

Questions from Candidate Workshops

Many of the topics which surfaced during the Q&A portions of our candidate workshops involve responses that vary depending on context and other factors, while others have a clear response grounded in law. In most cases, learning more about the circumstances of the question is necessary.

Candidate / Election Questions

How might we handle endorsements from community members or current board members?

Endorsements are a way for community members to show support for school board candidates and their priorities. Because school board elections are non-partisan, a broad range of endorsements can show a candidate's ability to work with people across the district.

When it comes to endorsements from current board members, practices vary. Some districts avoid this because if the endorsed candidate doesn't win, it can create tension among board members. This tension can hurt their ability to work well together, which ultimately affects students. The top priority is for the new board to work as a united team.

Can you share information about public records for board members on non-district accounts? Are rules the same for candidates?

- Any message, document or file created by an elected school board member about school district business is a public record—no matter how it's sent (email, text, social media, etc.). These records must be saved and made available through public records requests.
- These rules do not apply to candidates. However, courts have sometimes treated the period between election day and when a new board member is sworn in as being subject to the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA). WSSDA recommends that elected candidates act as if both OPMA and public records laws apply after election day.

When are new board members sworn in and on the job?

New board members are sworn in at the first board meeting after election results have been certified by the county.

Are there policies or standards about board members having family members that work for the school district?

Yes, there are, because this can create a conflict of interest for the board member. While specific circumstances can vary, we suggest you refer to your district's policies (and legal counsel, if needed). In general:

- A candidate should make clear to the community if they are a family member of a district employee, especially if the family member is a spouse or dependent of the board member.
- Once a candidate is elected and becomes a sitting board member, they must recuse themselves from any conversations or negotiations that impact the contract negotiations for the family member.
- Once a sitting board member, a spouse or dependent cannot become employed by the district, unless the district is a "second class" district, meaning it has fewer than 200 students. And even then; there are some stipulations. See WSSDA's "Avoiding Conflicts of Interest" publication

<https://wssda.app.box.com/file/1058076255101?s=vrn9cx2ax974q3v4z55cjs83>

How do elections work when school board members vote for positions on Educational Service District (ESD) boards and the State Board of Education? Can school board directors run for these positions, and is the voting weighted in any way?

By law, school board members vote for some seats in educational service districts (ESDs) and the State Board of Education (SBE). Sitting school board members cannot occupy both a school director position and an ESD/SBE position at the same time. However, due to the overlap of election cycles, it is possible to run for an ESD/SBE position while finishing up a school board member term. ESD elections are not weighted; SBE elections are weighted, per the RCW.

Can the school board collaborate with city council on certain issues that may help student outcomes?

Yes, and it can be a powerful way to create partnerships that support students and families. For instance, a city council might have the ability to create a grant for a summer reading program that the school district administers.

Board Make-Up

Are all school boards 5 seats?

In Washington state, almost all public K-12 school boards have five members, except Seattle Public Schools, which has seven. The number of seats varies across different states.

Is there variety in terms of how student representatives participate? Are there ever student representatives that have some amount of power on a school board)

The structure and process for engaging in student voice varies among districts across the state, with some districts including multiple student representatives and others including none. Some districts have student advisory votes while other districts request student representatives to disseminate information and/or share out reports. Student votes cannot currently be included toward official decision making, as per state law. WSSDA organizes a Student Representative Network which meets monthly and hosts an event each year at the Annual Conference. All student reps are invited to participate. Information can be found here. [Student Representatives Network - WSSDA](#)

Role and Responsibilities

Should there be an internal control for some separation between the board and the superintendent? Is it more of a balance?

Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the school board and the superintendent is both an art and a science. Policies act as a sort of control by explaining these roles and how they affect different parts of district leadership.

At times, roles can overlap. For example, when the board sets budget priorities, it may create challenges the superintendent must manage. That's why it's important for the board to consider the superintendent's input when making such decisions.

The most effective way to navigate these situations is through a trusting, collaborative relationship between the board and the superintendent. This supports open conversations and better decision-making for the district.

Does anything in state law say, "your job is not operations"?

