Keeping up with the Times: Maintaining Effective School Handbooks for Staff and Students

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Time flies.  For schools, this is especially true, since it is their responsibility to keep up with the times.  As careers evolve, families change and Pluto is dropped from the list of planets, educators revise their ways.  It is most apparent in the classroom, as children report to their parents new teaching methods and the public keeps a microscope on instructors’ work.

What many miss is the great amount of background planning.  School policy is proposed by administrators and approved by school boards, usually without public awareness.  It’s not until an incident concerning school policy (or a lack of it) occurs that many pay attention. School boards, administrators and other education officials are best served when they prepare their policies to keep pace with changes and continually revise.  School handbooks are an excellent example.  By keeping this updated, an administrator may protect him or herself as well as teachers from unwelcome controversy.

The subjects of my analysis are the Dallas Center-Grimes High School handbooks.  I studied the handbooks for both students and staff from the most recent school year, 2013-2014.  Overall, the handbooks appeared thorough, covering subjects from student use of electronic devices to staff appearance.  I was most impressed with the way subjects were covered.  Analysis showed the administration attempted to take a stance on subjects, while at the same time leaving room for interpretation.  This is a way for the district to address situations with individuality.

Technology is a major headline-maker, opportunity, and area of difficulty for schools.  I focused on a couple related areas, in part because it is a current and evolving topic.  The high school handbook covers electronic devices on pages 24 and 25 of its handbook; the school does an adequate job of being current and proactive with its policies.  Cell phones, ipods, mp3 players and other musical devices are addressed.  Times when students are allowed to have these devices, such as in the hallway or cafeteria during non-instructional periods, are made clear.  Situations where cell phone or other electronic devices are inappropriate to use are also outlined, as are consequences for inappropriately using them. From there, the policies overwhelmingly leave use of these in the classroom to teacher discretion, giving the educators freedom to manage their classrooms fitting to their teaching methods.  These policies demonstrates the school building’s appreciation for autonomy and forward-thinking practices.

*Price v. New York City Board of Education (2008)* upheld a ruling allowing New York City’s public schools to ban cell phones in schools.  While Dallas Center-Grimes is much more lenient than that, only disallowing them in classrooms where teachers do not permit them, this case sets a precedent.  For now, courts have given schools the okay to restrict cell phone usage, making the high school’s policy aligned to current law.  The high school’s policy follows school board policy well, as the board leaves regulation up to building administration in code 502.14.  Overall, electronic devices and their use are handled thoroughly and adequately in the school handbook.

Dallas Center-Grimes High School will be facing changes and need to update its handbook to reflect this.  With 1:1 laptops entering the building in the 2014-2015 school year, students need leeway to carry bags they otherwise have not been allowed.   The bags will include the cords to charge their laptops, as well as be important in preserving the devices.

Currently, the concise statements referencing carrying bags are on page seven of the student handbook includes this: “... students will not be allowed to carry book bags, backpacks, or other bags throughout the day or to the classroom. Students will be required to put their bags in their lockers at the beginning of the day, where bags should remain until the end of the day.” My recommendation is to revise this to state, “... *students will only be allowed to carry their assigned laptop bag*.  *The bag used must be the one distributed by the school.  Students will not be allowed to carry other book bags, backpacks, or bags throughout the day or to the classroom.  Students will be required to put their bags (except their assigned laptop bag) in their lockers at the beginning of the day, where bags should remain until the end of the day*.”  Being proactive with this school policy will ensure students know and comply with expectations.

Being proactive will also require the high school to include a short statement about searches and seizures. While the Fourth Amendment protects citizens from unreasonable searches, for safety and security, the school will have the right to reasonable searches. According to the Center for Public Education, schools must have only reasonable suspicion. This should be stated in the student handbook, adding that student privacy is a concern but safety of all students is of the highest importance.

The high school handbook’s category of ‘Computer Use’ needs changes. This is in part because of the 1:1 initiative but also due to some outdated wording. The handbook states students are not allowed to use e-mail; this needs to be taken out altogether.  Students have been emailing assignments, questions or other academic related material for multiple school years.  Next, the handbook states, “Students will only be able to access the Internet under supervision of a staff member.”  With multiple access points and students expected to use the Internet as a key element in their education, it has and will be unrealistic for students to only use Internet under staff supervision.  This statement is unnecessary.

