

# Stand up for children



A Parent's Guide to State  
Board of Education Advocacy



*DISCLAIMER: This publication is designed to serve as a tool for parents who want to communicate and advocate before the Texas State Board of Education. It is not meant to provide legal advice.*

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## Introduction

The **Texas State Board of Education** is a 15-member board charged by law with overseeing the public education system in Texas. Board of Education members make important decisions that affect children's lives and education.

Under Texas law, children have a constitutionally guaranteed right to an education. They also have many other rights when they are in school.

School administrators, including the principal, superintendent and district trustees can help you resolve many issues that come up at school. But only the Board of Education can set curriculum standards for the state, choose the textbooks Texas children will be required to use or approve the creation of a new charter school. This pamphlet provides a brief description of how the Board of Education functions and then guides you through some simple steps to make your voice heard.





### Get involved at the local level

Local school boards are responsible for setting policies and making decisions on a wide range of issues, including what curricular and extra-curricular programs are available, how and when students are disciplined, and how the district's funds are spent. In some cases, local school boards involve committees of various people in developing and reviewing district policies. Those committees often must include teachers, students, parents and community members. Watch for public notices and listen for announcements at school board meetings for opportunities to get involved in your district! For more information on how to become an effective school board advocate, see our brochure: *Stand up for children - Know Your Rights With Your Local School Board.*

### Why is Board of Education advocacy so important?

The Board of Education needs your experience and insight.

You can play an active role in policies that affect Texas children, such as setting curriculum standards, by communicating your concerns and ideas to Board of Education members. They need to hear from students, parents and family members about what is working, what is not working, what services are needed, and what your priorities are for your child's education.

Personal stories are powerful tools for change. Board of Education members can learn from your story.

You can help protect your child's rights.

Parents, students and teachers working together can help ensure that the Board of Education respects the rights of all school children and enacts policies that raise academic achievement in Texas.

### How does the Board of Education function?

The following is general information about how the Board of Education functions, including:

1. Who are the Board of Education members?
2. What are the Board of Education's duties?
3. How does the Board of Education function?

#### 1. Who are Board of Education members?

The Board of Education is comprised of 15 members, elected to represent single-member districts drawn by the Texas legislature. Each district is roughly equal in population.

Members are elected to four-year terms, except for the general election following redistricting, when the Board of Education districts are redrawn to reflect population shifts. In the election following redistricting, all members are up for election, with seven members elected for two-year terms and eight members elected for four-year terms.

#### 2. What are Board of Education's duties?

The Board of Education oversees Texas' enormous public school system, which includes more than

1000 independent school districts, serving almost 5 million children. Its duties include developing curriculum standards and graduation requirements, choosing instructional materials that conform to those standards, and approving new charter schools.

#### *Instructional Materials*

The Board of Education is also charged with reviewing and approving instructional materials, such as textbooks and online supplements. Instructional materials are evaluated in large measure by determining whether they meet the curriculum standards, called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.

#### *Charter Schools*

In 1995, the Texas Legislature created a new kind of public school, the charter school. Charter schools provide education through a "charter" or contract granted by a chartering entity such as the Board of Education or by the board of trustees of an independent school district. In general, charter schools are subject to fewer state laws than other public schools, on the theory that less regulation could foster innovation.

The Board of Education accepts applications for new open-enrollment charters once a year. Most charters are operated by non-profit corporations.

*Curriculum Standards*

One of the most important responsibilities of the Board of Education is setting the curriculum standards for all schools, called Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. You may hear these referred to as “TEKS” (rhymes with “leaks”). By delineating the specific knowledge and skills students must master to progress in school, TEKS dictate what Texas children will study from the first day of school through graduation. TEKS are also the criteria used for evaluating public school textbooks.

By law, the community has a role to play in setting curriculum standards. The Texas Education Code, which sets out the legal duties of the Board of Education, directs that: “The State Board of Education, with the direct participation of educators, parents, business and industry representatives, and employers, shall by rule identify the essential knowledge and skills of each

subject of the required curriculum that all students should be able to demonstrate . . . .”

