Maintaining Aligned School Handbooks for Staff and Students

FBLA

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As a classroom teacher for the last eleven years, I can honestly say that no two groups of children behave, interact, or learn the same way. Classroom demographics and student needs change year after year. As a result, in order for me to be an effective educator, I too must change, adapt, and stay current in instructional strategies and use of technology. Doing so ensures high levels of learning and engagement for students year after year. At the classroom level, this type of thinking and change is nothing new. Evolving to meet changing needs of students and families is easy to see from newsletters and parent-teacher conferences.

Graduate level work and this course have proven to me that change must also be reflected at a systems level. District communication and handbooks are no exception. The Handbook is one tool a district can use to communicate the vision and the policies in place to ensure that mission and vision is accomplished. As a future administrator I feel it will be my duty to bring policy revisions and updates to my staff each year as well and policies that are necessary to be refreshed on. When Matt Carver spoke to the class he suggested administrators review policies on technology, supervision, and bullying each year and provide cases if possible to set the urgency and importance of the policy. It was no surprise that most of the revisions needed dealt with these same issues.

The handbooks I chose to analyze are those from the Urbandale Community School District. The Urbandale district page is linked to ten different handbooks ranging from Activity Guidelines to Talented and Gifted Handbook. I looked specifically at the Elementary Student/Parent Handbook and the Employee Handbook. After looking through the student handbook online I found that it is does a good job communicating policies and most are fairly thorough. After meeting with the districts’ Human Resources Director I learned that all policies in regards to students was updated April 1, 2013, that spring the district had an Iowa Department of Education site visit as well. The personnel sections of board policies have not been reviewed since February 20, 2012 and therefore require more attention and revision.

**Student Handbook**

Four of the five student handbook areas I looked at only needed some revision for clarity and alignment to current state and district policy with the most extensive revision needed in the area of surveillance camera used in school hallways and common spaces.

The first area I chose to look at was the student searches policy. In class we covered student searches quite well at the middle and high school level, so I was curious to see what the elementary handbook states in regards to searches. I have not had to search first grade back packs before but in a kindergarten through 5th grade building a search may be needed and I feel parents need to know that it is permissible as well as how it would be handled.

In the Student handbook under the heading Student Searches it states, “see Board Policy 512 - Student Searches”. Upon looking through the board policy it is very thorough and covers the reasons a search may be necessary, it defines reasonable suspicion and reasonable scope, as well as search procedures. On the board policy page, there is also reference to the Iowa state code 808A.2 which aligns to student searches and protected areas. The only suggestion I have is to include an actual statement in the handbook regarding student searches in addition to the board policy it aligns to. That way parents have the necessary information in the handbook as well as a place to go for more detailed information. The statement found in the Bellevue Public Schools in Nebraska handbook does a good job of stating expectations in a parent friendly format and it also includes cell phones in the statement, which Urbandale’s policy does not include.

School officials also reserve the right to search an individual and his/her vehicle, personal belongings, and affects located on school grounds or at school events, including but not limited to electronic devices, whenever the search is reasonably necessary to maintain order, discipline, health or safety. All such searches shall be based upon reasonable individualized suspicion that the individual subject to search has violated or is violating either the law or the rules of the school, and shall be conducted when school officials are in possession of concrete, objective and clearly expressed facts which may be based upon reliable information or personal observation. All searches shall be conducted in the most minimally intrusive manner possible, shall be limited to the objectives of the search and not be excessively intrusive in the light of the age and sex of the student and the nature of the infraction.

By placing a statement like the one above in the handbook in addition to the reference of board policy 512 for more information, I feel the communication is clear and explicit.

The Urbandale policy only states that “searches of students, their clothing, pocketbooks, briefcases, book bags, duffel bags or other personal containers in the possession of or in the immediate proximity of the student, and searches of automobiles on school property” are subject to searches. I feel that cell phone searches are an important piece missing from this policy and could be addressed further within student searches, within the Electronic devices/technology policy, or both policies. According to New Jersey v. T.L.O (1985) students are protected by the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which protects citizens against unreasonable searches and seizure. The term reasonable suspicion is crucial in legalizing school searches and there have been several cases that can provide guidance on how the precedent would apply to the search of student cell phones. Klump V. Nazareth Area School District (2006) and J.W. v. Desoto County School District, (2010) were both cases where districts policy was against having cell phones out during the school day so confiscating the phone was justified in both cases. The question is whether a search of the phone was justified and the two cases have differing opinions. This is an area that I feel I need more understanding of but what I do know is that schools would be smart to include a specific statement on their policy that regulate student owned devises brought to school, especially since it is becoming more and more common that elementary age students are carry cell phones.

