POLICY TOOLKIT

2. CSBA's Policy Framework

This Policy Framework supports boards in developing sound and effective policies that benefit all students. A sound policy framework is the first step in building shared vocabulary and understanding, resulting in a more informed and cohesive governance team. This framework will help board members, no matter their previous expertise and experience, be able to recognize reliable source material and enhance the ability of members to make the most of vetted resources such as those offered by the California School Boards Association (CSBA).

COMPANION TOOLS

Cover Letter The cover letter provides a brief overview of the toolkit and suggestions for the review process.

Policy Framework 101 The 101 document serves as a simplified version of the more comprehensive framework document, quickly orienting members to the tools and how to use them.

Individual Board Member Reflection The individual reflection sheet poses a series of questions to help board members understand their current policy literacy and practices related to policy development.

Board Policy Process Evaluation This evaluation is used to guide the process of weighing and scoring the current practices that the board is engaging in when revising and adopting policies. The rubric helps boards understand where they can aspire to improve.

Policy Principles Quick Reference Guide The quick reference guide helps board members understand how to engage in high-quality policy review and discussion at the dais.

Additional CSBA Policy Resources *(Available by subscription only)*

GAMUT Policy — The most comprehensive set of sample school policies in California.

CSBA's Mandated and Conditionally Mandated Policy Language — A chart summarizing state and federal laws that mandate districts to adopt policies and regulations on specified topics, and the CSBA policy or regulation that addresses each mandate.

Policy Document Workshops — Develop a robust, up-to-date policy manual that addresses key issues and complies with state and federal mandates through a 2-3 day workshop facilitated by a CSBA consultant.

Policy Manual Reviews — A review of a board's policies resulting in a report identifying individual polices that need to be updated or added to the manual.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Importance of setting policy culture and practices — Effective policy governance by LEAs is crucial for ensuring that schools operate efficiently and equitably, fostering community trust, and providing high-quality teaching and learning environments. Strong policies and culture around policy development can protect the LEA from legal and financial challenges.

Need for comprehensive and inclusive policy development — Policy encompasses the LEA's accountability standards and should be developed through a cooperative effort involving the board, staff, and cross-section of community members. Including different perspectives ensures policies reflect the needs of the community, are well implemented, and can become part of the day-to-day culture of the LEA.

Necessity of ongoing policy evaluation and adaptation — Policies must be regularly reviewed and updated to remain effective and compliant with state and federal laws. Continuous feedback from the community and systematic data analysis is essential for closing gaps between written policies and actual LEA practices, ensuring equitable education for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Each newly elected school board member takes an oath of office promising to govern from a deeply held understanding that all students can succeed. To fulfill that promise, and for the effective operation of the schools, a school board member must work together with other board members to set rules and guiding principles, typically through policymaking or policy development. Since school board members are people of diverse backgrounds and experiences, and not necessarily educators by training, there is a need to establish a shared understanding of the basics of policymaking or policy development. For that reason, a key responsibility of the board is to set in place a working relationship with a superintendent whose education and experience can help in ensuring the LEA adequately responds to the needs of students and families, while also representing the needs of the community and complying with state and federal mandates.

For the superintendent and administrative staff to develop the type of programming that will position students to realize their highest potential, the board will need to review, draft, adopt, revise, rescind, and align policies so that the LEA can prepare each student for success. Lack of effective policy governance can severely limit the governance team's ability to ensure schools are operating efficiently and equitably.

A team that is transparent in their collective efforts to build a strong and consistent approach to governance is one that can set the ideal conditions for retaining its talent and allow families to build positive and long-lasting relationships with LEA staff and educators.

A cohesive governance team is better positioned to stay informed about changes in educational programming and research, support the implementation of best practices, provide LEA staff with access to professional development that fosters high-quality teaching and learning, and reduce financial strain on the LEA through more efficient use of time and talent.