While state law (RCW 28A.150.230) doesn't explicitly say "your job is not operations," it makes clear that school boards govern through policy and are accountable for district outcomes. Specifically, that law states:

*"It is the intent and purpose of this section to guarantee that each common school district board of directors, whether or not acting through its respective administrative staff, be held accountable for the proper operation of their district to the local community and its electorate. In accordance with the provisions of this title, as now or hereafter amended, each common school district board of directors shall be vested with the final responsibility for the **setting of policies** ensuring quality in the content and extent of its educational program and that such program provide students with the opportunity to achieve those skills which are generally recognized as requisite to learning."*

The board's role is to set the district's direction and goals and monitor student outcomes, not manage day-to-day operations. Effective governance involves allowing the superintendent and

staff to develop solutions based on their expertise and available resources. When board members bypass this process by prescribing specific actions, it can lead to mistakes, wasted resources, lower staff morale, and ultimately, poor student outcomes. It may also violate the division of duties within your superintendent's contract.

When faced with a need or goal in a school district, it's more effective to set direction and create space for the superintendent and staff to offer solutions based on student circumstances, staff capacity and the resource constraints of the district. The board then considers the superintendent's proposal, provides feedback and at times can send the team back to keep processing options. But this leadership cycle ensures there are structural ways to consider all variables, constraints and even leads to creativity in problem solving.

If a board member jumps right from naming a problem to dictating a specific solution, errors can be made, resources placed in ineffective endeavors, and valuable staff members demoralized.

How does RCW28A.330.020 support the idea that the superintendent is our "only" employee? Where in state law does it say that the superintendent is the board's only employee?

First, there are other professionals that a board can hire directly, including architects, attorneys, and medical personnel. However, these are not employees of the district; they are contractors hired for work outside of the job description of typical district employees such as teachers, support staff, and administrators

Here are some of the details found in the RCW. RCW 28A.400.010 establishes that "the board of directors shall elect a superintendent" and specifically provides that "the right to renew a contract of employment with any school superintendent shall rest solely with the discretion of the school board employing such school superintendent." It is RCW 28A.400.300 which addresses the hiring and discharge of other school employees, stating that the board has authority to "employ for not more than one year, and for sufficient cause discharge all certificated and classified employees" (other than the superintendent). Then RCW 28A.405.300 further clarifies the distinction by stating that "determinations of probable cause for certificated employees, other than the superintendent, shall be made by the superintendent" - showing that the superintendent has a different employment status than other certificated staff and that the superintendent determines personnel decisions.

If we are responsible for finances, why must the board give approval of the superintendent conducting a reduction in force (RIF)? Why is that so often used to balance the budget over other options? Would that be part of the superintendent's evaluation?

The board decides that a RIF is needed but the superintendent decides how to implement it in a way that is least disruptive to student learning.

What role can a school board play in a school district rolling out a dual language program?

School board members can support programs like dual language by focusing on the district's strategic direction, which promotes strong student outcomes while respecting the superintendent's role in managing operations. The most effective way to drive any change is by first building consensus within the board and then with stakeholders.

What is a typical percentage for a reserve fund?

Most school district policies set a reserve fund (also called an unreserved fund balance) between 2% and 8% of the general fund, though some districts may differ.

The reserve fund serves two main purposes:

1. To cover emergencies or unexpected drops in funding.
2. To maintain steady cash flow between large payments from the state, so the district can meet regular expenses like payroll.

Meeting and OPMA Related Questions

How and when can the board have in-depth discussions on topics? We can speak to each member individually, but if we speak to two others, we create a quorum and that must be an announced open public meeting. How might a board navigate this?

Under the OPMA, if a majority (quorum) of board members discuss district business together, it must happen in a public meeting. While you can talk to individual members one-on-one, speaking with more than one other member at a time may create a quorum and trigger OPMA requirements.

To have in-depth discussions while following the law, the board can schedule special meetings—often called work sessions, study sessions, or retreats—for the purpose of discussion only. These meetings must be announced in advance and open to the public. They provide a legal and effective way for the board to explore complex topics in detail.

What is the difference between a study session, learning session, and an executive session?