After these retractions, there are further changes key to making the institution of 1:1 smooth.  “Time and/or access to the Internet or the computers may be limited.  Classes will have preference for computer use over individuals during the day.  This can be retracted, as it is no longer related.  An important addition is a statement involving teacher discretion.  *“In the classroom, students will be able to use their laptops during appropriate times, at teacher discretion.”* This piece is important for classroom management and being proactive in expectations.  Beyond these revisions, the handbook already has important information regarding computer use.  The Children’s Internet Protection Act requires schools to put appropriate stipulations and protections on school computers, with the intent of guiding students away from harmful websites.  The handbook addresses safeties put on school electronic devices, an Internet Usage permission form and consequences for students who use computers in appropriately.  It states the steps to be taken in case of student-imposed damages, addresses the issue of inappropriate sites, and more.  In *School Law and the Public Schools,* Essex lays out guidelines for schools to protect themselves where students and the Internet are concerned.  (Essex, p. 300, 2012)  With the recommended changes above, the handbook aligns well with Essex’s guidelines.  For example, disciplinary policies are laid out and parent-student responsibilities are clearly established.  The current handbook statements, along with the few revisions suggested will help Dallas Center-Grimes High School as it transitions into more computer usage.

A student handbook is unimportant if its policies are not upheld.  As was mentioned earlier, this high school handbook often leaves room for interpretation, allowing administration and teachers to uphold policies in the manner they feel appropriate.  For the most part, the dress code policy follows this.  It speaks to appropriate dress, rarely specifying exact clothing.  One exception that needs to be removed is yoga pants.  The brief dress code policy states, “The following are not allowed: Yoga pants and/or sweatpants that are excessively tight are discouraged.”  Current trends mean female students often wear yoga pants and/or sweatpants; they are often excessively tight.  Some may argue they don’t have to be excessively tight, but this line seems too difficult to define, especially considering people’s many opinions on the definition.  Essex reports, “Dress regulations based on fashion or taste as a sole criterion will not survive court scrutiny.”  (Essex, p. 60, 2012) Beyond this, the handbook follows the “U.S. Supreme Court’s three-prong test for upholding regulations restricting expressive conduct.” (Essex, p. 60, 2012)  The school’s policy, as stated in the handbook, is not suppressing expression; it contributes to important government interest; and it doesn’t take away more freedom of speech than necessary.  This Supreme Court conclusion was a result of the *Blau v. Fort Thomas Public School District* decision in 2005. (Essex, p. 99, 2012)

Dallas Center-Grimes High School has been working to keep up with the times, especially considering its recent institution of flexible intervention time.  During one period that occurs either two or three days a week, students have the freedom to attend an academic session they feel is beneficial to their learning.  It may be review, enrichment, retakes or one of many other options.  The staff and administration have so far used the policy of allowing students to choose and go where they feel they can most benefit.  The predictable 75 - 80% of students put in a useful time period of academics.  The predictable 20-25% of students get lost on their way.  Similarly, advisory time is instituted for the remaining two to three days a week where this intervention is not being enacted.  The same situation occurs and some students express their feeling that this time is useless by not appearing.

While this can be seen as a day-to-day attendance issue, I feel it needs to be addressed in the handbook, similar to the way open-campus or off-campus classes are addressed.  While the lack of attendance may be dealt with the same way lack of attendance to English class is, it would be wise of the administration to make specific statements in their handbook, concerning the advisory and intervention time.  The appropriate place for addressing advisory/intervention time is under the category of ‘Attendance.’

The subject of advisory/intervention time should be its own heading and include a definition for each of these periods.  Following that should be bulleted expectations.  *“Students arrive on time.  Collect necessary materials and participate in related activities.  Students who are tardy or absent without an office-approved excuse will face the consequences as explained above.”*The administration and staff together, with school board approval, may choose other definitions and expectations.  The important piece is that this academic time is used appropriately by students and seen as an expected part of the school day.

Page 28 of the student handbook addresses the high school’s policy on semester tests.  This topic is thoroughly covered, but revisions to the policy are needed.  In general, students are required to take a minimum of two semester tests; they are allowed to opt out of a semester test in classes where they are earning an A- or higher.  The idea is to reward students for the positive work throughout the semester and help them focus their studying during a stressful time.  Two additions would improve the academic experience for this topic.  First, this policy reaches into the classroom and a teacher’s methods; therefore, it’s important to allow the classroom teacher discretion.  *Parate v. Isabor* is a case centered around first amendment rights of academic freedom.  While this case was at the university level, its decision is relative at lower levels of education as well.  The court determined "[b]ecause the assignment of a letter grade is symbolic communication intended to send a specific message to the student, the individual professor's communicative act is entitled to some measure of First Amendment protection." (University of North Carolina, 2014, p. 13) Every school day, administrators entrust in teachers the duty of doing what’s best for students; at the end of the semester, teachers should have the opportunity as well.