**3. How does the Board of Education function?**

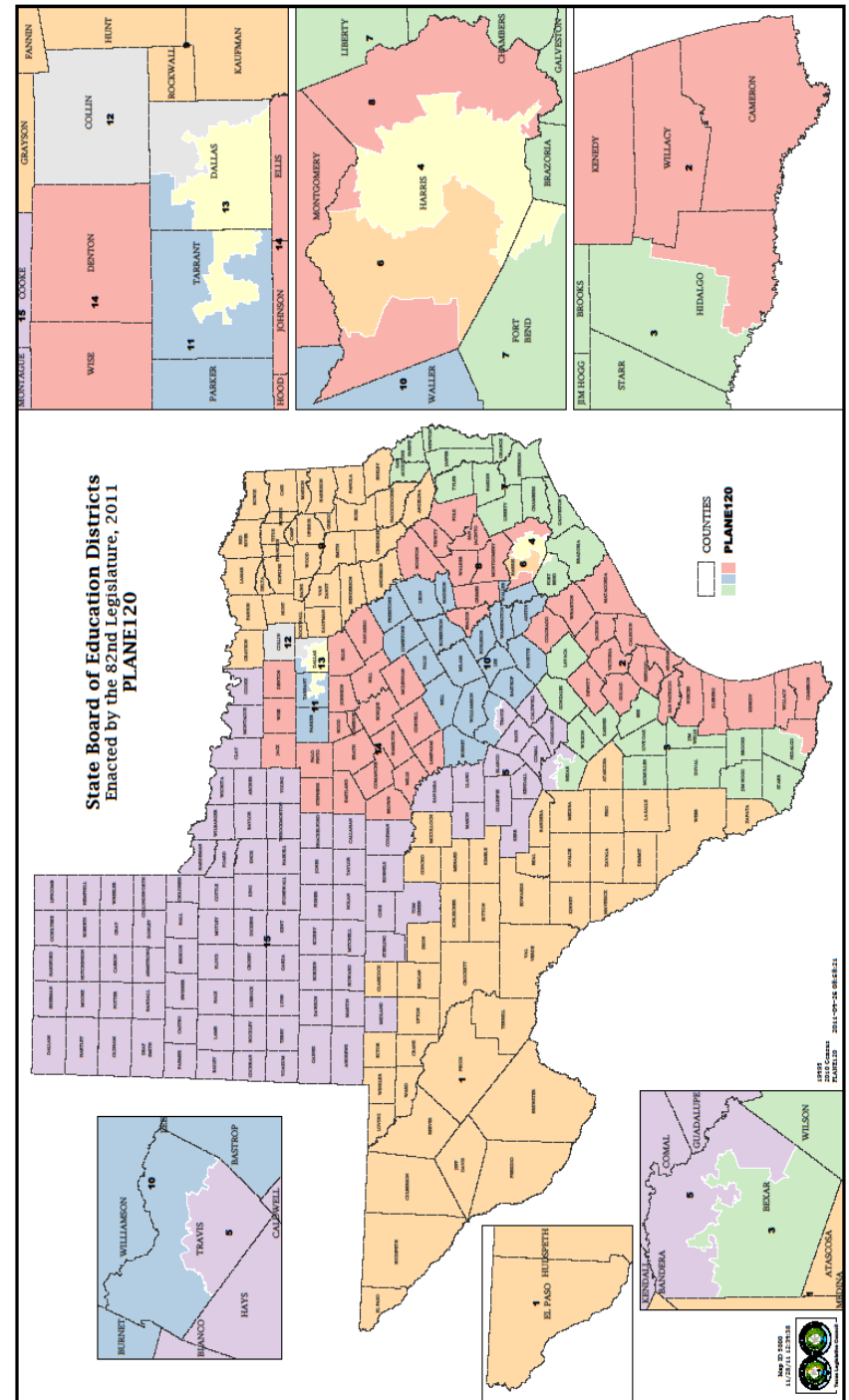
The Board of Education, like other governmental bodies in Texas, is governed by our state’s Open Meetings Act.

