



Public School Governance

Each school day more than 1,030 Texas public school districts welcome five million students to local schools that provide rich and varied learning experiences from pre-kindergarten through high school. This is an enormous task with literally thousands of moving parts. In addition to the primary role, academic instruction, school districts offer transportation, counseling, meal services, extra-curricular activities, and a host of other opportunities and support programs for students and their families.

To accomplish this, locally elected school boards and district administrative staff work together within a governance structure that must address local community values and expectations along with federal and state law, State Board of Education rules, guidance from the Texas Education Agency, and guidelines from organizations such as the University Interscholastic League.

The Role of the Local School Board

“Governance” is the word that refers to the responsibilities and duties of the school board acting as a “body corporate.”¹ State law gives local school boards the “exclusive power and duty to govern and oversee the management of the public schools of the district. All powers and duties not specifically delegated by statute to the [Texas Education] agency or the State Board of Education are reserved for the trustees.”² Statute then goes on to enumerate the powers and duties of the school board, including adoption of a budget and local tax rate, collaboration with the superintendent, and establishment of performance goals for the district and its schools. These charges require board action throughout the year. These actions include adopting local policies, taking action with regards to employment contracts, and approving the district’s calendar, annual budget, and tax rate. Sections 11.151 and 11.1511 of the Texas Education Code enumerate the powers and duties of the school board as a governing body.

Locally elected school boards are tasked with ensuring satisfactory educational and fiscal performance of the district as a whole as well as academic performance of each school in the district. Boards must assure that the district complies with the requirements of federal and state law, even when the requirements appear burdensome or incompatible with local preferences. There is and always has been a natural tension between federal and state requirements and a desire for more local control and flexibility over instructional programs and district operations.

The relationship between the school board and the superintendent is intended to be collaborative.³ They are to work together to develop a vision statement and long-range educational plan for the district. Within the educational plan should be student achievement and operational goals. The collaboration should advocate for high student achievement and create connections with community organizations to support the high achievement goals. With the help of the district administration, the board must monitor progress toward meeting the goals as well as revise plans and goals, as needed, when state laws and rules change.

¹ Texas Education Code, Section 11.151 (a) and (b).

² Texas Education Code, Section 11.151 (b).

³ Texas Education Code, Section 11.1512.

The Role of the Superintendent and Administrative Staff

Perhaps the local school board's most salient role is to adopt the vision statement and comprehensive goals for the district and to monitor progress toward the goals, but another important responsibility is to hire and evaluate a superintendent with whom the board works collaboratively in the best interests of the district. The Texas Education Code identifies the superintendent as the district's "educational leader and the chief executive officer." The superintendent is also identified as the "administrative manager" charged with "implementing and monitoring plans, procedures, programs, and systems to achieve clearly defined and desired results in major areas of district operations" and "developing or causing to be developed appropriate administrative regulations to implement policies established by the board of trustees."⁴

The superintendent, through his or her administrative staff, creates the detailed implementation documents that outline the day-to-day needs of running the district. These administrative regulations include student and employee handbooks, grading guidelines, rules regarding intra-district transfers, and directives such as dress code guidelines and employment application processes. Taken together, these detailed documents are what many refer to as a district's "policies," though they should not be confused with the board-adopted local policies found in the district's policy manual.

The Role of State Government

At the state level, the Texas Constitution requires "suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools."⁵ To serve this end, the primary role of the Texas Legislature is to ensure adequate funding for operations and facilities and to provide direction on teacher compensation, contracts, state accountability, health and safety, graduation programs, student discipline, and roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents. The particulars of operating individual districts have traditionally been the purview of the local districts themselves. In recent years, however, the legislature and state government have set out new mandates such as end-of-course testing, requirements for educator employment and compensation, the school start date, and many other facets of district operations.

The 15-member State Board of Education develops and approves the curriculum standards called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or TEKS. This board adopts rules to implement these standards as well as instructional materials that align with the standards. The Texas Education Agency, led by the Commissioner of Education, promulgates rules to implement education law and oversees district compliance. The Agency develops the accountability system and arranges for development of tests that measure academic performance. The Agency also has numerous data collection and monitoring functions as well.

The Role of the Federal Government

Public schools in the United States are funded and governed primarily at the state and local level. However, the federal government requires that, as a condition of accepting federal funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the nation's schools meet assessment requirements and federal accountability standards for all student populations. Each campus, each district, and the state itself must annually meet federal accountability standards for adequate yearly progress (AYP) in academics, measured by scores on standardized tests. Additionally, public school districts that receive federal Title I and IDEA funds to supplement the educational support of low-income students and students with disabilities must comply with additional reporting and compliance requirements that come along with those funds. The federal government also provides resources for free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch for students.

⁴ Texas Education Code, Section 11.201.

⁵ Article VII, Section 1, Texas Constitution