

Grayson W. McKinney

Dr. Rodney Green

EA742: Educational Law

27 July 2015

School Policy Review

Introduction to School Policy

When I made the decision to apply for the school leadership track at Oakland University, I at first joked with my friends that this program was comprised of knowledge- and skill-building courses in “all the things which I passionately dislike about public education.” At the top of this mundane list would undoubtedly be *school policy*. Policy, as I understand it, is the fundamental governing documents by which your school district is run. While I still feel that this perhaps isn't the most exciting aspect of public education (just perhaps), I now know how important it is to have an intimate understanding of the core workings of a school district's policies in order to run a shipshape school. Not only is it important to know the school's policies and procedures for everything that encompasses your own personal domain of the district, but it is also essential that as an administrator, you know how policies come into being, how to write clear and concise policies that are not vague, and that your policies and procedures be maintained as current and up-to-date to avoid potentially disastrous problems.

School Board Policy Manual Review

For the purposes of this exercise in policy review, I examined and reviewed the school board policy manual of the Troy School District in order to identify the major topics that are covered by my home board's policies. Our governing document was easily accessed and available on our district's webpage under the school board's subpage. The document was clearly

laid out and divided by Chapters from A through L, with three separate links to recently revised policies and two additional appendices. The chapters each spoke to different topics that the board has deemed important enough on which to adopt policies, including policies on the organization of the school district, the bylaws of the board itself, the administration of the schools, and fiscal and business management. It blew my mind to read through Chapter F, which had the benign sounding title of “Facility Expansion Program”. But upon opening this chapter, I read an interesting bit of policy, which highlighted the method by which any future schools shall be named! I always wondered about where the seemingly random names of our elementary buildings came from, and now I know. They have been (and always will be) chosen as a tribute to Troy citizens, living or deceased, like my own Costello, who have made a significant contribution to public education within the community. Middle schools, similarly, are named for educators, and finally the high schools will be given the names of appropriate classical city-states which were contemporary with ancient Troy- hence our dear Athens and Troy High. Who knew?

Other chapters address the Board’s role in developing rules and procedures regarding school personnel (no nepotism, please), negotiations, instructional programming, policies regarding students, general public relations, and general organizational relations. In addition to this comprehensive list of policy areas, the school board also included separate revisions to previously existing policies with regards to anti-bullying (revised in 2014), nondiscrimination (revised in 2014), and smoking (revised in 2014). This last revision highlights the importance of maintaining and updating policies that reflect the changes in the need. The revision of 2014 includes description of newly invented forms of tobacco to be included in the tobacco free schools policy, such as non-tobacco nicotine products like e-cigarettes. They even take the time to ban paraphernalia that I would have to look up on wikipedia to know what it is, such as shisha,

snus, tobacco strips, sticks, and dissolvable tobacco products. Good for our board to stay so up-to-date. It's much better to be proactive rather than reactive, and it seems that the board is keeping up with the times and "kids these days".

The Board Authority

By now, you may be wondering to yourself, who died and made the school board king? Fortunately, in our great country there is no king, but what we do have is a whole heap of legislative rigmarole, and it is through this saga... spiel... and song and dance that we arrive at the *reason* behind the *right*. On the Michigan Department of Education's website, you can find and read all 290 pages of the Revised School Code (Act 451 of 1976). In this act, it states (thankfully) on page five, that "[a] general powers school district is a body corporate and shall be governed by a school board. An act of a school board is not valid unless approved, at a meeting of the school board, by a majority vote of the members lawfully serving on the board."

Furthermore, it states "the board of a general powers school district shall adopt bylaws. These bylaws may establish or change board procedures, the number of board officers, titles and duties of board officers, and any other matter related to effective and efficient functioning of the board." It is through this statute that a school board has the authority to set policies that deal with educating pupils, and providing for the safety and welfare of pupils. They also have the responsibility of acquiring, constructing, maintaining, repairing, renovating, disposing of, or conveying school property, facilities, equipment, technology, or furnishings. The hiring, contracting for, scheduling, supervising, or terminating of employees, independent contractors, and others to carry out school district powers also falls to them. And finally, the receiving of, accounting for, investing, or expending school district money; borrowing money and pledging school district funds for repayment, and qualifying for state school aid and other public or private

money from local, regional, state, or federal sources also falls under a school board's prerogative.

