

West Sonoma County Union High School District

Governance Handbook

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This handbook reflects a framework for effective governance. The Board sees this handbook as a “living document” and will annually review and update its content. Trustee roles, commitment to norms, and developing consensus on protocols will enable the governance team to perform its responsibilities in a way that best benefits the students of West Sonoma County Union High School District. It is the intent of the Board that this document be widely available

I. District Mission and Guiding Principles

West Sonoma County Union High School District Mission

The mission of the West Sonoma County Union High School District to provide high quality instruction as student achievement is our top priority. (Mission statement currently in the process of being revised)

West Sonoma County High School Union District is committed to the following Guiding Principles:

Use Essential “6” to guide all decision making:

- Is it in the best interest of all students?
- Does the decision align with the mission and vision of the district and POG
- Does it help the district increase enrollment?
- Is the decision fiscally responsible?
- Do we have all the information we need?
- Have we engaged our Educational Partners if appropriate?

Educational Excellence and Lifelong Learning:

- Prioritize decisions for the ultimate benefit of students’ diverse needs.
- Foster high standards of achievement through collaborative work among staff and stakeholders.
- Embrace and integrate technology to enhance learning and teaching, catering to varied learning styles.
- Commit to continuous staff development for sustained educational improvement.

Student-Centered Environment:

- Maintain a safe, nurturing environment that promotes respect and well-being.
- Support student health and offer diverse educational opportunities, including academic and vocational pathways.
- Encourage critical thinking and problem-solving as core competencies.

Community and Inclusivity:

- Build a respectful and diverse educational community that values inclusiveness in decision-making.
- Appreciate and recognize the contributions of all district employees.

Accountability and Stewardship:

- Uphold accountability among Board members and staff, ensuring excellence across academics, the arts, athletics, and student wellness.
- Ensure fiscal responsibility to provide optimal educational programs and maintain suitable facilities.

II. Governance/Leadership Team Roles and Responsibilities

Effective teams value and respect their essential roles, reach mutual agreement on the roles of the Board and superintendent, and strive to operate within these roles. [Follow Roberts Rules of Order.](#)

Effective Trustees

- Are leaders who are passionate, engaged, and commit the time to be knowledgeable
- Hold a broader vision of education
- Demonstrate effective leadership qualities
- Are open, willing to learn, and listen to the viewpoints of others
- Do not give up seeking to understand issues; are tenacious and never afraid to ask questions
- Are good listeners, not defensive or reactive
- Build trust through being responsible, respectful and responsive to all members of our community in an inclusive and equitable manner
- Understand that actions of the Board are made as a whole and each member will stand by these decisions. After a decision is made, Trustees will represent the voice of the full Board, not promote individual beliefs or values as that of the Board's.
- Trustees will follow agreed upon processes and procedures.

Effective Leadership/Governance Team

The Board of Trustees and Superintendent of the District believe in having a strong and collaborative leadership team where Board members and district administration operate in an open and collegial manner to achieve the best for the students of the district.

The characteristics of this governance team include:

- Continuously building a sense of mutual trust
- Assuming positive intent and giving one another the benefit of the doubt
- Speaking with one another to resolve interpersonal or process issues while keeping the Superintendent informed when necessary
- Effective Trustees respect the knowledge of the District Leadership Team and will work in collaboration with the Superintendent.
- Engaging in open, meaningful, respectful dialogue while welcoming different viewpoints and perspectives. Seeking compromise where appropriate
- Being provided with and sharing adequate information to make informed decisions
- Supporting and caring about each other
- Create a culture of transparency and openness

Creating a Positive Culture and Providing Support

In order to promote a positive, open and respectful culture throughout the district, the Board of Trustees and Superintendent realize it is their duty to operate in an open atmosphere, without surprises, continuously communicate and support one another's decisions while maintaining confidentiality.

