

## **POLICY MANAGEMENT // GOVERNMENT**

### **Importance of Clear Policies and Procedures in Schools**

School policies and procedures establish expectations, keep students safe, and make sure they receive a good education. Here's how to write clear policies.

**December 22, 2020**

#### **Article highlights**

- Policies that set proper expectations.
- Policies that create a safe learning environment.
- Procedures to establish before there's an issue.

Schools are complex organizations that have many moving parts. Parents trust schools to keep their children safe and provide a good education. Teachers expect schools to help them do their jobs effectively. School boards and administrators have certain expectations about how a school should run.

In order to function effectively, schools must have clear policies and procedures that guide day-to-day processes. These policies cover everything from attendance, to student discipline, to emergency procedures.

School policies come in several different forms.

For example, most schools have separate handbooks for students, teachers, staff, and even parents. The rules and expectations laid out in these handbooks hold everyone accountable and ensure that the school can run properly.

School policies and procedures should be clear and specific.

The target audience – whether students, parents, or staff – need to be able to understand the rules in order to follow them. And administrators should regularly review policy handbooks to make sure all policies are up to date.

Overall, school policies and procedures establish expectations, keep students and staff safe, and make sure students receive a good education.

## **Set Proper Expectations**

Clear communication about expectations is especially important in schools. While teaching styles and classroom rules may differ between teachers, the basic guidelines should be consistent. This helps unify the school and make sure parents and students know what to expect.

It also helps create an effective environment for learning, where students and staff can focus on lessons, rather than getting caught up in arguments over things like attendance or clothing.

School policies and procedures codify these expectations, so everyone is on the same page.

## **Attendance policy**

School attendance is a matter of law. New Zealand legislation requires children to begin school at age 6, and attend school for 180 days each year until they reach the age of 16..

While parents are ultimately responsible for getting their children to school, it is a legal requirement that schools to keep attendance records.

Therefore, school policies and procedures on attendance have to make expectations abundantly clear to parents, students, and staff.

The state or local school board establishes many of the specific attendance guidelines. But handbooks for parents and students should include clear, jargon-free language on the benefits of full attendance – the “why” behind the policy.

## **Dress code**

School dress codes can be tricky.

In recent years, there have been several protests over school dress codes that are seen as sexist or unfair. Schools can avoid such controversy by creating clear dress code policies that apply to the entire student population.

They must not target one particular group of students, or be enforced in a way that could be seen as discriminatory against students of a particular race, religion, political belief, or gender identity.

School policies and procedures about the dress code should be specific and objective.

For example, if the dress code prohibits “gang-related” apparel, it should specify what that means. If the policy uses words such as “revealing,” “inappropriate,” or “disruptive,” it should define them or give examples.

Creating and distributing dress code policies will ensure that students understand expectations. They will know administrators aren't singling them out. Clear policies will also save teachers from having to subjectively decide whether a student's clothing counts as “revealing,” which can be awkward.

## **Cell phones and electronic devices**

Parents often want their students to have a cell phone so that they can get in touch in case of an emergency. And smartphones have become so ubiquitous that most schools have given up trying to ban them altogether.

Many schools allow students to carry cell phones as long as they keep them turned off or on silent. Some ban students from using cell phones at any point during school hours, while others allow them to use cell phones between classes and during lunchtime.

Allowing students to carry smartphones can be problematic, though. A 2012 study found that roughly 94% of high schoolers accessed social media on their phones during class.

And other studies have shown that schools that ban cell phones have better educational outcomes. Things such as cheating, cyberbullying, and taking pictures or videos can also be issues. Teachers need support from school administration when dealing with cell phones in the classroom. As one administrator wrote in an article on Edutopia:

***“Cell phones in the classroom can be a significant discipline problem and classroom management struggle if clear and explicit guidelines are not established the first day.”***

Clear school policies and procedures make practices more consistent.

Students don't have to wonder what devices they are allowed to use and when. And teachers know how to enforce the rules.

### **Create a Safe Learning Environment**

Of course, school policies and procedures are not only about fairness and expectations. They also establish guidelines to keep students and staff safe.

Creating a safe learning environment involves protecting students and staff from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. Students need to feel safe and secure at school in order to learn effectively.

School policies and procedures establish guidelines for safety in several areas:

#### **Bullying and sexual harassment**

Bullying can take many different forms, including physical threats, verbal or emotional bullying, or cyberbullying.

Sexual harassment can also take different forms: unwanted physical contact, inappropriate comments or jokes, demand for sexual favors.

Victims of bullying or harassment can be hesitant to speak up. They may worry that their claims won't be taken seriously or that the bully or harasser will retaliate.

Good school policies and procedures make it easier for parents, teachers, and students to identify bullying or sexual harassment. They provide a way forward for victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

The policies should provide definitions and examples of things that would qualify as bullying or harassment.