Boards that lead with a deeper understanding of their role and responsibilities as representatives of the community are more likely to put in place policies and practices that support students to reach their highest potential and insulate

their LEA against harm, such as tragic and costly accidents and lawsuits. Instituting comprehensive policy development practices often involves a great investment of time upfront, but in the long run creates a climate that promotes student learning and safety as well as ensures legal compliance and efficient use of resources. Using a policy subcommittee or other processes to incorporate feedback from a cross-section of perspectives similarly takes time to set up, but once established, reduces the burden on the board and increases engagement and buy-in.

When an LEA has strong policy practices, it builds trust with its community, creates strong conditions for high-quality teaching and learning, and can even save money. Strong and equitable policymaking practices can create conditions that empower students to thrive academically and socially. They can also help shield the LEA from significant challenges, such as high-profile bullying incidents or costly legal issues. Boards need to consider that having sound policy practices is not only legally and financially smart but ultimately helps to ensure that each student receives the equitable education they deserve.

WHAT IS BOARD POLICY?

Board policy refers to a set of rules that govern the operations of the LEA.

Policies can encompass all aspects of the educational environment. The following box outlines different types of policies and related documents.

Types of policies

Board Policy (BP) — The what and why. The big picture and general direction. The general principles by which an LEA directs its operations.

Administrative Regulation (AR) — The who, how, and when. Procedural steps outlining a rule of order prescribed for management. ARs are often established by the superintendent. They can exist alongside a BP, or alone without a corresponding BP.

Board Bylaws (BB) — Rules adopted by the governing board for its own operations.

Exhibits (E) — Examples, standard forms, or other additional information necessary to understand and/or comply with a policy.

Other governance and administrative documents

Code of Conduct — A set of principles and guidelines that outline how board members should behave.

Budget, board resolutions, Project Labor Agreement (PLA)/Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) — Agreements created in collaboration with other organizations outside of the LEA to govern shared responsibilities or work conditions.

Student, parent, and staff handbooks — Documents describing policies and regulations written to specific audiences in the LEA.

LEA plans (LCAP, Technology, Safety, Communication, Health and Wellness, etc) — Plans that describe how the LEA will accomplish community goals in a specific area. Often required by the state or federal government to be developed and submitted.

Policy is not just about what happens in the classroom. To ensure staff and students have high-quality teaching and learning conditions, trustees must consider all the LEA spaces serving youth and those who interact with them.

Policies can cover employees, facilities, curriculum, contracts and services, technology use, and anything else that schools touch or engage with. Board policies are not the only documents that include district policy. LEA policy documents can also include superintendent memos, board resolutions, and handbooks. However, these documents must comply with board policy and state and federal law.

School board policies are developed to promote consistent practices and comply with current state and federal laws. Board policies also communicate the LEA's educational philosophy and a means for meeting the LEA's stated vision and mission. Most LEAs will already have a policy manual that includes the policy types previously listed.

CSBA maintains the most comprehensive manual of policies for school districts and counties, with over 650 sample policies and regulations, and quarterly update packets that help LEAs stay current with state and federal laws and industry best practices. A board's policy manual must balance the need to comply with state and federal mandates and reflect the concerns and the needs of the local community.

WHAT DO POLICIES DO?

Policies create common and clear rules for the LEA's decisions and actions.

Policies reflect the LEA's and community's local values and principles. They also create clear and consistent rules for the LEA to operate. Policies aim to ensure that each student, teacher, and community member is treated transparently, equitably, and fairly.

Policy development is a cooperative effort involving the board, staff, and school community. After identifying an issue that requires a new or revised policy, information must be gathered. The policy development process can expose unintentional misalignment in the LEA's expectations or goals. Adopting a policy that reflects consensus after a deliberative process creates community trust and buy-in to the mutually agreed-upon practice.

While state and federal laws define many required policy areas, strong local policies can build on these requirements by considering how legal mandates intersect with the LEA's unique practices and community context. In some cases, LEAs may choose to set expectations that go beyond what is required by state or federal law. When doing so, it is important to engage local stakeholders in the conversation to ensure that expectations are clearly communicated and that practices reflect shared understanding.