The next revision of this topic concerns attendance.  Code 501 of the board policies states, “It is imperative that….. Students realize that valuable information and training is provided each day by the teachers, and they will miss important learning opportunities if they do not attend school daily.”  This statement must be enforced by actions, including semester test policies.  If a student has missed a significant amount of days (“significant” may be defined by administrators, teachers and community members), then studying for and taking the semester final should be required.  Not simply as a disciplinary measure, but as a method to ensure the student learned, despite missing academic time.  A positive consequence of this change in the handbook is likely to motivate some students to attend more.  This is an excellent effect that can come out of extending the policy.

After delineating topics of the student handbook, the focus is now on the staff handbook.  Likewise, this handbook is thorough.  However, there are a few places where the school can be better served with some revisions.

Missing from the handbook is expectations for staff during certain emergency drills.  The historically present fire and tornado drills are spelled out, but the school now holds drills for a lockdown and shelter-in-place.  The Iowa Department of Education recommends having a procedure in place.  Additionally, it is suggested the school share the general procedure with parents and print it in the school handbook.  Taking this into consideration, the handbook requires an extension.

The Iowa School Safety Guide defines a shelter-in-place as being used when “evacuation would put people at risk (e.g. environmental hazard, blocked evacuation route).” (Iowa Department of Education, 2014, p. 20) A lockdown should be used in various situations, including when an armed assailant is present, a student has a weapon or there is a threat within the building.  Currently the fire and tornado drill procedures are under a ‘Miscellaneous’ section of the handbook.  These should be grouped with lockdown and shelter-in-place drills and placed under a section titled ‘Emergency Procedures.’  Here, the administration can place staff expectations such as how to follow take attendance, necessary materials and a reunification process.  To maintain safety, it’s important for emergency drills to take a priority in the handbook.

Professional Learning Communities are another recent addition to the high school.  They are briefly mentioned in the staff handbook; however, their importance and the high expectations communicated by the administration on a day-to-day basis need to be displayed in the handbook as well.  Page six of the handbook only defines the purpose of professional learning communities and leaves staff with the instruction that a process for these work groups will be determined.

Teachers have limited academic freedom, especially in the area of content.  They are largely held responsible to teach as directed by the school and district. Various court cases have affirmed this. *Garcetti v. Ceballos* in 2006, and *Evans-Marshall v. Board of Education* in 2010, (National School Boards Association, 2010) are two more recent cases protecting school districts’ rights to direct curriculum. Professional Learning Communities at Dallas Center-Grimes High School are a way for the school to direct curriculum. Because of this, administration has the right to provide more expectation in its handbook.

An area where the staff handbook does not align with school board policy is copyright. Copyright issues are referenced on four different pages of the board policies but not at all in the staff handbook. Code 603.16 of board policy thoroughly addresses the district expectations as well as law relative to educators and copyright. Especially with growing Internet use and people’s ability to choose amongst various works, copyright expectations should be addressed.

Section 107 of Title 17, United States Code addresses fair use copyright laws, making it an important section for teachers to have a general understanding of. (U.S. Copyright Office, 2014) This section on fair use references copying for the purpose of teaching and addressing situations where it is legal, such copying certain documents for educational purposes. While much of the fair use doctrine opens the door for teachers and educational use, it also dictates the amount of a copyrighted work that can be reproduced. To recognize the importance of copyright laws and alert staff to recognize them, the school could benefit from including a section on copyright in the staff handbook.

Important statements to add would include brief and related statements on fair use such as “*Fair use allows an individual to reproduce copyrighted work for purposes such as teaching or research*.” Also, board policy includes a specific list of what teachers may and may not do, but the staff handbook could provide an abbreviated version. *“Staff may not use copies to substitute for the purchase of materials and are limited on the amount copied from a work under copyright. Teachers must not directly or indirectly require students to copy or use copyrighted works.”* Each of the statements aligns with board policy and would bring copyright laws to the attention of staff.

It is evident Dallas Center-Grimes High School has been progressive in its instructional programs, boasting new technology and collaborative teams, among other features. As the school does so, it can better-prepare itself for the future by maintaining staff and student handbooks that reflect progression. Minor revisions, such as dress code issues, and major additions, such as emergency routines, will enhance handbooks that are currently informative and aligned. Continual revisions will only help the school as it keeps up with the times.

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