- Study sessions and learning sessions are special public meetings focused on one or two topics and allow the board to have in-depth discussions, often around something complex. While these meetings must be advertised in advance and are open to the community, per OPMA, public comment is not required, and no official action can be taken during these sessions.
- Executive sessions are governed by Washington's Open Public Meetings Act (RCW 42.30), which generally requires school board meetings to be open to the public but allows for specific exceptions, including: superintendent evaluation discussions, real estate

transactions, legal matters and litigation strategy, collective bargaining strategy, student disciplinary cases that could affect other students and security procedures

- The WSSDA Open Public Meetings publication is a helpful resource to understand the different meeting types. [Guidebooks - WSSDA](#) and if you want to read more about executive sessions, here's the link to the RCW:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=42.30.110>

Do board meetings have to be recorded?

School board meetings where votes are taking place have to be recorded and published in a reasonable time frame.

Do work study meetings fall under the open meeting law?

Yes, they are considered under "Other Meetings", see page 10 in WSSDA's Open Public Meetings Guide. [Guidebooks - WSSDA](#)

Policy Questions

What's the difference between a policy and a procedure?

Policy is written by the board to outline *what* a district is to accomplish. Good policies are high level enough to cover all circumstances but detailed enough to give clear direction to the Superintendent and district staff. Procedures are written by district staff and describe the details around *how* a policy is to be implemented.

Policy is written by the school board to define *what* the district should achieve.

Good policy stays high-level to apply in many situations but is clear enough to guide the superintendent and staff.

Procedure is written by district staff and explains the specific steps for *how* to carry out the policy.

Who actually sets the board policies?

The state Legislature mandates many policies and federal law creates requirements that go into policy as well. Local school boards are able to set policy above and beyond the state and federal requirements. To support this responsibility, WSSDA provides model policy as a service. See [Critical, Important, or Discretionary? Understanding Model Policies and WSSDA's New Way of Presenting Them](#)

What role does WSSDA play in policy updates?

To support districts and remove barriers to legal compliance, WSSDA offers a [Model Policy Subscription Service](#) to help boards keep their policies up to date with changes in school law.

Since new legal requirements often come with each legislative session, regular policy reviews are essential. (And that's another service WSSDA offers. See [Policy Manual Review Services](#)).

Especially for districts that don't have their own legal staff, WSSDA's model policy service is a cost-effective way for districts to avoid legal liability, keep up with best practices, and give boards a foundation for developing policy in conversation with their local community.

Does the board review all of its policies each year, or is that an ongoing process?

- Because there are many policies, school boards often use a yearly calendar to review a rotating set of policies each year.
- Boards handle policy updates in different ways. When state law requires a change, those updates must be made promptly, even if they fall outside the board's regular review schedule.
- Boards that subscribe to WSSDA's Model Policy Service receive recommended updates based on changes in the law but can also revise policies to reflect local priorities.

For example: If the state mandates a minimum amount of recess time, all districts must update their policies. But if a local board wants to extend the school day to allow even more recess, that's a local decision they can write into policy.

What is policy governance? Is that or any other governance model required by state law? What can be done if school board members disagree on what their role is— for example, if some believe they should be involved in day-to-day operations?

A governance model is a framework to organize policies in order to document and communicate the principles by which the board governs. This includes policies outlining:

- Roles and responsibilities of the board
- Accountability of the board and superintendent
- Structures and processes to support the leadership of the district.
- How parties will interact with each other
- Policies governing how the district is run, i.e. about staff, financial reporting, instructional requirements, etc.

Policy Governance is one of many models. It was [created by John Carver](#), originally for corporations. There are other models used by school districts including Coherence Governance, Balanced Governance, and Student Outcomes Focused Governance. No specific governance model is mandated by law.

Curriculum

What is the role of teachers in establishing standards for curriculum?

Curriculum standards are set at the state level. As mandated in state law (RCW 28.A.655.070), “OSPI develops, adopts and periodically reviews the state’s learning standards.” This process incorporates input from many stakeholders, including educators. At the district level, school boards are required, again [by state law](#), to curriculum standards and to establish an instructional materials committee that is run by district administration and is to be comprised of staff members (such as teachers and other experts) as well as community members. The instructional materials committee works together to recommend curriculum to the school board, who then makes a decision to adopt the curriculum (or not) in accordance with board policy.