WHO USES POLICY?

Policies should be useable and understandable to all relevant stakeholders.

The board, LEA administrators, and school-based staff will need to work together to implement policy and ensure compliance. Ensuring LEA practices reflect the board's directions or decisions requires evaluating the conditions and culture of implementation and monitoring the intended outcomes.

Incorporating the diverse perspectives of students, staff, families, and the community during policy development promotes implementation of the board's policies and their establishment as part of the LEA's culture and practices. Boards should strive for a policy culture where community members regularly review and engage with policies — not just when something goes wrong.

WHO DECIDES LEA POLICY?

The school board has decision-making power over LEA policy.

School board members determine local school policy and ensure it is implemented effectively and judiciously. Local school boards are critical in implementing state and federal laws in LEA programs and services.

The board is responsible for policy adoption, revision, and elimination. CSBA recommends that an LEA hold two readings of a new or revised policy. Ultimately, boards are responsible for deciding how much time a community may need to weigh in on the policy before the board acts. The board should include community members in subcommittees and other bodies to engage community members regularly in decision-making for the LEA. Boards can ensure diverse community member participation by helping to remove common barriers like lack of child care, transportation, translation, meeting after common work hours, and varying the meeting location.

HOW DO POLICIES AFFECT LOCAL PRACTICES AND PROGRAMS?

Ensuring local practices and policies match is important in creating LEA alignment and compliance.

Outdated policies not in alignment with state and federal laws can limit student achievement, result in preventable injury and harm, undermine the ability of staff to respond to student need, bring financial harm in the form of lawsuits, and erode the community's trust in the LEA.

No policy will remain effective without periodic review and revisions informed by regular input from the community to understand how policies impact students and staff. Creating subcommittees to continuously monitor and propose revisions to policies is one way to ensure the board is kept up to date with the ever-changing state and federal requirements without losing local control. Trying to close the gap between what's written on paper and what may be happening in actual LEA practices can only be improved with feedback from the people responsible for implementing and living with the policies the board passes.

WHEN IS A BOARD POLICY NEEDED?

Board policy can be helpful in ensuring clarity and consistency for all stakeholders.

When does something become a policy need? When it's required by state law, or when a topic or question arises and the board would like every school or every staff member to handle it in the same way. On the contrary, if the board decides not to create an LEA-wide policy, it creates the conditions for each school site or staff member to decide independently, which may introduce personal biases. This may lead to treating similarly affected individuals in inconsistent ways and to practices that may be inconsistent with state or federal law. Policy can fill the gap between what state and federal law require and create standards that complement or exceed the law. Board policy can ensure consistency and reduce unclear practices or procedures that may result in inequities. While policies often cite state and federal law, many issues have room for local discussion and decision-making. If the board doesn't decide on the issue, it needs to be clear who the decision-maker is, whether it's the superintendent, principal, or other staff.

The board has the unique responsibility and authority to facilitate the deliberative democratic decision-making process. Community members may request the board act on an issue through the adoption of a policy. Consensus building and allowing the community to share their opinions and be heard are key to strong policy development. Often, a policy committee can be a good way to give stakeholders a voice in the process for important LEA decisions. Including multiple perspectives on the committee is another way to ensure deliberative consensus-making is practiced before the item comes to the board. Best practices for establishing policy subcommittees are further discussed in the CSBA Board Policy Process Evaluation.

LEAs are mandated to have some policies by law. For example, every LEA that serves students in grades 7-12 must have a policy that addresses suicide prevention. Given the number of available sample policies, it can be tempting to limit the number of policies an LEA adopts to only the policies required by law. However, just because a board rescinds or does not adopt a non-mandatory policy doesn't eliminate the state and federal requirements that the policy may be addressing. Failing to be clear about LEA practices or procedures can confuse community members, result in unnecessary legal costs, and reduce transparency and trust with families and employees.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD BOARD MEMBERS REVIEW POLICIES?

