

School Boards Matter

A Guide to Effectively Advocating At The School Board Level



Co-Developed by the
Human Rights Campaign Foundation and
School Board Integrity Project



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HELLO,

Thank you for accessing “School Boards Matter: A Guide to Effectively Advocating At The School Board Level.”

We know that school boards have some of the most direct impact on the day-to-day aspects of our lives- and particularly the lives of our LGBTQ+ students and families.

We also know that school boards and school board elections have increasingly become a flash point for extremism, harmful rhetoric and attacks on the LGBTQ+ community and our students.

That is why we at the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and the School Board Integrity Project are excited to provide you with this co-developed guide to help you on your advocacy journey to ensure school boards are representative of the core values we share around inclusion and not exclusion.

We know the way to combat the increasingly extreme and dangerous ideals and rhetoric is to come together to organize and turn the focus at the school board level back to the values the vast majority of us share, like integrity, respect, excellence, belonging, and trust.

Whether you are a parent, teacher or staff member, concerned community member, or a student, we hope you will use the information and tools within this guide to help you advocate for inclusive policies for LGBTQ+ and all students, organize and build power within your communities, and hold your school board members and candidates to a higher standard.

IN PRIDE AND SOLIDARITY,

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PART ONE:

What You Should Know About School Boards

A school board is a group of people who make decisions for the school system. They work within the rules and laws set by the state. School board members are elected by the people who live within the school district; therefore, the school board should represent the community's interests and provide quality education for all students. **Over 90,000 people are serving on school boards** – which is **nearly one in five elected officials** across the country.



Local elections—including school boards—have some of the most direct impact on our day-to-day lives, yet they receive the least amount of attention from the voting public. A study by the Brookings Institution, a non-partisan research group, found that **most school board elections are decided by just 5-10% of the voter base**. Because of this low turnout, these races are “susceptible to the whims of a small number of voters.” In some places, this has allowed the far-right-reflecting a vocal minority in our communities to essentially take over school boards by mobilizing their extremist base to elect anti-LGBTQ+ candidates.

School boards drive policy on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This includes affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities as well as LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons, books, and programs. School boards determine policies related to gender-affirming dress codes, safety and discipline measures for anti-LGBTQ+ bullying incidents, inclusive curriculum measures, and diversity in hiring. School boards also set the goals that district administrators follow. While school boards can be constrained by action at the state level, they still have a wide range of control over the designs, budgets, and cultures of our schools.

To make it easy, you can break down the main responsibilities of your local school board into **three key categories**:



PART TWO:

How to Navigate School Boards

To advocate on the school board level, you first need to **know who is on your school board**. Information about your school board is not always easy to find. Start by **visiting your school district's website**. If you don't see links to "School Board," look for other options such as "Trustees," "Board Directors," "Board Members," "Board of Education," or "Education Coordinators." Sometimes the information can be hidden under headings such as "Departments," "About," or "About Us."

Once you know who is on your board, you need to identify who are our allies, those who oppose policies and actions that support LGBTQ+ students and staff members, and those who fall somewhere in between. We've included a worksheet titled **"Getting to Know Your School Board"** to help you map out your specific school board later in this toolkit.

Every school board is unique, so in order to be an effective advocate, we need to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of your specific school board.

Here are a few other things you can research in addition to your board members to help you navigate your school board:

SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS:

- When and where are full board meetings held?
- When and where are agendas posted?
- Which meetings are live-streamed or recorded and posted online?
- Where and when are meeting minutes posted for public review?
- What are the board committees?
- What are the policies around public comments?

COMMITTEES:

- When and where are committee meetings held?
- Who chairs each committee?
- What are the current topics or items under review?
- Do community members attend committee meetings?
- Are there at-large positions for parents, community members, and students on board committees?



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NOTES

[illegible]



PART THREE:

Bringing a Concern to the School Board

When it comes to bringing a concern or other item to your school district or board, you want to ensure you are prepared and set up for success. Below are a few steps you can use to help you determine the best path forward.

1. DETERMINE WHO BEST CAN HELP YOU AT THE DISTRICT

Should your concern be directed at the school principal, a department supervisor (e.g. Special Education Department), the superintendent, the school board, or someone else?

Finding the appropriate person to direct your concern increases the chances of getting your concern addressed quickly and efficiently. The easiest way to do this is by stopping in or calling the school district office or school office and explaining your concern. When speaking about something that upsets you, do your best to remember that the person is there to help you direct your concern to the correct person, not to solve your problem.