*Open public meetings*

With few exceptions, the Board of Education must conduct its business in open public meetings. The board’s business includes more than just the casting of final votes. It also includes the discussions between members as they reach their decisions on how to vote.

By law, the Board of Education holds four regular meetings a year in Austin, Texas. The Board may also hold special meetings of the full Board at other times and places selected by the Board’s Chair, as well as meetings of the various committees of the Board.

For a schedule of upcoming board meetings, call the Texas Education Agency at (512) 463-9734 or visit its website at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us> .



## WHO REPRESENTS ME?

Not sure who your Board of Education representative is? Check out this handy tool:  
<http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/>

### *Exceptions for privacy*

The Board of Education is permitted to meet in closed or “executive sessions” in certain limited circumstances.

### *Public participation*

The Open Meetings Act guarantees the public an opportunity to observe their elected representatives as they consider and make decisions. It does not give the public a right to speak at meetings. However, the Board of Education does allow members of the public to speak at most meetings. Usually, each speaker will be given the floor for about three minutes.

Speakers are required to sign up in advance of the meeting and follow the procedures established by the Board.

## SPEAK UP

Do not be shy about calling your Board of Education member or going to a Board meeting! Remember that you have unique insights into what is happening with your child.

For more information on how to register to speak at a meeting, you can call the Texas Education Agency at (512) 463-9734 or visit its website at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us>.

### **Communicating with the Board of Education**

The next sections of this guide describe several steps that can help you effectively communicate your concerns to Board members in writing, or at a Board meeting. There are tips for:

- Writing to your Board of Education member
- Calling your Board of Education member
- Meeting with your Board of Education member

Careful preparation can help you make an effective presentation to the Board. But if you have a concern, a question or a compliment, go ahead and get in touch with them. You do not have to be an expert on education policy, or have all the answers in advance. You can let the board members know that you are still exploring an issue.

### **Writing to Board of Education members**

Letters sent by mail or facsimile are an effective way of communicating with your Board of Education member. Often a letter will be seen as representing not only the position of the writer, but also many other parents who did not take the time to write.

E-mail can be another effective way to communicate with school board members. Remember to be just as careful about what you write in an e-mail as you would in a letter.

If you prefer to write in a language other than English, check with the Board member’s office to see if it has someone who can translate your letter or e-mail for the board member.



Here are six tips for writing an effective letter or e-mail:

**Keep it brief:** Letters should never be longer than one page and should be limited to one issue. Board members often have a lot of reading material to go through before each meeting.

**State who you are and what you want up front:** In the first paragraph, tell your Board member that you are a parent or family member of a child in their district. Identify the issue you are writing about. If your letter relates to a specific policy or regulation, identify it by its name and number.

**Hit your three most important points:** Choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading your Board member to support your position and explain these in your letter.

**Personalize your letter:** Tell your Board member why this issue matters in your community. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your family. **Do not underestimate the power of your own story. Personal stories have a strong impact.**

**Personalize your relationship:** Have you ever voted for the Board member? Are you familiar with him or her through any business or personal relationship? If so, say so.

**You are the expert:** Remember that it's the job of the Board of Education to represent you. Be courteous and to the point, but do not be afraid to take a firm position. You may know more about the issue than the Board member – this is your chance to educate him or her about the issue.

#### *Calling Board members*

You can also call Board members and let them know where you stand on the issues. If Board members find that their positions are unpopular, your call may contribute to a change in policy. If a Board member asks you to put your concerns in writing, follow up with a brief letter.

If you will need an interpreter, call the member's office to see if it can help you arrange to have an interpreter available on the phone or at an in-person meeting.

**Back up a letter, e-mail or phone call with face-to-face communication at a Board meeting!**

#### *Meeting with Board members*

Board of Education meetings are public, and speaking in public can be intimidating. But there are ways to overcome your fears and speak up for children.

- First, **remember that the Board members work for you!**
- If you have never spoken at a Board meeting, you might want to **go to one or two meetings just to observe**. You can get a sense of the individual Board members and watch how the Board conducts its business.
- Try to **work with another parent or an organized group**. It can strengthen your message and give you more confidence.