Some policies **require** annual or periodic review by governance teams to ensure they comply with federal and state mandates (e.g., Education Code Section 35160.5 requires that district policies pertaining to intradistrict open enrollment and extracurricular/cocurricular activities be reviewed annually). While there is no statute requiring that all policies undergo an annual review, policies should be reviewed regularly to maintain a policy manual that is up to date and reflects the mandates of law.

CSBA issues periodic update packets to incorporate legal and editorial changes to the sample policies. CSBA also offers a variety of policy services designed to assist governance teams with the process of maintaining an up-to-date policy manual.

The board and/or superintendent or designee should identify the need for a new policy or revision of an existing policy. The need may arise from a change in law; a new vision statement; new goals in the LCAP; educational research or trends; an incident that has arisen in the LEA; or a recommendation or request from staff, a parent/guardian, or other interested person. Only policies formally adopted by a majority vote of the board shall constitute official board

policy. Policies will only become effective upon board adoption or at a future date and if so, designated by the board at the time of adoption.

The policy development process may be revised or expanded as needed based on the issue being considered, the need for more information, or the desire to provide greater opportunities for consultation and public input. One effective strategy is to establish a policy subcommittee that regularly reviews and refines policies. CSBA recommends forming such a subcommittee to ensure policy development receives the focused attention it requires before policies are brought to the full board for approval.

Policy subcommittee

Subcommittees can use this framework to evaluate individual policies with a smaller group while reviewing the appropriate data and collecting any questions that the board has about the LEA's operations before adoption. CSBA releases policy updates at least four times a year, and board subcommittees can play an important role in reviewing and engaging in the auxiliary documents CSBA provides and comparing them against current LEA practice and values. While many CSBA updates reflect new state and federal law, it's imperative that the board reflect on what practices might need to change to be compliant with the new policy. Just adopting the policy is not enough. In an ideal world, legal compliance and the LEA's local priorities should be aligned, but often boards will need to first educate themselves and then LEA staff, students, and families about what is a requirement versus what is an LEA decision.

Governance teams may decide that they do not wish to keep a standing policy subcommittee but choose to convene one for situations where additional community engagement and implementation conversations would be helpful.

Subcommittees can consist of various community stakeholders and may include:

- LEA employees
- Community members
- Students
- Board members (as long as the number of board members are fewer than would constitute a Brown Act violation).

Policy subcommittee review steps

1) Reflect on the LEA's starting place. What is the LEA currently doing, and what evidence is being used to identify practices?
2) Create a small group that's going to take responsibility for reviewing the LEA's policy work outside of the main meeting. (MINIMUM: As a board, at least four times a year, aligned with CSBA updates; IDEAL: monthly policy subcommittee meetings)
3) Facilitate diving in by reviewing data, gathering feedback, and making recommendations for the full board's action
4) Present policy recommendations to the board, two to five policies per board meeting, to allow for additional community review
5) Vote, take action, and decide on monitoring cycles
6) Monitor impact and revise as necessary

Policy development workshop

After completing a policy development workshop, many boards will globally adopt a new set of policies, which will completely replace their current policy manual. While gathering community input on the whole manual might be

infeasible, feedback on how the LEA will change its policies and practices moving forward and ways the board will involve community members in future decisions is key. Board members should ask community members to elevate current policy issues so the board can itemize future issues to bring to a subcommittee.

WHAT'S NOT POLICY?

LEA policy documents do not need to include practices that change frequently, are one-time events, or are inconsistent by nature.

Policy should be perennial and applicable to current and future scenarios. Schools may have site-specific student behavior rules outlined in a student handbook or code of conduct, but they should be consistent with LEA policy and state law. While documents such as codes of conduct or ethics (e.g., for athletics), procedural handbook for staff, or other guidance tools are important operational resources, they are not policy and should be maintained separately.