2. FIND ALLIES

Advocating for change is more effective (and fun!) when you do it with a team of allies.

Look for parents, staff members, and other community members in your district who share your values and agree with what you are advocating for. You can do this through a number of channels, including activating your personal networks, looking at and posting in local social media groups, or seeing who has previously advocated in the district.

You should also look for community organizations and stakeholders who share your values and can help you amplify your message. A few examples could be:

- Members of the PTO/PTA or other district committees.
- The local Teachers' Union.
- Teachers and staff who actively support students (e.g. teachers who facilitate the school GSA, Student Council, respect diversity and inclusion, etc.).
- Local faith leaders or interfaith organizations.
- Community groups like PFLAG, LGBTQ Centers, Community Health Clinics, shelters, and neighborhood organizations.



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3. ORGANIZE FOR A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING

Take the time to **rally your allies**, meet and make a plan for what you want to accomplish.

Reach out to board members **before the board meeting** so they know about your concerns

- This will help eliminate the easy excuse of “this is the first time we are hearing about this” board members may lean on.
- Have your allies also reach out-- there is strength in numbers and it makes your concern harder to ignore.

Once you have a plan in place and have expressed your concerns, **focus on the school board meeting** you will attend.

- Work with your allies on the school board to get your concern on the agenda (or plan to speak during open comment if it is available at your district’s meetings).
- Understand any rules or norms for the board meeting and be respectful of them
 - Be aware of speaker sign-up periods, time limits and other things that may impact your plans.
- Ensure your allies know the meeting and plan to show up.
 - You can also create a visual statement in the audience by wearing a coordinated color, bringing signs, and taking and posting photos online to raise awareness of the issue and your advocacy within the community.
 - If possible, you can also alert local media to help draw even more attention to the issue.

Create a follow-up plan. It’s unlikely the board will take action on your concern immediately at the board meeting, particularly if it is a new topic that they have not discussed before. Be sure to **make a plan to hold the board accountable and continue advocating** alongside your allies for the changes you want to see in the district.

- This can look like continued calls and emails, as well as attending more board meetings and work sessions.
- Ultimately, if you have an unfriendly board, you may have to work to hold them accountable at the ballot box when they are up for re-election by **supporting candidates who share your values.**





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Holding an Ally Meeting

Now that you have identified allies in your district, it's time to get folks together and make a plan. Whether it is a large group, or a small group of dedicated allies, coming together to make a plan is important. Below you will find a sample outline for an ally meeting you can use as a guide for your own meeting.

SAMPLE ALLY MEETING OUTLINE

- **Welcome and introductions.**
 - Share names, pronouns, and organization affiliations (if any).
- **Provide space to share concerns.**
 - Allow time for people to share experiences. Are there similar issues happening throughout the district?
- **Share information on the topic that brought you together.**
 - What is the goal you are trying to accomplish?
- **Discuss what the group knows about the board.**
 - Remember, to successfully make a change, you only need 50% of the board plus one, not the whole board. Knowing who your allies and opposition are will help you determine a strategic path forward.
 - Remember, you have the **“Getting to Know Your School Board”** worksheet in this toolkit to help you uncover this information before your meeting!
- **Begin to prepare talking points and develop a strategy for what you’d like to accomplish.**
 - A few examples of this can include gathering data points/school survey results, identifying other district policies that you can reference or use as an example of what you would like to see, finding news articles or other historical context to help make your cases to the board, and gathering multiple parent, student, and even staff perspectives.
- **Make a plan for specific board member outreach.**
 - Understand who on the board you and your allies have personal relationships with (if any).
 - Focus on informing your allies on the board of your plans and goals so they can support you.
 - That support can include putting your topic on the agenda, giving you some insight into what is happening behind the scenes, and being a strategic partner at the meeting.
 - Once your allies are covered, focus on those who could be persuadable.
 - Take the time to schedule a meeting or a phone call with them. If that doesn’t work, send them a letter or an email.
 - There is more information to help you do this using the **“Engaging Your School Board Tip Sheet”** on the next page.
 - Present your concerns and propose solutions to the board members during your conversations.



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- **Create a follow-up plan as a group.**
 - Your work doesn't stop here. Plan follow-up meetings, report on progress, and communicate as things move forward.
 - Be sure to create a channel for communicating with the group.
 - Create a Facebook group, an email chain, Slack, or another way to communicate important updates with each other when things start moving quickly!
- **Get to work.**
 - Start to put your plans into action!

