

Handling Student Handbooks

Your student handbook is an important communications tool and a policy document. Here are some tips to make it informative and useful

As school districts across the nation get ready for the advent of another school year, it is time to think (again) about what information students and parents need, and how best to provide that information. For most schools, the student handbook will be the most important purveyor of information provided to students. A good student handbook is a convenient, central reference for matters relating to student affairs.

The student handbook serves the key purpose of documenting notice of school rules. It also demonstrates compliance with the various “posting” requirements of state and federal civil rights and education laws. In this article, we’ll offer some practical tips for preparing informative and useful student handbooks.

What general information should go into the student handbook?

Student handbooks are the guides to student life in the district, providing an orientation for new and current students. Each handbook should include general information about the district as well as on each school, such as contact information for administrators and the school board.

The best handbooks help establish a tone and culture for the school. One way they do this is through welcome letters from the superintendent and building-level administrators. In the letters, the administration may highlight changes, such as those relating to security and visitor protocols, or to student policies and procedures, some of which may have been prompted by changes in the law.

High school student handbooks will likely contain much more information than those for elementary schools. General material common to all schools includes school calendars, information about school hours, inclement weather procedures, available extracurricular activities and interscholastic athletics, and important school events.

Rules included in the student handbook range from the mundane (visitor procedures) to the critical (emergency response).

In addition, handbooks should contain legally required notices to all students and parents. These include federally mandated notifications, such as notices relating to nondiscrimination, Section 504, Title IX, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, free and reduced-price school meals, and those required by NCLB. Districts also can use their handbooks to describe their regular and special education interventions.

For example, the district can provide valuable information for parents on its Response to Intervention program or other regular education support structures. Similarly, facts about the district’s special education services, including parents’ rights and procedural safeguard notices, should be in the handbook.

The key, of course, is to balance the need to provide important information to students and parents with the audience’s need to receive the information in a manner that is clear, comprehensive, and concise.

Must-have policies

In addition to general information about



the school and required notifications, it is essential to include certain district or school policies in the student handbook. That said, it is not practical or necessary to include every policy in the student handbook. Trying to include all district policies will make the handbook cumbersome and diminish its utility.

A full listing of all district policies should be available to students, parents, and the general public elsewhere, such as on the district website. Using excerpts of district policy language is advisable, with information linking to the full policy, so that the student handbook does not function as a duplicate policy book.

Certain student policies—such as those identified below—are critical additions to the student handbook. Notably, districts should take care that the policies and procedures provided in the student handbook are applied fairly and consistently. Selective enforcement of a handbook section, policy, or procedure could lead to claims of discrimination or unequal treatment. Here are some must-include policies:

- Student discipline policies and procedures outline expectations regarding student conduct, as well as explain the continuum of disciplinary consequences. Such handbook policy excerpts should have sufficient detail to put students on notice for the potential consequences for their conduct. Descriptions of conduct that warrants removal from class or school, from detention to expulsion, are essential information for students and parents.

- Attendance policies and procedures track state and local attendance and truancy laws. These rules also provide information about excused and unexcused absences, and may explain when a student may experience credit loss or retention due to absences.

- Bullying prevention policies and school climate plans are rightly included in the student handbook. The handbook is a critical opportunity to define

bullying for students and parents. In addition, school climate plans describe the district and school-specific efforts to promote a positive school environment.

- Dress codes make clear at the outset attire that will violate school rules. Reference to requests for exceptions to the dress code for religious practice or belief should be included.

- Expectations regarding search and seizure of students, their personal effects, and even school property, such as lockers, should be explained to all students and parents in the handbook.

- Nondiscrimination policies, addressing prohibited discrimination under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (disability), Title VI (race, color, national origin), Title VII (sex), and other state-specific protected classes should be included. In addition, include complaint processes, including forms, and the appropriate administrator to whom complaints should be directed.

What's in a good handbook?

Here are some tips to make your student handbook the go-to-guide for students and parents, as well as keep the district in compliance with federal and state laws.

- Make sure that every handbook has an “effective date,” so that everyone is able to readily identify the current edition of the handbook.

- When updating the handbook for a new school year, include a statement indicating that the handbook may be amended from time to time and that the district reserves the right to revise its policies in accordance with the law. Each time a revised and updated handbook is issued, include a statement that the current handbook replaces all prior versions.

- If any policies are substantively revised between handbook editions, include a cover letter outlining those changes at the start of the school year

to ensure that students and parents have clear notice of the changes.

- Include an acknowledgement page to be signed by the student and his or her parent or guardian. These sign-off sheets, which should include language indicating that the parent or guardian and the student have read and understand the policies and procedures outlined in the student handbook, serve as verification that students and parents are on notice for the school's policies and procedures.

- Consider posting the student handbook on school websites. Printing student handbooks (and mailing them) carries substantial cost to districts. Posting it online provides an immediate cost savings. Along with posting it online, provide parents and students with notice that the handbook is online, instructions on how to access it, and locations where hard copies may be obtained. Hard copies should be available to students and parents upon request, especially for those families without Internet access, and to the general public. Good places to store extra hard copies of the student handbook are the central office and the school and public libraries. If using online posting as the primary publication of the handbook, districts may need to work a little harder to ensure acknowledgement forms are returned, or create a system to collect those acknowledgement forms electronically.

Student handbooks serve many practical and legal purposes. They provide an excellent opportunity for schools and districts to get the year off to a good start. Take the time to take full advantage of that opportunity. ■

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