Think about the frequency of the issue the board is considering. Should this be institutionalized when a key staff member retires or leaves? Does this need to be memorialized in a way that will be revisited, or is there another way to create institutional capacity and memory outside of a policy? There are many documents that an LEA may review in the future, but board policy is one of the most long-lasting documents an LEA can create to help future decision-makers with operational goals.

HOW SHOULD I THINK ABOUT POLICY IN MY ROLE AS A BOARD MEMBER?

Board members play a crucial role in policy review, adoption, and facilitating community input.

As a board member, I need to understand that:

1) Successful policy adoption and implementation is a governance team's task. While, generally, school boards direct the superintendent only (except in the example of the majority of county offices with elected superintendents), boards set the direction and policy for all staff and students and are responsible for monitoring, reporting, and evaluating the success of LEA operations.

2) Dissemination of adopted policy impacts implementation. Once the policy is adopted, the board should ensure that necessary steps are taken for all stakeholders affected to be notified. If a policy affects employees, the LEA should ensure all employees get a copy. This also should occur for students, parents/guardians, and other stakeholders impacted by the policy adoption or revision. In most cases this will occur via official LEA communication, but the communication may also be from the board members to their constituents, and when that is the case, it should be aligned across the LEA.

3) Once the board has adopted or revised a policy, the superintendent and staff are responsible for implementation. The superintendent is responsible for supervision of staff and overall accountability to the board regarding the policies established by the board through regulations or procedures. All LEA employees and students are expected to follow all board policies and regulations.

4) Policy isn't just about setting the rule and hoping it happens. Boards must monitor and evaluate the individual needs of schools and distribute resources and effective personnel based on the policy's goal. To monitor the effectiveness

of a policy, board members should request agendized board discussion(s) on monitoring and implementation timeline on the policy item. Boards should use LEA-wide and individual school-level data that, when necessary or required by law, should be disaggregated by significant subgroups to inform the review and future decision-making.

5) Policy review and evaluation are the board's function and the superintendent's shared responsibility. Once the policy is in place, the administration must implement it through regulations or procedures and the board should be aware of the timeline for evaluation and monitoring and consider including it in a corresponding administrative regulation. Not every policy needs a corresponding regulation, but many do. Others may need additional communication discussions to ensure alignment with other LEA operations, like annual plans and budgets. Policy development is a constant process, and the work of collecting information and evaluating implementation should be seen as a continuous process.

CONCLUSION

Effective policy governance ensures that schools operate efficiently and equitably, fostering trust within the community and providing a foundation for high-quality teaching and learning environments. Comprehensive and inclusive policy development, which involves input from diverse stakeholders, is essential for creating policies that reflect the LEA's accountability standards and values. By prioritizing robust policy development practices, boards can protect their LEAs from legal and financial challenges while striving to provide every student with the education they deserve. Boards can learn more about how to strengthen their policy practices by conducting a board evaluation using the CSBA Board Self-Evaluation Tool.

