This document is part of a series of resources that are designed for school and district personnel who, while not formal policymakers, still play a significant role in bringing the voices of students, parents, caregivers, family members, and community members to the process of making local district policy. By “local district policy,” we mean the procedures, positions, aspirations, and guidance that govern important aspects of the school district’s day-to-day and long-term work that are formally adopted by the local school board. Our hope is that these tools will clarify the local policy-making process and help people better understand, engage in, and influence the development of district policies.

This tool focuses on the steps you can take to find and understand specific local district policies.

**Step 1: Understanding School Board Responsibilities**

State law outlines the authority of school boards, and so the exact responsibilities of school boards are different from state to state. Generally, school boards are responsible for hiring and evaluating the superintendent, setting procedures for how the district runs, setting the strategic direction of the district (often including the formal goals), and monitoring progress toward those goals. Often school boards play a formal role in the hiring of district and school staff. This could include district and school administrators as well as teachers. School boards set policy to accomplish those requirements in their communities and to stay in compliance with state and federal laws.

**Step 2: Finding Your Local District Policies**

Once you have a better understanding of what school boards do, the next step to becoming more engaged in and informed about local policy is to find your local district policies, often called a policy manual. Hopefully, accessing this manual will be as simple as heading to your school district website and searching for district policies. If you have trouble finding them, you might try typing “[the name of your school district] policies” into your preferred search engine. It is possible (but unlikely) that your school district’s policies won’t be accessible online. If this is the case, try contacting the school district office directly and asking how to access its policy manual. Remember, these are public documents and you have a right to see them.

**Step 3: Making Sense of Local District Policy Codes**

School boards use codes, which are a series of numbers or letters, to name and group their policies. Understanding the way your district’s policies are coded makes it easier to locate and access specific policies. It’s important to remember, however, that coding systems may change from district to district and from state to state. At the end of this document, you will find example coding conventions used in New England.

**Step 4: Understanding Local District Policy**

Once you have found your local policies, you may want to read them to better understand their impact or to propose changes to your school board. Below are two sets of questions that can help with this process. Both sets of questions can be used alone or with a group.

**Instructions for Groups**

If you are working through either set of questions below with a group, think about bringing together as diverse a group as possible (with a particular emphasis on connecting with people who historically have been marginalized, excluded, or removed from the policy-making process). It might be helpful to sit with other parents or caregivers, other teachers, other students, or perhaps district or school administrators. Diverse perspectives will provide the
most robust sense of the impact of any given policy and will help you identify the most powerful values, commitments, and practices you want to preserve or uplift.

General Instructions
The questions below can be changed or shifted to meet your specific needs, and you may choose to tackle them at different times or in a different sequence. No matter how you adapt them, push yourself (or each other) to get as specific as possible when answering these questions.

The first set of questions will help you understand the impact of an existing district policy. The second set of questions will help you think through developing your own policy or policy recommendations. You might turn to these questions if you have discovered that there is no policy in your district around an important topic. These questions might be a helpful starting point for you to determine priorities or draft language. If you are thinking about developing a new policy or proposing changes to an existing policy, see the Getting Started With a Policy Process: How to Develop Your Own Community Engagement Policy for more information. You might also consider connecting with a school or district administrator to learn more about the history of a policy or policy-related topic in your district.

First Set of Questions: Asking for Understanding
The following questions will deepen your understanding of the impact of specific policy language.

1. **What does this policy enable? For who? Under what conditions?**
   This question is purposely broad. Try to think about this from as many different perspectives as possible. For a teacher or a student: What does this policy enable me to do in my classroom? For a community member: What does this policy enable me to do in our community or district?

2. **Does the policy explicitly prohibit or curtail something?**
   Is it addressed intentionally for a specific group (e.g. students, educators, English learners, etc.) Does it promote or curtail a particular type of engagement?

3. **What would this policy require us to start, stop, or continue doing? For who? Under what conditions?**
   A couple of potential variations, depending on the specific policy: What does this policy incentivize? What does this policy prohibit?

Second Set of Questions: Asking for Alignment
The following questions will help to clarify the values, commitments, and practices to preserve in a new or revised policy.

1. **How aspirational should your new or revised policy be?**
   Think here about where you or your group would like to see the district invest and deepen commitments. At the same time, there is such a thing as a policy that is too aspirational to be attainable, which could erode trust.

2. **What are the critical beliefs that need to be sustained over time?**

3. **What are the critical practices that need to be sustained over time?**
Sample Coding Conventions

All school districts organize their local policies by category. Districts in the same state tend to follow the same coding conventions. Here are the coding conventions typically followed by districts in New England, though they may or may not be used in your school district. If you need help understanding your district’s coding conventions, please contact your school district office directly.

Coding of School Board Policies – Connecticut

0000 Series – Mission, Goals, Objectives
Potentially includes: mission and vision, equity policy, community engagement policy, goals and objectives, etc.

1000 Series – Community Relations
Potentially includes: policies around overall school or community goals, sharing information, community engagement, parent groups, community organization and partnerships, visitors in schools, public political activities, performances, etc.

2000 Series – Administration
Potentially includes: job descriptions, administrative roles and responsibilities, evaluation information, record keeping, etc.

3000 Series – Business or Non-Instructional Operations
Potentially includes: policies on the operation of school facilities, business offices, transportation, food services, etc.

4000 Series – Personnel
Potentially includes: hiring, employment checks, nepotism, professional development, use of force, salaries and working conditions, etc.

5000 Series – Students
Potentially includes: attendance, discipline, drugs or alcohol, bullying, admissions or placement, as well as policies around homeless students, undocumented students, pregnant or parenting students, etc.

6000 Series – Instruction
Potentially includes: grading and reporting, promotion and retention, graduation requirements, homework policies, etc.

9000 Series – Bylaws
Potentially includes: school board procedures, practices, code of ethics, etc.

Coding of School Board Policies – Vermont

A. Board Operations
Potentially includes: conflict of interest, board processes, board or superintendent roles, etc.

B. Personnel
Potentially includes: background checks, recruitment, hiring, supervision, evaluation, professional development, harassment, etc.

C. Students
Potentially includes: discipline, restraint or seclusion, activities, athletics, English learners, attendance, privacy, etc.

D. Instruction
Potentially includes: graduation requirements, curriculum, field trips, instructional materials, field trips, etc.

E. School-Community Relations
Potentially includes: parental involvement, marketing, community use of school facilities, community engagement, etc.
F. Non-Instructional Operations
Potentially includes: emergency procedures, bomb threats, budgets, school closings, etc.

Coding of School Board Policies – Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont*
Please note: This is also the coding convention used by the National School Boards Association.
*School districts in Vermont may utilize district-specific coding conventions.

A: Foundations and Basic Commitments
Potentially includes: non-discrimination policies, harassment policies, educational philosophy, mission, vision, and goals, etc.

B: Board Governance and Operations
Potentially includes: policies around the functioning of the school board itself, such as board responsibilities, procedures, duties, roles, meetings, executive sessions, committees, conflict of interest, etc.

C: General School Administration
Potentially includes: job description of superintendent or other key district administrators, superintendent evaluation, salary negotiation, administrative goals, organizational chart, etc.

D: Fiscal Management
Potentially includes: policies on the budget and budget process, procurement, audits, signatures, investments, etc.

E: Support Services
Potentially includes: policies around transportation, food programs, emergency plans, bomb threats, some school records, energy, pest management, etc.

F: Facilities Development
Potentially includes: naming of facilities, retiring of facilities, etc.

G: Personnel
Potentially includes: job descriptions, recruiting, hiring, nepotism, conduct, supervision, evaluation, leaves, personnel records, drug or alcohol use, etc.

H: Negotiations
Potentially includes: goals, negotiating agents, etc.

I: Instruction/Instructional Program
Potentially includes: school day, school year, curriculum, instruction, English learners, home schooling, class rank, health, physical education, graduation, promotion or retention, homework, library materials, field trips, reporting student progress, etc.

J: Students
Potentially includes: discipline, suspension, expulsion, harassment, enrollment, searches, activities, athletics, restraint or seclusion, records, activity fees, allergies, cell phones, bullying, vaccination, hazing, substance use, medication, mandatory reporting, etc.

K: School-Community Relations
Potentially includes: community engagement, partnerships, use of school facilities, marketing, solicitation in school, decision-making, visitors, etc.

L: Education Agency Relations
Potentially includes: student teaching relationships, etc.