Urbandale policy 606A states “The District prohibits student use of personal communication devices such as cellular telephones, smart devices, and PDAs for purposes not directly related to established educational programming. This prohibition applies during the school day and while participating in school activities,” but the policy does not state terms of searching the device. A statement stating “Students who bring their own devices to school are subject to a reasonable search if suspicion arises that the devices contain evidence of a violation of school policy or the law” should also be added.

The second student policy I reviewed was the Harassment and Bullying policy. This is addressed on page 31 of the handbook under the heading Sexual and other harassment and again simply lists board policy numbers 427 and policy 545. On the board policy page of the website the policy is detailed and aligned with Iowa Code 281 12.3 (6) which deals with student responsibility and discipline but it does not specifically state alignment with 281 12.3 (13), which explicitly addresses harassment and bullying policy. The content provided within the Urbandale board policy does address all components of the Iowa code, 281 12.3 (13), and simply adding the code within the Urbandale policy’s legal references section is needed. In addition I would also use the verbiage used on the board policy site in the handbook in addition to referencing the actual board policy.

Electronic devices/technology is the next area within the student handbook that I addressed. The current board policy is 448 and pertains to responsibility for personal property and policy 606A-internet appropriate usage. The two policies listed state when personal devices should be out of bags and that the district is not responsible for lost or broken personal property. After hearing Matt Carver speak and discussing situations involving cell phones I believe it would be in the districts best interest to also provide guidelines for how the personal devices should and should not be used. In the California case, Evens v. Superior Court - Los Angeles Unified School Dist. (1999), a student video recorded his teacher during science class with out her knowledge. In California this action violated education code section 51512 that prohibits such an act. Evens and the Untied Teachers contented that the evidence from the video recording was obtained as a result of California’s privacy act so it is not admissible for court. The district concluded that whatever evidence of teacher misconduct from the tape could also be learned through and investigation including interviews of students, teaching materials, and complaints made by parents. Iowa code 727.8 ELECTRONIC AND MECHANICAL EAVESDROPPING states that it prohibits the recording or interception of such communications by means of any mechanical or electronic device without the consent of at least one party. This means just the student can consent to the recording and it is legal. When making a revision I suggest using the wording found in the North Junior High Cell Phone Policy from Boise. It states the intended use of technology, when permitted times and locations for cell phone use are, and it then goes into detail explaining that teachers may authorize the use cell phones for instruction and what is not permitted during instruction time. I think using the below statement from Boise, Idaho as a starting point for cell phone use, provides Urbandale continued flexibility for instructional use but is clear on expectations.

Students may not use their phones during instruction time. This means cell phones must be turned off or placed on silent and put away before entering the classroom. Headphones may not be visible during instructional time. Also, phones may not be used outside of the classroom during instruction time. For example, leaving for the restroom, locker, library, or any other location outside of the classroom.

Teachers may permit use of cell phones for academic activities related to curriculum and will notify students when this type of use is authorized.

When a device is in use in the classroom, students WILL NOT:

* **Answer an incoming SMS (text) message or phone call**
* **Be on any social media site (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)**
* **Access or play any game or access any entertainment site on their device**
* **Access or use any application (app) on their device unless expressly instructed to by the instructor**
* **Take any picture or video that the instructor has not expressly asked you to take**
* **Upload any picture or video taken in any class to any social media site or website**
* **SMS (text) message or email any picture of video taken in class to any person, including themselves**
* **Access any type of mobile web browsing for any reason unless directed by the instructor**
* **Take any picture, video or text any class assignments or assessments without permission**

*Due to the evolving nature of emerging technologies, additional rules and regulations may be added throughout the school year.*

The area needing the most revision and alignment within the Student/Parent handbook is the use of surveillance cameras. Urbandale’s policy on the use of surveillance is on page 34 of the handbook and directs the readers’ attention to board policy 703. The handbook states, *“*Video cameras may be placed on school buses or school property to monitor student behavior. The film may be used as evidence in a student disciplinary proceeding.*”* This corresponds with chapter 285 and 321 of the Iowa code. Having been in Urbandale schools where video surveillance was reviewed for behavior, such as fights in the lunchroom or outside during arrival of students, I feel that a specific policy needs to address the rights of students and parents of video taped records.