Exhibit 1 — The Policy Cycle

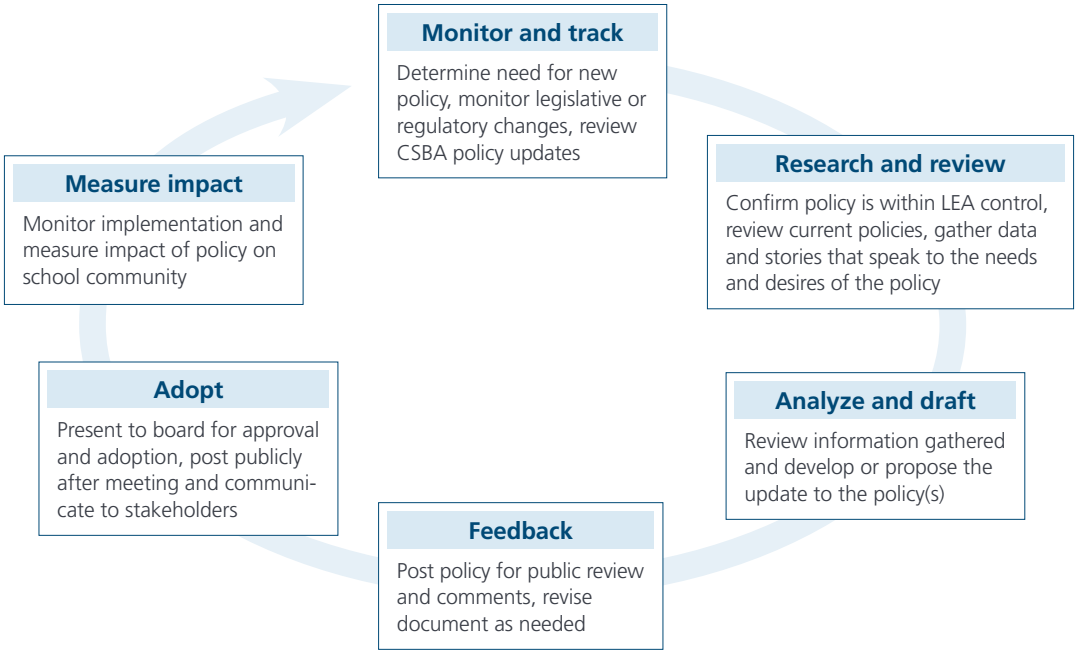


Exhibit 2 — The Policy Hierarchy

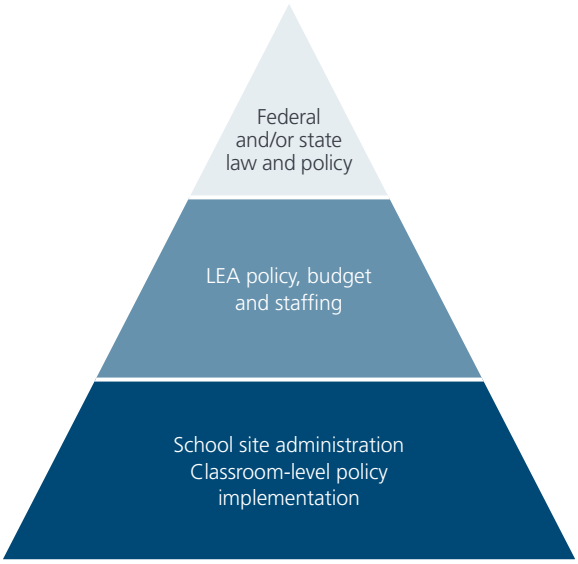


Exhibit 3 — Dimensions of Strong School Board Policy

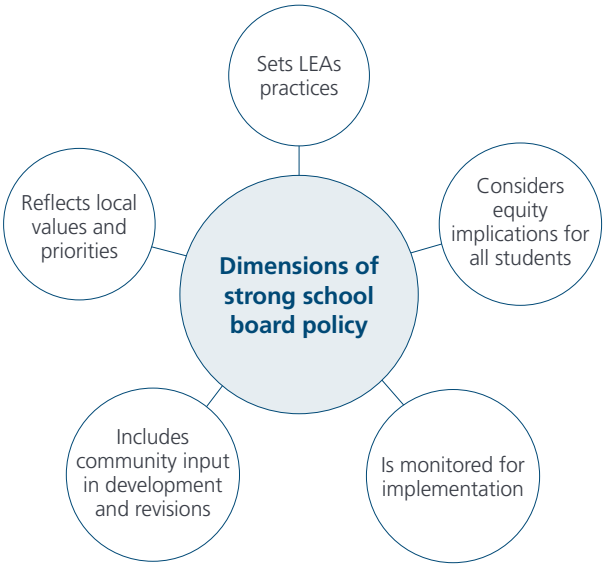


Exhibit 4 — The Policy Theory of Action for Equitable Student Outcomes

