

STRAIGHT TALK



Policymaking is a Vital Responsibility for School Boards

By Kirk Schneidawind, MSBA Executive Director

I am going to go out on a limb. When you ran for your school board seat, how many of you thought of yourselves as policymakers?

People throw around the term “policymaker” loosely these days. Merriam-Webster defines a policymaker as “someone who is responsible for or involved in establishing policy.” My guess is that few of you gave much thought to becoming a policymaker, but that is exactly what governing bodies, regardless of their size, do: they make policy.

In fact, the school board’s role in creating and setting policy is one of the most important responsibilities. As a school board representative, you were selected to represent your community’s vision and values – the development and adoption of a school board policy provides a great opportunity to put these into action.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities is an important element of any strong, high-functioning school board. The board must prioritize governance while the superintendent focuses on policy implementation, which is often referred to as day-to-day administrative responsibilities, but as we know, it is much more than that. Policies are the governance framework for the school board and district. From our

experience in working with boards and superintendents, distinguishing between the roles of the board and the superintendent – in mathematical terms – is a constant. When boards and superintendents achieve clarity on this, we see positive results for their students, their school district, and their community. One of the board’s main responsibilities that does not need clarity is their role as a policymaker. School district policy development falls squarely on the shoulders of our school boards. As the board represents the community’s values and vision, it is important to understand that this is an expected leadership role.

We realize that policymaking is an essential function while also recognizing that community members elected to their school board may not be inherently equipped to draft comprehensive discipline, ethics, or attendance policies. Good policymaking takes continuous work. For that reason, MSBA’s Policy Services act as a valuable resource for our school boards by staying in front of the state and federal legislative changes, court decisions, and emerging issues to ensure our school boards are legally compliant and focused on policy matters that are vital for student success.

School boards must be aware of the other policymaking bodies that influence school board policy development. The Minnesota Legislature and the U.S.

Congress add and change laws that have a direct impact on the school board policymaking. As a result, school boards’ perspectives are needed at the state, federal, and court levels to not only emphasize that boards put the mission and vision of their communities into action through policy development, but also to help lawmakers understand the potential repercussions of not considering school boards in the enactment of state and federal legislation.

How does your school board approach its policymaking responsibilities? As MSBA progresses on its strategic improvement journey, understanding and meeting the needs of our school boards is essential for your students’ success. We also know that high-performing boards are systemic thinkers, focused on student success while looking upward and outward as they consider how school board policies may affect the district’s students and staff. Though you may not have considered becoming a “policymaker” when you first filed to run for your school board, you now know why policymaking is one of the most important and influential components of being a school board member.

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