Engaging your School Board Tip Sheet



ENGAGING IN-PERSON OR BY PHONE

When approaching a conversations with a school board member, we want to create space for a productive and civil conversation.

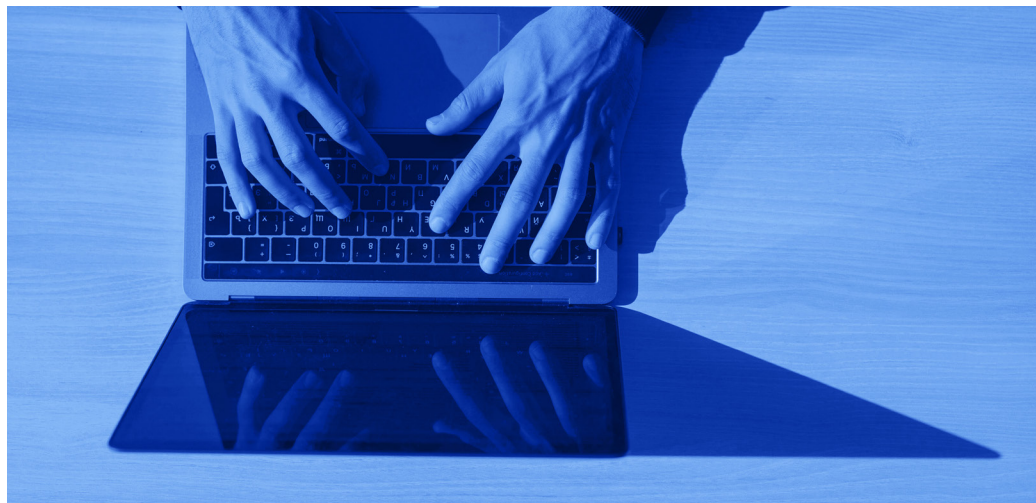
- **Find a specific time that works for both of your schedules and be respectful of their (and your) limited time.**
 - If you are meeting in person, ask them to join you in a neutral and public space like a local coffee shop to make it more comfortable.
- **Be transparent about what you want to discuss with them.**
 - No one wants to be caught in a “gotcha” moment. Let them know when you set up the conversation what you would like to discuss.
- **Don't bring unexpected guests.**
 - Unless you have made it clear when you were scheduling the meeting, this should be a one-on-one conversation to ensure it is as productive as possible.
- **Focus on your story and/or experiences.**
 - You will not always agree with them and they will not always agree with you, but keeping your conversation focused on your personal experiences and your values will help keep things moving forward.
- **Stay respectful.**
 - This is your opportunity to discuss issues that can be difficult.
 - If tensions run high and the conversation is no longer productive, politely thank them for their time and end the conversation.



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Engaging your School Board Tip Sheet Continued



ENGAGING BY EMAIL OR LETTER

When a conversation isn't possible, writing your board members can be a great way to ensure your voice is heard.

- **Get the specific email/mailling information for your board members.**
 - You can find contact information and procedures on your district's website.
- **Tell them how you are connected to the community.**
 - Are you a parent, student, alumni, community member, or teacher? Let them know!
 - They will value your email or letter more if they know how you're connected to the district.
- **Briefly state why you are sending the email/letter and what is important to you.**
 - This is a great place to tell your personal story and emphasize how their decisions will impact students in their district.
- **Avoid form emails if you can!**
 - We know it's an easy action, but after the first few dozen, members will tune them out, even if you add a personal touch.
 - It's better to send a personal email and let them know in the email if you are a part of a more significant movement.
- **Keep it short.**
 - Members will receive many emails, especially if it is a hot-button issue. They will be likelier to read it if it's short and to the point.
- **As always, keep it respectful.**
 - You can be passionate about something without resorting to personal attacks. It's also simply not effective to be rude.

PART FOUR:

Speaking at a School Board Meeting

Now that we have a plan and allies, and we know that speaking directly to the school board is the best course of action, let's uncover how we go about speaking at a board meeting.

Usually, topics on the agenda for full school board meetings have already been discussed and agreed upon ahead of time in committee meetings, which is why it is helpful to have allies on the board advocating for your issue at an upcoming board meeting.

Keep an eye on the committee meeting agendas and attend/watch the recordings of school meetings to stay up to date on what the board is covering and continue tracking board member's views.

Use the school district website to determine when the next meeting will be held and what is on the agenda. Be prepared to look for answers to questions such as:

- Which meetings allow the public to speak?
- At which point in the meeting are you allowed to speak?
- Are you allowed to speak on a topic that is not on the agenda?
- How do you sign up to speak at the meeting?
- Do you need to sign up to speak before the meeting?
- How much time do you have to speak?