Policies should lay out the steps for reporting bullying or harassment and specify that all allegations will be taken seriously.

The policies should also define the procedures for investigating the claims, and the actions the school will take if the claims are found to be true.

Establishing clear, specific policies and procedures about bullying and harassment will not prevent all incidents, but they give a framework for all involved – taking the individual opinions or best guesses out of the equation.

### **Student code of conduct**

A code of conduct covers day-to-day student behavior.

The exact details of the code of conduct will differ depending on the needs of the specific school. But it should be as simple as possible, establishing guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

With the code of conduct especially, it's important for the student handbook to use language that students will understand. For example, a code of conduct for a middle school should use vocabulary and language that a 6th-8th grader will be able to easily read and understand.

A good code of conduct helps students succeed by establishing expectations and boundaries. It brings clarity and consistency in practices across the school and helps teachers and administrators know how to address behavioral issues.

Like all school policies and procedures, the code of conduct should change and grow with the school community.

The school should gather a team of administrators, teachers, and students to review and update the code of conduct every year.

### **Fighting/weapons**

School policies and procedures should provide definitions and examples of dangerous objects that are banned from campus.

The policies should explain any state or local laws that govern weapons or violence in schools. It should also establish the consequences of bringing dangerous objects to school. Having clear policies in place can prevent students from accidentally bringing dangerous objects to school.

If a violent incident does occur, good school policies and procedures ensure that everyone knows what to do to stay safe.

### **Alcohol, drugs, and tobacco**

Many U.S. schools have adopted “zero tolerance” policies when it comes to drugs and alcohol. But a recent study showed that such policies may not be effective deterrents.

Instead, United Educators suggests:

***“The most effective policies pertaining to the use, possession, and distribution of these substances are both comprehensive and compassionate. They emphasize prevention and nondisciplinary intervention, as well as fair and consistent discipline, to hold students accountable for their behavior.”***

The United Educators report includes several helpful areas for schools to think through when creating school drug and alcohol policies.

### **Establish Procedures Before There’s an Issue**

Schools have many moving pieces that can make day-to-day operations complicated. School administrators shouldn’t wait until something goes wrong to address an issue. Instead, they should proactively create school policies and procedures so teachers, administrators, and parents will know what to do if an issue arises.

This helps ensure that the school runs smoothly and treats all students consistently.

### **Dismissal procedure**

Most days, school dismissal and pickup will be fairly simple. However, schools should never find that they released a child to an unauthorized person or in a way in which the parent did not know where they are.

So every school should have policies in place.

Policies should cover authorized adults, early dismissal, inclement weather, changes in dismissal type, and how the school will handle dismissal in the event of an emergency.

This will prevent things from descending into chaos if there is an incident. It may be seen as a hassle to some, but will ultimately give parents peace of mind.

### **Academic dishonesty**

School policies and procedures should lay out instructions for how to handle students caught cheating.

This takes the decision-making away from individual teachers so that they don’t have to determine if or how to discipline the student. It is consistent for everyone.

It also makes students aware from day one what will happen if they choose to cheat – no talking their way out of the consequences.

### **Student clubs and athletics**

Having clear guidelines in place for school clubs and athletics will prevent accusations of discrimination. For example, school policies may specify that a student-athlete must maintain a certain GPA.

They may also lay out requirements for adults or non-students who want to lead or participate in after-school clubs. What access will they have to school facilities? What paperwork or charters are required? And what topics or goals are acceptable.

These standards would apply to all students, regardless of athletic ability, social status, or any other factor.

### **Student search and seizure**

Courts have ruled that the Fourth and Fifth Amendments don't always apply the same to students as they do to adults. While police officers must prove "probable cause" before searching private property, teachers and school administrators just have to have "reasonable suspicion" that a student has violated a law or school policy.

However, there are limits to how far a school can go with searches and seizures.

The Center for Public Education provides helpful information on students' rights. Clear school policies and procedures will reduce liability and help keep schools out of court.

## **Disciplinary guidelines**

As mentioned before, teachers will have different approaches to how they run their classroom. But individual teachers should not be the ones deciding disciplinary steps. School policies and procedures should lay out consistent, escalating steps for discipline. They should be age appropriate, fair, and explained in a way students can understand as they move up from grade to grade.

The policies should include who is authorized to invoke each form of discipline.

For example, a teacher might be authorized to assign detention, a principal or administrator may have to sign off on a suspension, and the school board may have to approve an expulsion.

Clear, well-written school policies and procedures help create environments where students can learn effectively.

Policies help schools keep students safe, enforce rules consistently, and provide the best possible education.

<https://www.powerdms.com/policy-learning-center/importance-of-clear-policies-and-procedures-in-schools>