

Best Practices for School Site Committees

This document is a companion to the Bylaws of the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) School Governance Councils (SGCs) and the Berkeley High School (BHS) School Site Council (SSC)¹. The bylaws address key elements of the purpose, charge, formation and conduct of these school committees. Each committee should also develop **operating agreements** and **group norms** consistent with the bylaws. Some appropriate topics are listed below.

An agreed-upon framework for interaction decreases the potential for misunderstandings or conflict, and increases the inclusivity and effectiveness of committee operations and decision-making.

Plan to begin each school year with a review of the purpose of the SGC, and a discussion of the past practices for meeting conduct. Consider adjustments to the operating rules and norms at any point in the year, if it could lead to increased participation and improved decision-making. Each year brings new participants, new perspectives, and a different set of issues, and an openness to process improvement is a hallmark of an effective SGC.

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Committee Operating Agreements and Group Norms

1. Recruitment and Elections

Recruitment of candidates and election of members “should be conducted in such a manner as to promote a SGC/SSC which reflects the ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic and programmatic composition of the site.”¹ It is important to find a variety of ways to reach out to, inform and engage a diverse group of potential candidates. Elections should be conducted so as to promote broad participation by the school community and a clear understanding of candidates’ perspectives.

Recruitment may include:

- Personal outreach to individuals or to specific groups,
- Flyers, newsletters, email and phone blasts,
- A general interest meeting to recruit for a variety of parent/staff/student groups such as the SGC, the PTA, the ELAC,
- Drumming up interest the preceding spring,
- Including recruitment information with summer mailings.

Recruitment Issues & Ideas:

Candidates and Elections:

- Schedule a candidate forum, or at least candidate introductions at a PTA meeting held before or at the same time as elections, so that voters may hear directly from the candidates,
- Brief candidate statements should be available in print, on the school website, and/or along with the ballots,
- Provide a template for the candidate statement – helpful for those who are new to this kind of involvement,
- Translate candidate statements and ballots into Spanish, as needed.

Voting may take place:

- at a special election meeting, and/or
- via ballots sent home with students and returned over a period of days, and/or
- online (with some safeguards)

Election and Voting Issues & Ideas:

¹ BUSD School Governance Council Bylaws adopted April 23, 2008; BHS School Site Council Bylaws adopted September 15, 2010 and revised October 9, 2013

2. Meeting Time, Place, Calendar, Agenda

Meeting Time & Place:

- During candidate recruitment: Publicize the normal committee meeting day and time.
- After the election: Adjust days and times so that all members' schedules are taken into account.
- Meetings must be held in a place accessible to any member of the public
- Meetings should be regular, preferably at set times, (for example, the first Tuesday of each month at a particular time).

Meeting Calendar:

- Should be established at the first meeting and then publicized widely, to allow maximum community participation.

Meeting Agenda:

- Established in advance by Chairperson and Principal
- Posted no less than 72 hours in advance to inform the school community of the items to be discussed (per Brown Act, “Open Meeting Law”)
- Publicized on school e-newsletter, principals’ newsletter, school website, bulletin boards, etc.
- Includes times for each item
- Includes a time slot for comments from the public (usually at either the beginning or end of the meeting). (Public means anyone who is not an elected member of the committee.)
- Is voted on at the beginning of each meeting.

Meeting Time, Place and Agenda Issues and Ideas:

3. Meeting Management Practices

Rules for conducting meetings have been developed by many different individuals and groups over a period of many years. For example, *Robert’s Rules of Order* was first published in 1870 and was based on the rules and practices of Congress. Since then, there have been elaborations and interpretations from literally hundreds of commentators, leading to complex and often contradictory regulations.

The SGC:

- May choose to use Robert’s Rules, or a modified version thereof, to conduct its business, as long as the group has shared access to a clear set of procedures for setting agendas and conducting its business.
- Should not assume that everyone is familiar with how to make or second a motion – make this part of the orientation and provide a handout on meeting procedures.
- Should include at the end of each agenda a brief item called “for the good of the order,” a time for positive comments and suggestions aimed at improving the work of the group.

Meeting Management Issues and Ideas:

4. Committee Orientation and Training

Each fall the district conducts an orientation and training for new and returning members of the SGC and other school site committees. Each SGC, guided by the Principal and Chairperson, should also carry out its own orientation and ongoing committee training throughout the year.

Site Committee Orientation should include;

- Review of the committee's Bylaws and the operating agreements (group norms)
- Overview of the current school site plan & budget
- Essential school-wide student performance data.