Community Engagement

Are there any webinars or educational tools on school boards that target the community to develop their understanding?

WSSDA offers candidate workshops during election years which are open to the public and anyone who is interested and/or running. A video of one of those workshops is included on this website and led to this FAQ document. In addition, WSSDA has come to communities to do candidate workshops in person. Our publication outlining the role of school directors is also available free: [A Guide for Effective School Board Members](#)

What happens if the school board receives a complaint from the community, what is the appropriate process? Is it down to each district’s procedure? Are school board members allowed to address?

The response would vary based on the source of the complaint. As board spokesperson, the board chair could meet with the community member to document the complaint. For legal and HR reasons, it is best to begin by following the district’s policy on community complaints. And, of course, the board is most effective when partnering with the superintendent to alert them to the complaint and to delegate to the superintendent the path to find the most effective resolution.

What advice do you have about keeping your own private social media separate from your "profile" as a school board director?

The Open Public Meetings Act and Public Records Act do not distinguish between “personal” and “official” social media accounts. Any time school district business is mentioned within your social media accounts, the laws come into effect. For that reason, many districts have policies and working agreements around how to handle social media. If you do not want your social media subject to disclosure laws, do not mention anything about school district business.

Is it appropriate for a school director to pursue community partnerships, specific grants, local non-profit funding to support students and programs, or otherwise try to drum up community resources for the district considering the governance and OPMA framework?

Individual school directors should always work in partnership with the rest of the board and the superintendent when seeking partnerships. Not only will this coordination keep the conversations and communications within the scope of the OPMA, but it will also ensure any potential partnerships will not divert district resources from other necessary areas. For this reason, boards will often designate liaisons to local governments and civic organizations.

Can you also speak on the relationship of the school board with city/county officials?

There are many benefits to partnering with city, county or other officials, and the possibilities are as varied as the communities themselves. Some districts develop [partnerships that lead to internships or apprenticeships](#). Some have collaborated on [after-school or summer programs](#) or [to meet emerging critical needs](#). Leasing school facilities or writing letters to support federal and state grants are other ways that district-municipal partnerships can work. These are just a few examples.

How can I comment back on procedures that community members are unhappy with? What does that look like?

Communicating with community members on procedures should begin with collaborating with the superintendent. As the board does not oversee procedures, the board does not get involved with updating them. However, board members can act as a conduit for the feedback and to support the community member with an introduction to the superintendent.

Public comment is never commented on by our school board. Are they obligated to do that?

Because the agenda of the meeting must be published ahead of time per the Open Public Meetings Act, the board does not reply to public comment unless that topic is already on the agenda. This is to support the entire community, who deserve to be made aware if a topic is going to be discussed so that they have the same opportunity to provide their input.

It seems that parents are unaware of board responsibilities and procedures. How can we resolve that?

It helps if the superintendent educates the community about the role and purpose of the school board. WSSDA's Guidebook for Effective School Board Members, or excerpts from it, could also be helpful to share.

Are there policies about board members participating in community events, or is it up to the board members to decide?

There are three general practices that are common around community events:

1. Check to make sure a quorum of the board is not going to attend without giving public notice of that attendance as a “meeting” as directed by the OPMA;
2. If the event is being held at a school, do the school office the courtesy of emailing a day or so in advance to let them know of your attendance. Having a school board member on campus can be a big event for a school;
3. Let your superintendent and board know where you have been able to go in case they want to learn more about your experience.

How is committee membership determined? Is there a process for that or is it whomever volunteers? Is there some balance of district folks and community folks?

There are board policies that govern how committees are compiled. The topic and scope of the committee often impacts how the committee is put together.

How do you let people know when you speak as a parent rather than as a board member?

When in public, you always speak as a board member even if a topic involves your child. If you would like to have a conversation with your child’s teacher or principal, you can always make a meeting or set a conference time. It is helpful to come to these meetings with an awareness that you might have to create trust within the conversation so that the staff member isn’t concerned you will use your authority to ask for special favors.