You can always start by trying to set up individual meetings with Board members to see where they stand on an issue. But you should also follow up by raising your issue at a Board or committee meeting. The Board has only fifteen members, and if you have even one or two board members on your side, your presence at a Board meeting can help them gain the support of their fellow Board members and the public. The following sections include suggestions for:

- Preparing for a Board of Education meeting
- Making an effective presentation
- Following up after the meeting

*Preparing for a Board of Education meeting*

1. Request time on the agenda

Contact the Texas Education Agency to find out how to get on the agenda at a Board meeting. Let them know what issue and policy, by name and number if you can, you wish to discuss.

If you will need an interpreter, contact the agency as far in advance as possible to see if they can make someone available.

2. Look at the Board of Education’s policies and procedures

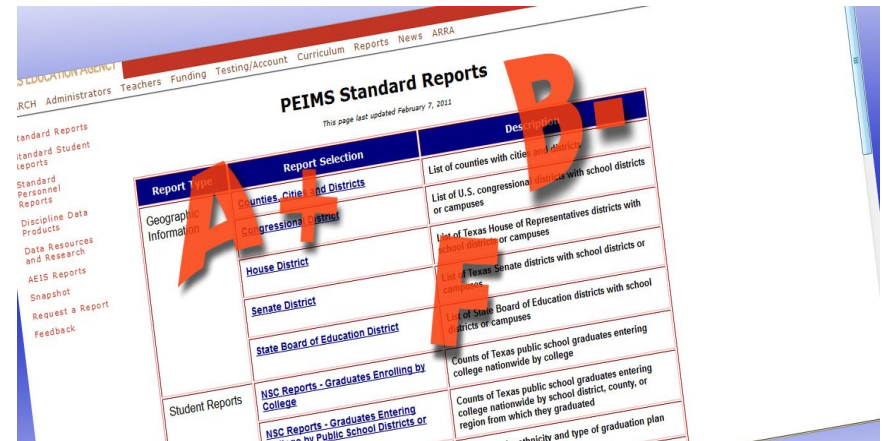
The Board of Education sets its own rules for how its meetings will be run. It’s a good idea to take a look at the rules and procedures in advance of attending a meeting so that you know what to expect. Current versions of the Board’s rules are published on the website of the Texas Education Agency at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=3958>.

3. Find out about your rights relating to the issue

Information about students’ and parents’ rights can be found in parent/student handbooks, district policies and procedures, and in the ACLU of Texas’s Youth Rights Manual, available on our website: [www.aclutx.org](http://www.aclutx.org).

4. Gather information

If you are asking the Board to take a particular position on an agenda item, it pays to do your homework. You can usually find information about items on the Board’s agenda on the Texas Education Agency’s website or at the agency’s offices in Austin.

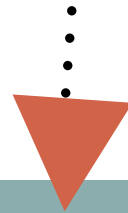


If you want to review current curriculum standards, they are published in the Texas Administrative Code, and are available online at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6148>.

If you have access to the Internet, you can also find a variety of reports on curriculum and education policy.

5. Connect with other parents and families

What do others in your community think? Work with other parents, families and students to define the problem and discuss possible solutions. Think about who your allies might be in seeking the change you want. You might find support from existing parent groups, teachers or community leaders.



**Report Card**

The Texas Education Agency collects and publishes on its website a great deal of data regarding Texas schools and student performance. You can access these data and reports at [http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/adhocrpt/Standard\\_Reports.html](http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/adhocrpt/Standard_Reports.html).

## JOIN THE COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK

Want to do more to ensure that your Texas lawmakers are doing what's best for kids? Members of the ACLU of Texas Community Action Network (CAN) engage with policy makers at every level of government to bring about positive changes. We'll give you the tools and training necessary to become an effective advocate in your community. To join or for more information, go to our website: <https://www.aclu.org/secure/can>

### 6. Think about the big picture and anticipate objections

When you decide to bring an issue to the Board, it will usually be because it affects your child. As you prepare, however, remember to consider how the issue affects all children in the district. Board of Education members are charged with making decisions that will be in the interest of the entire state and are often concerned with how a change will affect schools' budgets.