School Board and Superintendent Roles and Responsibilities

The role of the Board is to:	The role of the Superintendent is to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be an advocate for education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve as a resource to the Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize and keep District resources focused on student learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring options and recommendations to the Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with the Superintendent to set the vision and goals for the District 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide options and recommendations to the Board.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be supportive of students, staff and administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement Board Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support community participation and involvement in our decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As the primary district communicator, be the liaison between and representative of the District, staff, Board, community, and other stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide timely responses to complaints and concerns referred by the Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approve the budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a positive environment throughout the District
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire and evaluate the Superintendent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be the "day to day" decision maker
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer complaints and concerns to the Superintendent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support and leadership to implement the vision and goals for the District
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support actions taken by the Board and clearly differentiate personal opinion from Board decisions when speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage and delegate the work of the District Recommend for hire and supervise all District staff

The role of the Board is not to:	The role of the Superintendent is not to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abdicate Board responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assume Board responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As individuals, make promises that would appear to bind the District or Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speak on behalf of the Board, unless authorized by the Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pursue narrow personal agendas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Press narrow personal agendas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Carry out policies or micro-manage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Direct staff members, other than the Superintendent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discourage open discussion and feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create surprises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create surprises

Student Board Representatives Roles and Responsibilities

Purpose: To outline the role, responsibilities, and inclusion of student board members in the West Sonoma County Union High School District board governance.

Selection and Term:

- Student board members are chosen by students enrolled in the district's high schools.
- The term is one year, commencing on July 1, with provisions for adjustments under certain circumstances.

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Student board members shall attend all board meetings, except closed sessions.
- They are entitled to cast preferential votes on matters and make motions, except in specific areas like employer-employee relations.
- They shall be seated with other board members and recognized as full members in discussions.

Rights and Privileges:

- Entitled to receive the same meeting materials as other board members.
- Eligible for appointment to subcommittees.
- Invited to attend board functions and events.
- Reimbursed for mileage but not entitled to monetary compensation.

Training and Development:

- Provision for training, workshops, and conferences to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- Orientation for incoming student board members to understand district operations and board responsibilities.

Performance and Accountability:

- Procedures for addressing unfulfilled duties, including the appointment of an alternate student board member.

Policy Alignment and Engagement:

- Regular review of student board member roles to ensure alignment with district policies and effective student engagement in district governance.

IV. Structure and Process

Below are the processes and agreements that ensure that all members of the leadership team are operating in an effective manner.