Board Alignment, Communication and Voting

What can a board member do when in the minority to advocate for their community

If there are students who aren’t being served, board members can use their voice to point out areas of improvement for the district. They can also bring perspective and their values to discussions in board meetings. Effective school board members remember they serve every student in the district, not just those they might personally know or identify with. And as each student brings their unique talents and needs, board members need to guide their leadership in a way that creates adaptability, broad thinking, and empathy for each student.

What happens if a board does not agree?

A board does not need to agree all the time. In fact, being comprised of different individuals brings a multitude of perspectives, experiences and approaches to very complex work. However, *how* the board disagrees makes all the difference. Having different priorities and approaches to

serving students can still be grounded in mutual respect, trust, and a willingness to learn from each other. In that way, you can work together to try and find solutions that keep moving the district forward.

Can you abstain from a board vote if you disagree?

Abstaining due to a conflict of interest is a common practice. Abstaining from an important vote can have a negative long-term impact on the district. Another approach might be to table a vote to seek more time for deliberation and information gathering.

What happens if there are two nays, two ayes, and one abstention?

It does not pass because there is no majority.

If you disagree with something that will inevitably pass, can directors abstain from voting or are they required to vote each time?

There is no requirement to vote one way or another. However, abstaining from an important vote can have a negative long-term impact on the district by creating uncertainty and confusion. This can harm the board's ability to create lasting growth in the district. If you disagree with a vote that is on the table, abstaining offers no advantages. Voting "No" and explaining during the meeting what conditions or improvements would move you to a "Yes" is a way of leading the district forward. Board members can also state what part of an action they disagree with or do not support, yet still choose to vote in favor. This allows some nuance beyond a simple Yes or No vote that is sometimes helpful.

How is it determined who can speak for the board? Is it always the president?

The board president is usually the designated spokesperson for the board, but not always. Board policy often spells out this expectation, generally in the 1000-series, which covers topics related to the board itself or in a board norms/operating protocol policy or agreement. In some cases, this is a less formal agreement that the board president or another designated board member will be the spokesperson. Either way, it is recommended to clarify your board's practice.

This doesn't mean other board members can't speak to media or the public or others, but they should be clear that they are sharing their own perspective as an individual board member and are not speaking for the board. Mixed messages from multiple board members to a community can cause confusion and loss of trust in the board and school district.

How can you be a unified board even in cases when you do not agree with the majority vote?

Being a unified board can be defined in different ways. One of the most impactful ways of being a unified board is to always place student needs in the center of every discussion and decision.

Because there are a wide range of student needs, there will be a wide range of potential priorities, trade-offs, and ultimately, votes. As a board deliberates and then votes, explaining the values behind the vote and the desired outcome of the vote can go a long way in building understanding. You don't have to vote with the majority, but you do have to support the decision of the majority.

Board Director Training and Development

If I serve on another county board where public meeting training is required and I've taken it within the past year, do I need to take it again?

No, as long as it has been recorded that you have taken Open Government Training offered by the state Attorney General's Office.

Is the ethics board different from OPMA? What are the repercussions of ethics or OPMA violations?

OPMA violations can result in fines for individual board members. Ethics violations could fall under conflict-of-interest laws and the repercussions will vary based on the circumstance and severity.

Does the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction have a webpage to help us understand school budgets?

See [School District Budget Challenges and Financial Insolvency](#) and WSSDA's [Washington School Funding FAQs](#)

Also, WSSDA has a series of [workshops on school district finance](#), including one titled "Deciphering District Budgets." The workshops are offered on a rotating basis throughout the year, including at WSSDA's Annual Conference. WSSDA emails all school directors when training is scheduled. See all the [professional learning opportunities offered by WSSDA](#) or check the [events calendar](#) for upcoming workshops.

Which law requires equity training for board directors?

RCW 28A.343.100. Learn more about [WSSDA's educational equity trainings](#). (←linked to <https://wssda.org/events/professional-development/educational-equity/educational-equity-trainings/>)

Are all WSSDA trainings free for school board members?