One or more Board members may already have taken a position on the issue. Talk to others to learn more about Board members' views. Try to anticipate what reasons Board members, school administrators or other community members might have to oppose your position and be ready to answer them.

### 7. Recruit others to attend

If you are going to a Board of Education meeting, bring along as many other parents, students and community members as you can! Not everyone needs to speak; just being there will let the Board members know you care. Plan a carpool, share child care responsibilities or meet for breakfast ahead of time so you can all make it there together.

If you have set up an individual meeting with a Board member, bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage. Keep it small, and bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the issue. Let the Board member know ahead of time how many people will attend the meeting.

### 8. Decide what you want to achieve

Make a clear outline of what changes you want to see. What is it you want the Board to do – vote for or against a particular textbook? Make a commitment to introduce a rule change or better enforce an existing one? Asking the Board to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been!



## CHECKLIST: PREPARING FOR A MEETING

- Request time on the agenda
- Look at the Board's policies and procedures
- Find out about your rights
- Gather information
- Connect with other parents and families
- Think about the big picture and anticipate objections
- Recruit others to attend
- Decide what you want to achieve
- Agree on what to say
- Lay out the plan for the meeting



9. Agree on what to say

It is tough to make a strong case for your position when you are disagreeing with other members of your group during the meeting! Identify your most important points – these can be your “talking points.” If a point is causing tension within your group, leave it out of your presentation to the Board.

10. Lay out the plan for the meeting

People can get nervous in a meeting and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the plan for presenting your issues beforehand, including who will speak first and what you will say in closing. Designate someone to talk and a different person to take notes.

**Making an effective presentation**

1. Be prompt and patient

Board of Education meetings can run long, and the period for public comments may be at the end of the agenda. But you should be sure to be present when your agenda item is called, or you may lose your chance to speak.

If you have arranged an individual meeting with a Board member, be sure to show up on time and be patient – it is not uncommon for meetings to run late.

2. Keep it short and focused!

You may have only a few minutes to present your concerns. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic. Start by introducing yourselves and thanking the Board members for taking the time to hear from you.



**EFFECTIVE SPEAKING**

Make it easy for people to hear you by standing and speaking clearly and distinctly.

3. Stick to your talking points

Follow a prepared outline so you will be sure to hit your most important points. Stay on topic, and back your points up with no more than five pages of materials that you can leave with the Board members. If you can, bring copies for each board member.

4. Provide personal examples of the impact of the policy!

This is the most important thing you can do in the presentation. When you are telling your story, it is okay to be nervous and emotional – people understand that parents and families feel very strongly about the lives and education of their children.

If you get emotional, try to take a few deep breaths, and focus on a written outline to get you through your points.

5. Remember to always be respectful

Showing respect toward the Board members, school administrators and other people in the audience – even if you disagree with their positions – will make it more likely that your concerns will be heard and taken seriously.

If a Board member or other person is responding in anger, do your best to keep your cool and see if you can find points of agreement. Review the things you do agree on – including that you all want to figure out what will work best for the students – and try to narrow down your points of disagreement.

Realize that one of the keys for resolving conflicts is to give people the time and information to consider your point of view.

6. Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart move

You do not need to be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell the Board members that you can get additional information for them. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments on the table and allows you to contact them again about the issue.

Never make up an answer to a question – giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!

7. Confirm a plan for going forward

If the Board is not going to act immediately, ask them what their next steps will be and request information about when the issue will be on the agenda again.

Often, if a Board member has not taken a position on a policy, he or she will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. The Board members may want time to consider a new proposal and research the potential impact. They may also want to put the issue on the agenda for a future meeting to give other members of the public a chance to comment.

Remember – you can impact the policies that shape your child’s education!



**Following up after the meeting**

1. Review and reflect

Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to understand what the Board has committed to do and what follow-up information you committed to send. If a Board member took the time to meet with you individually, each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you note.

2. Follow up in a timely fashion

If you need to get information to Board member, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. If a Board member has promised to get back to you, follow up with him or her. Be flexible, but persistent.