While reading, *Video Camera Surveillance in Public School Settings:*

*Emerging Technologies, Privacy, and the Role of the Fourth Amendment,* by Kevin P. Brady, I learned how surveillance data corresponds to educational records and the implications from the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)**.** FERPA is provided for parents to have the legal rights to “inspect and review the educational records of their children” and defines an educational record as “any document, photograph, data, or image-processed document maintained by an educational agency or individual acting on behalf of the educational agency or institution.”

School administrators need to consider whether “educational records” were created when collecting, viewing, or retaining any video or audio data of student behavior because FERPA regulations directly apply. In order to comply with FERPA parents are usually legally entitled access to videotapes of their children unless withholding these videotapes is necessary to protect the health and safety of a particular student or others in the school community. The document by Brady also provides six guidelines for implementing a surveillance system; several of these are already in effect in Urbandale so I will speak to the one regarding policy. Brady suggests using the following language from Richmond Public Schools, Virginia in the student search and seizure section:

Surveillance cameras are in use in school facilities and on school buses to promote safety and to encourage reasonable orderliness in school, on school property, at school functions, and on school buses. Any person entering a school facility, on school property, at a school function, or riding a school bus is subject to being videotaped.

**Employee Handbook**

The Urbandale employee handbook is accessible via the Urbandale Employee Portal. I chose to continue the theme of workplace privacy and searches as well as use of personal technology through an employee lens. The employee handbook does a good job in stating policies to safeguard the privacy of medical and personal records of employees as well a setting a clear picture of Internet staff usage on district owned devises. At first glance the policy of employee searches is communicated through the guidelines of student searches. The only suggestion I have is to add a statement to further define searches of school property in classrooms. While researching employee handbooks I came across an independent school from Texas that does a great job of detailing even nonivestigatory searches in the workplace. Conroe Independent Schools policy states:

Nonivenstigatory searches in the workplace including accessing an employee’s desk, file cabinets, or work area to obtain information needed for usual business purposes may occur when an employee is unavailable. Therefore, employees are hereby notified that they have no legitimate expectation of privacy in those places. In addition, the District reserves the right to conduct searches when there is reasonable cause to believe a search will uncover evidence of work-related misconduct.

With this addition as well as the current statement on page 40 of the employee handbook I believe expectations and policy are clear.

The final employee policy I reviewed was the use of personal technology. Policies regarding the use of the Internet, email, and computers owned by the district are found in the employee handbook and part of the board policy, however the use of personal technology, such as using personal cell phones, is not as clearly defined and should be addressed. The Jackson County School district does a nice job making clear when it is appropriate to use cell phones by teachers and other instructional staff and I feel the clarity around this issue also directly relates to supervision duties and expectations. I suggest Urbandale add a section that clearly states, “Urbandale believes in effectively educating all children and in order to reach our mission of Teaching all- reaching all, classroom instruction time must be protected.” Using the Jackson County verbiage the policy could continue stating, “Therefore, any activity that distracts the teacher from his or her ability to utilize the entire class period for instructional purposes is prohibited. Specifically prohibited in the use of cell phones by teacher or other instructional personnel during class time (I would also add any supervision time). The Districts further prohibits the use of text messaging in any form by all staff to students.”

The additions of these specific policies hold teachers accountable for their actions and makes expectations clear when personal technology should and should not be used at school.

Overall I feel Urbandale Student and Staff handbooks are well written, well aligned, and cover important polices in detail. Most policies needing revisions were in regards to digital information and technologies. Technology use and digital data will only increase and board policies will have to evolve and adapt with the new knowledge and experiences in technology for students and employees.

**References**

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