No, some trainings have fees to cover WSSDA's costs to offer the training. These typically range from \$90 to \$110 for trainings of 2.5 hours or more. These are also offered as a part of the [WSSDA Annual Conference](#) which takes place every November.

Can you speak more to “innovation” and a growth mindset?

A growth mindset is a belief that learning is continuous, and abilities and skills can always grow. In practice, a growth mindset causes leaders to look for opportunities to find new understandings and keeps them open to new solutions and possibilities. That mindset can lead a school director to deeper understandings of effective governance and the many challenges and opportunities facing their school district. To explore how a growth mindset relates to classroom instruction, see Stanford University’s Teaching Commons: Growth Mindset and Enhanced Learning. (←link: <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/teaching-guides/foundations-course-design/learning-activities/growth-mindset-and-enhanced-learning>)

How does WSSDA support school directors with professional development and training?

WSSDA’s Leadership Development branch supports school board members through trainings, customized workshops, consulting, plus our free Online Board Self-Assessment tool. [See our full list of professional learning opportunities](#). (←link: <https://wssda.org/events/professional-development/>)

Also, you will receive a “New Member” packet once you are elected and will be invited to join our New Director Network which meets virtually each month during the first year of your service as a board member. We are here to help!

Do you automatically become a member of WSSDA when elected as a board member? Before the invitation to this training, I didn't know WSSDA existed, but I'm so glad it does!

Yes, you do! Membership in WSSDA is automatic.

State, Federal and Local Law

Is there a hierarchy of laws and rules that determines which takes precedence? For example, should one first follow school policy, then Washington state law and constitution, then federal law—or the reverse? Or is it handled case by case, referring to higher levels only when lower ones are unclear? Also, does federal law override executive orders, and do state laws override executive orders?

In short, the general hierarchy runs:

1. U.S. Constitution (highest authority)
2. Federal laws and treaties (supersede conflicting state laws)
3. State constitutions
4. State laws

5. Local ordinances and school policies
6. Executive orders (federal or state), which must fit within the above

This means you usually **start at the top of this list** to check for conflicts, not the bottom—because higher-level rules can invalidate lower ones.

In more detail:

- **Federal vs. State** — The 10th Amendment says powers not given to the federal government (or prohibited to states) are left to the states or the people. That means states have broad authority—*unless* federal law covers an area, in which case the Supremacy Clause (Article VI of the Constitution) makes federal law prevail over conflicting state law.
- **State vs. Local/School Policy** — School districts and local governments get their authority from state law. If a local policy conflicts with state law, state law wins.
- **Executive Orders** — At both the federal and state level, executive orders are instructions from the executive branch (President or Governor) to carry out existing laws; they can't override statutes or the constitution. So:
 - Federal law (from Congress) overrides a presidential executive order.
 - State law (from the legislature) overrides a governor's executive order—unless the legislature has already given the governor temporary emergency powers.

Student Outcomes and Opportunity

Can you comment on the difference between opportunity and outcome? What is the definition of student outcomes? What types of things are included?

Opportunities are provided by schools and communities to support student learning and growth. This can include, for example, course and program offerings, highly qualified teachers or language services or support.

Outcomes are what we look for as a result of student learning. Examples of outcomes can vary depending on student needs and background. Some commonly measured outcomes are graduation rates, enrollment in advanced coursework, mastery of different subject areas, and disciplinary rates. There are several student outcomes that are referenced in budget allocations. Two examples are the frequency of disciplinary actions and outcomes (suspension/expulsions) and academic assessments.

When opportunities are not available to every student within a school, or to every school within a district, we might call that an opportunity gap. This can be a useful concept to support change or progress within a district. A board might consider, through data, what opportunities support an outcome they are looking to improve and ensure access and resource allocation to that opportunity.

WSSDA offers a training focused specifically on understanding and addressing disparities in both outcome and opportunity called “[Discovering Educational Disparities](#).”

School Director Data

What data is tracked about board members? For instance, do you all track what percent of board members are also working full-time jobs?

There are no mechanisms for WSSDA to track demographic and/or employment data of school board members as that information isn’t gathered from candidates when they file to run for election. At times, WSSDA will facilitate a survey to seek data from board members on their years of services, their background or other topics of interest.