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QUICK TIPS TO SET YOU UP FOR SUCCESS AT YOUR MEETING



Prepare your remarks ahead of time. This is not the time to wing it.

- You will have a limited amount of time to discuss something that is likely to elicit emotion. Write out your remarks ahead of time and practice them.
- Later in this toolkit is a “**School Board Testimony Guide**” to help you plan your remarks.



Review the meeting's agenda items, so you know when you will be speaking.



Arrive **before** the meeting is scheduled to start and sign up to speak.



Know that the board may modify the agenda or the amount of time the public is allowed to speak.



You may or may not be told your place in the queue, so **be prepared to speak at any time.**



Don't expect a response. The board generally does not engage in a conversation with public speakers about what they have just said.

- Don't be alarmed if their facial expressions remain neutral. They may try not to reflect what they are feeling or thinking.
- When your time is up, the board will likely move on without making any remarks about your comments.



You will be timed, and you could be cut off without notice, so plan your remarks accordingly.



Be sure to **thank the board** for their time.



Follow up after the meeting with the members and include a brief summary of your remarks and your contact information.





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School Board Testimony Check List

Speaking at a school board meeting can feel intimidating. Use the checklist below to help ensure you are prepared when you address your school board at a meeting.

- ☐ Date, time, and location of the board meeting.
- ☐ An understanding of the board meeting rules.
- ☐ An understanding of the meeting's agenda and which agenda item you will be speaking on.
- ☐ Your pre-written statement that has been printed out. *Bonus points if you have practiced beforehand!
- ☐ Printed copies of your statement for you to ask the clerk to hand out to board members.
- ☐ A pen and paper to take notes about the meeting.
- ☐ A phone or other timer to ensure you stay within the time parameters set by the board.
- ☐ Friendly allies who will be there to support you before, during, and after your testimony.
- ☐ A plan to follow up with the board after the meeting and hold them accountable.



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School Board Testimony Guide

Use the following worksheet to help you outline what you would like to say when you are in front of your local school board.

Introduction	This is your opportunity to tell the board who you are and your connection to the district.
Why You Are Here	What are you advocating for?
What is at Stake?	What will happen if the board fails to take action?
Action You Want the Board to Take	What are you asking the board to do? Pass a policy? Make an investment? This is your time to tell them.
Closing	Here is your moment to wrap up and thank the board for their time and consideration.
Follow Up	Your work doesn't end after you have spoken. Make a plan to follow up and ensure you and your allies hold the school board accountable!

PART FIVE:

Talking Truth. Dispelling Myths with Facts.

There are many myths about advocating on a school board. We have compiled some of the most common questions and myths and laid them out for you below.

MYTH

FACT

To get a concern addressed, first attend a school board meeting and speak during public comments.

Before you go to the board, find out if you can get your concern addressed by the school principal, superintendent, or another department. Ideally, public commentary on a concern at a board meeting should be a last resort, when your other efforts have been exhausted or ignored.

The most effective way to influence policy change is to attend a school board meeting and speak during public comments.

If the first time the board hears about your concern is at a board meeting, it may be too late to sway their opinions. During the full school board meeting, board committees present on topics that they have discussed during their meetings for board approval. The best way to make yourself heard is to attend a committee meeting or contact board members directly.

If the school board decides to do something that would exclude, discriminate, or potentially harm students or staff, the state department of education, mayor, governor, or someone with more authority will step in and stop it from happening.

The School Board is the policy-making body for the school district. The State Department of Education, the mayor, and the governor can try to influence, warn, or persuade the school board, but they have **no authority** over the decisions made by the local school board.

School boards cannot create policies that are illegal or discriminatory because it's against the law.

School boards should work within the law; however, it's up to individuals to hold the board accountable to those laws.

The school board hires and fires teachers, support staff, principals, and district administrators.

School boards hire the **superintendent**. The superintendent works for the school board. The superintendent makes decisions about staffing.

If there is an unsupportive or unresponsive school board or school board member, there is nothing I can do about it.

School board members are **elected** to their positions. If they are unwilling to do their job or do not share the values of the voters in their district, they can and should be held accountable at the ballot box during their re-election.



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School Board Advocacy Road Map

As you begin your advocacy on the school board level, we wanted to provide you with a roadmap to help you remember the steps along the way. Below is your School Board Advocacy Roadmap full of “**U-Turns**” you can use to help guide you through the process.