Policy Makers

One might wonder to oneself... just how does the board go about setting policy? I have set a personal goal for myself to not only attend a regularly scheduled board meeting this year, but also a workshop meeting to see how the board goes about getting down to brass tacks. In reading through the Chapter B, for bylaws, I found that it states in section B-1800, titled "POLICY CHANGES, ADDITIONS", there is a specific law for "POLICY DRAFTING" (B-1801). In said law, it states that the Board reserves to itself and its delegates the function of drafting district policies. However, there is consideration for the thoughts and feelings of citizens, students, and employees of the District, who may suggest policy revisions and additions for Board consideration. All policies adopted by the Board, we are advised, are reviewed by legal counsel.

While the board seems to do its best to create policies that cover any situation that may arise, there is also a policy that deals with making decisions in the absence of an existing policy (kind of like wishing for more wishes, right?). B-1901 states that in cases where action must be taken and the Board has provided no policy, the superintendent has the power to act. The superintendent, like other citizens, students, and employees of the district, has the right to inform the Board promptly of such action and of the need for policy. Similarly, if there is a policy in place that for some reason becomes unnecessary, illegal, or outdated, the Board has the right to amend or suspend current policies. In order to do so, these policies may be temporarily suspended by a vote of four members of the Board at a regular or special meeting.

Implementation of Policies

Once a policy has been “vetted” (developed and approved), it becomes the boards responsibility to implement the fledgling policy. In the B-1700 section of the bylaws, there is a section that simply states that whenever policy revisions, additions, amendments, or deletions are being considered, first and second readings will be on the Board agenda. In case you happen to miss those board meetings, they are also taped and broadcast. If you still haven’t heard the news about policy changes, employees will be when such notification is required by law or contract. Otherwise, it seems that you are out of luck. Board policies will be available on the District Web site, but beyond that, there doesn’t seem to be a hard line of communication from the top down.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Despite these steps that are taken by the Board or administration to make sure policies get implemented and/or are known by staff, I must say that if it weren’t for the writing of this paper, I don’t know that I ever would have stumbled across these policies and practices of the board. The effectiveness of the trickle-down effect seems to be questionable at best, and perhaps more intentional focus should be placed on this aspect of our school district during new teacher orientation. Our district seems to do a good job of being clear and transparent, and also staying current, but the communication of amendments and additions to the policies could be improved.

Conclusions

While school code and policy may not enter into the day to day world of your average classroom teacher, it seems very important to know the reasons *why* and *how* behind the *what* of what we do. I have long since changed my tune about the tedium of administration. It is an ever-changing field of problem solving and leadership. School policy is one of the many important facets that makes this job navigable and understandable. As Benjamin Franklin once said, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” ::mic-drop::

Resources

The Revised School Code Act 451 of 1976. (2015, July 14). In *Michigan Legislature*. Retrieved

July 26, 2015, from <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/mcl/pdf/mcl-act-451-of-1976.pdf>

Troy School District Board of Education. (2013, August). Board of Education Policies. In *Troy*

School District. Retrieved July 26, 2015, from [http://www.troy.k12.mi.us/pages/](http://www.troy.k12.mi.us/pages/Troy_School_District/Board_of_Education/Board_Policies/Board_of_Education_Policies)

[Troy_School_District/Board_of_Education/Board_Policies/](http://www.troy.k12.mi.us/pages/Troy_School_District/Board_of_Education/Board_Policies/Board_of_Education_Policies)

[Board_of_Education_Policies](http://www.troy.k12.mi.us/pages/Troy_School_District/Board_of_Education/Board_Policies/Board_of_Education_Policies)