamerica.org.

- In most states, you can request copies of school board minutes, policies, or other documents under Freedom of Information laws. See PAA's tip sheet on filing FOIA requests (<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/sample-foia-requests/>).

Testify! Speak out about any school issue that is important to you, your students, and/or your school.

- **Individual concerns:** We recommend that you first try to work through personal concerns about your school with the school principal or with the appropriate Board department. If none of your attempts to resolve the problem have worked, it can help to testify about the issue (not the individuals) at a Board meeting. The Board may restrict you from mentioning specific staff people or other individuals by name.
- **Individual school issues:** The Board sometimes operates on the principle that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." It is especially effective to bring a number of people from your school with you, and to choose your best speaker to represent all of you. Be specific about what your school needs, follow up quickly on any promises they make, and keep in touch with the person assigned to your request.
- **Citywide issues:** It is very important that issues affecting all of our schools are discussed publicly at the Board meetings. Board members need to hear from individual parents and other members out in the schools about how their policies may hurt or help.

HELP! I'M NOT USED TO PUBLIC SPEAKING! Most of us are nervous in front of a large formal group, but after a few tries you will become more comfortable. Remember, this is for the *children!* You are their voice.

Some tips for speaking out effectively:

- Write out your comments. Even the best public speaker can get lost and confused in front of a group. Also, you can make copies of your testimony and hand them to the Board members and any reporters who are there.
- Keep to one page. You will have two minutes. Most people can read one typewritten page, double-spaced, slowly, in two minutes. If you talk fast, you can read more, but it is better to say less, say it clearly, make your point, and have a strong finish. You may be given additional time for translation, if necessary.
- Request some specific resolution or action. For your individual and school issues, make sure someone in authority is assigned to your problem, and is given specific instructions. For citywide issues, make sure that a process is laid out to address the issue.

One more great idea: PAA endorses the local form of school governance used in Chicago. Called *Local School Councils* (LSCs), these 12 or 13 member bodies are elected at each school. Parents elect the 6 parent representatives, staff elects 2 teacher representatives and 1 paraprofessional representative, and non-parent community residents elect 2 community representatives. High school LSCs have an elected student member, and principals are automatic members. The chairperson must be a parent. LSCs:

- select and evaluate the school principal;
- approve the annual school budget; and
- approve the annual school improvement plan.

Research over 20 years has shown that Chicago schools run by LSCs significantly out-perform schools taken over by the district. You can find more on this research and on LSCs here:

<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/empowerment-parents-want-lsc-model-school-reform/>