SGC members:

- Will need to draw upon school and district expertise in the areas of data interpretation, educational programs, and budgeting
- Will need training and orientation in data interpretation, educational programs, and budget development
- Should learn to interpret student and school performance data to identify student needs as the basis for planning
- Will need a basic familiarity with continuing and new educational programs
- Will need to develop a shared understanding of how to distribute budget resources to the activities and programs agreed to in the site plan.

Committee Orientation Issues & Ideas:

5. Communication Guidelines and Group Norms

Communication guidelines should reflect an awareness of, and respect for, the cultural and linguistic diversity of members. The group's meeting norms can be affirmed at the beginning of each meeting and new agreements may be added to the list over time. They might include:

- We have thoughtful discussions that are focused on the needs of students,
- We are responsible for supporting the learning of all of our school's students,
- We speak respectfully to each other,
- We assume positive intent,
- We do not engage in ad hominem (personal) attacks,
- We look for opportunities to find points of agreement or compromise,
- We step up to the discussion when we have something to contribute,
- We step back knowing that it's important to hear voices other than our own,
- We are careful and considerate listeners,
- We avoid side conversations,
- We make statements based on evidence and research rather than anecdote,
- We build upon each other's ideas to create the strongest conclusions.

Communication Guidelines/Group Norms Issues & Ideas:

6. Participation and Teamwork

The SGC is only as strong as the commitment of the individual members to their roles and responsibilities, along with their shared commitment to the work of the team. Members should commit to:

- Arrive on time,
- Attend regularly,
- Be present – not “multi-tasking” by doing other work at the meetings,
- Come to meetings prepared - read, research, talk to constituents,
- Ask questions for clarification,
- Be willing to raise and discuss challenging issues that may affect the school’s ability to achieve the results for students outlined.

The Principal and Chairperson should work together to:

- Act as facilitative leaders in decision-making;
- Ensure that all SGC members have the information they need to make timely decisions;
- Draw upon SGC members’ individual skills and areas of expertise to enhance discussions in both substantive and procedural questions,
- Provide opportunities for the SGC to assess itself, as for instance share perceptions of how well meetings and committee work are accomplishing the SGC goals,
- Identify ways to improve meetings and decision-making,
- Resolve problems and conflicts effectively.

Participation and Teamwork Issues & Ideas:

7. Decision-Making

The SGC is responsible for decisions that support all students’ learning outcomes, and must align decisions with site and district goals. Before making decisions, planned discussions and presentations should ensure that a variety of ideas and issues are considered and addressed.

Consensus versus Voting:

- A collaborative process leading to consensus is desirable.
- “Consensus” is a decision making process that works to include the voice of all persons responsible for making the decision.
- SGCs are encouraged to use consensus decision-making during the course of their discussions of recommendations and proposals.
- Straw votes may be taken during discussion.
- If consensus cannot be reached at the point when the decision must be made, and after every effort has been made to reach consensus, a vote should then be taken and the majority opinion prevails.
- Voting must be open -- no secret ballots.
- Methods of achieving consensus and/or coming to a vote should be part of each school site committee’s operating agreements.

Decision-Making Issues & Ideas:

8. Monitoring & Developing the Annual School Site Plan

The SGC meetings should include monitoring the implementation of the current year's Site Plan, updating the Plan as needed, and developing the Site Plan for the coming school year. In order to both develop and monitor the effectiveness of the school site plan, the SGC must agree on how to review multiple various forms of student performance data.

The SGC should commit to:

- Reviewing the programs in the Site Plan, including raising constructive questions or concerns about the activities or programs that are not being implemented, or that are not showing signs of progress toward student goals.

The Principal should:

- Review proposed changes or adjustments to the Site Plan and budget throughout the year with the SGC so that questions and concerns can be addressed in a continuous cycle of inquiry.

Site Plan Monitoring and Development Issues & Ideas:

9. Community Involvement and Transparency

The SGC acts on behalf of the school community, and seeks input from school constituencies (teachers, parents, students). The SGC also informs the school community of its activities and outcomes. This is achieved by making sure that:

- Meetings are open to the public, with time set aside for “public comment” at each SGC meeting.
- Meetings are well publicized, in accordance with a statute commonly referred to as the “Brown Act”, which guarantees the public’s right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies.
- The agenda and supporting materials are circulated at least 72 hours in advance of each meeting (e.g. posted on a school bulletin board as well as email or other newsletters).
- Meeting minutes are recorded and distributed to all SSC members and publicly posted at the school.

In addition to publicizing the agenda and minutes, and allowing for public comment, the SGC should plan for community meetings, surveys and other means of both sharing information and gathering feedback about the School Site Plan. This process must also incorporate input and viewpoints from the English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC), as well as other groups in the school community.

Community Involvement and Transparency Issues & Ideas: