



Pittsburgh Public Schools moving forward with controversial policy changes

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February 26, 2025

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Public School directors Wednesday passed a slew of policy revisions aimed at allowing the board to shift its focus to bettering student outcomes.

The board during its legislative meeting unanimously approved amendments to seven policies related to board procedures. Director Sala Udin was absent.

It's part of the board's [student outcomes focused governance](#) work in conjunction with [the Council of the Great City Schools](#), a Washington D.C.-based organization that aims to improve education for children living in inner cities across the country. Student outcomes focused governance is a model that allows board leadership to put its primary focus on setting goals and making decisions that directly improve student outcomes rather than prioritizing operations.

"We are all looking forward to continuing to do this work by putting the outcomes of our students at the forefront of the work that we do," board President Gene Walker said. "Because if our students aren't getting results then we aren't doing our job correctly."

Impacted policies include: [Policy 001](#), Board Policy and Procedure; [Policy 003](#), Authority and Powers; [Policy 004](#), Functions; [Policy 005](#), Membership; [Policy 006](#), Organization; [Policy 007](#), Meetings; and [Policy 009](#), Board Governance Standards/Code of Conduct/Code of Ethics.

Here's a look at the policy revisions:

Language changes

Language was changed in several of the policies including 001, 003, 004, 005 and 009 to reinforce the board's focus on its priorities and student outcomes.

In addition to those overarching changes, Policy 004 was tweaked to highlight the board's roles in the governance process, such as setting priorities and monitoring public progress

toward those. A new section also was added to Policy 005 regarding a district-required training program for newly elected or appointed directors.

Policy 006

Changes to this policy largely focus on committee structure.

In the approved policy, a section detailing legislative committees of the whole — including education, business and finance, and personnel — is struck. Two standing committees — executive and policy — remain, although another section that would permit directors to establish standing committees was taken out of the policy.

But directors can still create ad hoc committees as long as they have specific goals and deadlines.

“While the policy recommendations in 006 remove a requirement for standing committees that focus on administrative work, it still preserves the authority of the board to set any and all committees it sees fit as long as it defines what the purpose of that committee is and what it is trying to do,” Ben Mackey, who is with the Council of the Great City Schools, told directors during a January policy committee meeting.

Policy 007

This policy, which lays out board procedures, saw some of the biggest changes.

Changes approved included adding a timeline for when the board reviews documents. Under the changes, which go into effect in July, directors would receive relevant reports 10 days before an agenda review meeting.

Conversations did take place Wednesday regarding the consent agenda portion of the policy.

Director Jamie Piotrowski said that prior to the meeting a change was made to permit directors who did not receive satisfactory answers to their questions to be able to pull items from the consent agenda by 5 p.m. on the day before the board meeting.

That line also previously stated that three board members would have to make the request. But Director Emma Yourd made a motion to change that to one.

But Mr. Walker pushed back against the idea, saying that “the practical reason why we set the threshold at three is pretty straightforward. You need five votes for anything to move one direction or another and I think there’s a challenge to getting to that threshold when there is just one dissenting vote. And so any time you can put in provisions that already begin to create a consensus around something I think makes sense.”

The amendment passed in a 6-1-1 vote. Director Sylvia Wilson abstained; Mr. Walker voted against the motion.

Within that policy directors also removed a proposed line regarding campaign contributions.

The line would have read, “A conflict of interest also includes the requirement of school directors to recuse themselves from all matters involving individuals or organizations who made campaign contributions to them.” But Ms. Piotrowski said prior to the vote that sentence had been removed.

Community reaction

Despite moving forward, the policies have been a point of contention among residents, many of whom questioned the idea of student outcomes focused governance. Others raised concerns that power was being shifted to the superintendent.

“SOFG has no actual evidence that it results in better outcomes for students,” PPS parent Valerie Webb-Allman said during January’s public hearing. “Like none. So it just has an eye-catching name without anything to actually back up that name.”

She called the changes “anti-democratic.”

The advocacy group 412 Justice this week also published a letter detailing policy concerns. It called on the board to vote against the amendments.

“The SOFG Proposal strips parents, guardians, teachers, staff, and community members from having a say in their public schools,” the letter reads. “Members of the Board must choose community over consultants and vote NO on the 000 Series Policy Revisions for Consideration.”

And several residents, including Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers President Billy Hileman continued to raise those concerns during this month’s public hearing.

But many directors Wednesday pushed back against those statements.

“I have been supportive of student outcomes focused governance, I will continue to be supportive of the work but I will also continue to push back on the narrative that we are losing power,” Director Devon Taliaferro said. “I won’t allow my power to be taken away from me.”

Mr. Walker echoed those thoughts, adding that much of what he’s heard from the community is “unfounded or untrue,” based on his experience.

“As we look at this I think it’s important to recognize that any of the changes we’ve made to these policies, none of them remove power or authority from the board,” Mr. Walker said. “None of them give additional powers or authority to the superintendent. None of them were meant to strip our abilities to do anything.”

Ms. Wilson agreed, adding that she doesn't understand how some took the changes to be undemocratic.

"We are now putting our direction back on the focus of what we do for our children," Ms. Wilson said. "Some of the things that have been erroneously said, hopefully as we move forward folks will understand that that is very far from the truth."