

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 explaining local district policy—what it is, how it supports school and district improvement, and how it is created.

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### What Is Local District Policy?

There are lots of guidelines that schools and districts must follow, many of which are set by federal and state governments. While schools must comply with these laws, rules, and regulations, school administrators, school board members, and community members have some influence in determining how those state and federal expectations are implemented in their local schools via local district policies. These policies comprise the procedures, positions, aspirations, and guidance that a local school board approves and to which schools are held accountable.

Local district policy serves many important roles. It helps make sure that districts are following, or are in compliance, with state and federal regulations. Compliance policies frequently are the result of changes or requirements from the federal government or the state government with specific legal implications. Policy can also capture district or community hopes, visions, and commitments for their schools. Such advocacy policies (like “community engagement”) are aspirational in their commitments and visions; they describe a future that the school board wants the district to achieve. They are not just procedural in nature or required by state or federal law.

Districts need both compliance policies and advocacy policies. The nature of policies in any given district varies, as does the ratio of advocacy to compliance policies. Some districts have many advocacy policies and some have very few. Some boards adopt all of their policies from outside sources (like professional organizations), and some create or adapt all of their policies locally. Some districts tend to have more comprehensive and detailed policies and other districts have a history of sparse policy language. In short, districts have their own practices and preferences around policy.

### How Does Policy Support District Improvement?

Local district policy can help support and sustain a school district’s continuous improvement efforts in many ways. Here are some examples of how policy can advance improvements:

1. When beliefs, aspirations, commitments, and practices are adopted in policy, they are protected from staff turnover and sudden changes in a school or district. Even if a single initiative or project ends, or a committed leader leaves, policy that has been passed by the school board remains. In order to remove or change a policy, there needs to be a vote of the school board.
2. In addition to protecting practices, commitments, and visions, policy can also amplify them and accelerate their implementation. A policy can be written so that it encourages continued or expanded investment in best practices.

3. Policy can also play a role in achieving educational equity, which the Great Schools Partnership defines as ensuring just outcomes for each student, challenging the imbalance of power and privilege, and raising marginalized voices. By describing goals, commitments, and actions that guide a district's equity work, policies can move beyond basic compliance and help make critical change for students.
4. All members of a district and school community can use school district policy to hold local leaders and even the school board itself accountable for maintaining and funding the practices, structures, and commitments that have been passed by the school board.

### **How Do School Boards Create Policy?**

There are several processes for developing policy. Policies may be drafted by district staff, the policy committee of the school board, state school board associations, or other professional organizations. Often, professional organizations (for example, school board associations, superintendent associations, etc.) create and send sample policies out to all their members (local school boards or superintendents). Depending on the content of the policy and the preferences of the school board, many boards adopt such policies exactly as written. Others adapt these exemplars to meet their local needs. A smaller number write their own original policies. Frequently, compliance policies are adopted by the school board as they are written by professional organizations or by legal counsel. Advocacy policies are more likely to be developed or changed by the local school board or district staff before being adopted.

Most school boards have a policy committee made up of a smaller group of board members. The committee's role is different from district to district; generally, it is to set policy priorities and to guide the full board toward adopting policy. In many communities, the policy committee is supported by district staff, and their meetings are open to the public. Policy committees may support the policy process by reviewing policies, creating timelines for reviewing current policies, and making sure that policies being considered align with state and federal laws. Depending on the issue that the policy committee is tackling, the policy committee might engage members of the public in developing a particular policy. Regardless of how a policy is drafted, ultimately, any policy must be voted on by the full school board and will be passed only upon receiving a majority of votes.

### **How Can You Influence School District Policy?**

Just as there are many ways for policies to be brought forward, there are many ways for families, students, staff, and community members to participate in the policy-making process. By talking with school district leaders, attending school board meetings, or becoming familiar with existing policies, community members can start to understand how decision-makers in their district approach policy-making. To shape specific policy ideas or identify priorities, parents, students, and other local leaders can also team up with community organizations, draft sample policies, research policies in other communities or from professional organizations, or host neighborhood conversations to surface policy priorities. When possible, partnerships between community members, district staff, and even school board members can be very powerful in putting policy issues before the full board for consideration. For more information on how you can impact local district policy, see [Getting Started With a Policy Process: How to Develop Your Own Community Engagement Policy](#) and [Accessing and Understanding Local District Policy](#).

**Policy: KC**