Protocols to Facilitate Governance Leadership

Area	Protocol – Agreement
Placing items on the Board meeting agenda *Board Bylaw 9322	Trustees agree to the following process to place items on the Board meeting agenda <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contact the Board President and/or the Superintendent to discuss the item. ● Agendized items must clearly state the topic. ● The Board may not take action on any item not on the agenda unless there is an emergency or situation that was not known when the agenda was posted (see Brown Act).
Requesting information from the staff	In an effort to ensure that the working climate supports the norm of “no surprises”. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trustees agree to first contact the Superintendent with requests for information. The Superintendent will then provide the information to the Board or, when necessary, facilitate contact with staff. ● Information provided to one trustee will be provided to all trustees, as appropriate.
Deliberation by the Board	The Governing Board represents the entire community and models effective deliberation at Board meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Board members strive for authentic and honest discussion in a respectful climate. ● The Superintendent and trustees agree that each member will be proactive in identifying and sharing issues of concern. When an issue is potentially polarizing or divisive, the Board promotes thoughtful deliberation and strives for consensus. When a topic is difficult or challenging, the Board will outline a timeline to discuss the topic, the process that will be used and the opportunities for input. ● Board members practice active listening strategies including allowing the speaker to finish and raising one’s hand before speaking.
Bringing up items for future consideration	The Board will strive to find ways to improve and encourage innovation and new ideas, while maintaining focus on District goals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When a new idea is suggested, the Board President will ask trustees if there is general interest in the topic. ● The Board will arrive at consensus about whether or not a particular topic or subject of interest will be added to a future agenda.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the Board agrees, the Superintendent will move forward in gathering information. If the topic will impact the current workload, the Superintendent will suggest a timeline for the preparation of the information.
Allowing the majority vote to set the direction for the School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority to direct action rests with the Board of Trustees only when seated at a regular or special meeting. • It is important for the effectiveness of the governing team that a majority vote of the Board sets the direction for the District. • Once a vote has been taken, those in the minority agree to support the decision. • If an agenda item requires a 2/3rds vote, it will be noted in the agenda item.
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The governance team is responsible for keeping closed session information confidential, including, but not limited to, district litigation, personnel, negotiations, superintendent evaluation, student issues, or other issues addressed by The Brown Act. • The Superintendent will advise when she/he is aware that an issue is or is not appropriate for closed sessions.
Handling public comments and addressing community concerns for "Items not on the Open Session Agenda"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board's business shall be conducted in public. Clear guidelines are established for the public's input and shall be communicated by the Board President to the public. • When listening to comments from the public, the Board may ask a clarifying question. • As appropriate, the Board President may refer an item to the Superintendent and or the appropriate staff for clarification and follow up. • The Superintendent will report the status of the referred issue at a future Board meeting at the direction of the Board. • The Board welcomes input from a variety of stakeholders, however, the Board cannot engage in debate with the audience. Board meetings are meetings of the Board held in public, not "meetings of the public". • Occasionally the Board will schedule public hearings as required by law or desired by the Board. • Time limits for comments from the public are specified in Board policy and can be modified by the Board as desired.
Audience Participation at Meetings During Agendized Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The public is encouraged to attend Board meetings and have their opinions and comments heard by the Board. The Board wishes to create an open and informal atmosphere at Board meetings, while still remembering that the Board should discuss mainly among themselves and not engage in debates or extended discussions with the public. Typically, the Board discussion follows audience participation. Individual comments shall be limited in length to facilitate effective Board meetings and opportunities for all to be heard.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time limits for comments from the public are specified in Board policy and can be modified by the Board as desired.
Addressing concerns of the community via email and phone	<p>Mindful that email communication is public record, the governance team agrees to the following process in responding to email and phone requests from community members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When community members voice concern to a trustee through email or phone, the Trustee will thank them for their input and concerns and let them know that their input will be forwarded to the Board President and the Superintendent for possible follow up. The Superintendent will forward email correspondence that is directed to the Board President or individual trustees to all trustees. Trustees will be mindful of some sequential communications that may be considered serial meetings (examples: serial phone calls, emails, individual meetings).
Self-monitoring of governance team effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflection and ongoing self-assessment are important tools for the governing team to assess their own performance. The Board will schedule at least one session annually to review governance team agreements and processes and to participate in a self evaluation process. This will include evaluation of meeting effectiveness and assessing whether Board protocols are regularly followed.
Brown Act	<p>Closed Sessions shall be held only for the purposes defined in the Education Code. Examples are: meeting with the Board's negotiator; conferring with legal counsel regarding litigation; meeting with the district attorney, police or security consultants regarding threats; consideration of employment, discipline or dismissal of an employee or to hear complaints against an employee; to meet with their designated representative; purchase, sale or lease of real property negotiation; student expulsion consideration (see Brown Act for more specific definitions). No Board member or the Superintendent shall disclose discussions or conversations held in closed sessions.</p> <p>2708-Ralph-M.-Brown-Act-Bullet-Points.pdf</p>
Board Member School Visitations	<p>Board members are welcome and encouraged to visit schools. Prior to visiting a school in the role as a Board member, they shall contact the Superintendent and the school principal so that they can be informed. This does not apply to visits regarding their own children.</p>
Public Statements	<p>Public statements shall be made by the Board President, the Superintendent, or designee.</p>
Board Member	<p>The Board itself is the unit of authority over the District.</p>

Authority	Individual Board members hold no individual authority.
Meetings with Employee Unions	The District values the participation and input of recognized employee unions. Representatives are welcome to address the Board at Board Meetings during the times designated for that purpose. Board members will decline individual meetings requested by bargaining units. When non-individual meetings are requested by employee organizations, the Board members involved shall inform the President and Superintendent. Meetings to discuss items within the scope of negotiations will be declined as per Brown Act.
Superintendent Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Board shall evaluate the Superintendent at least annually, and give them feedback on her/his performance and achievement of goals as outlined in Board policy. ● In addition to a formal annual evaluation, the Board President and Superintendent shall regularly confer and discuss goals and progress.
Role of Board President	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Confer with the Superintendent before the Board meeting to prepare, as necessary, for Board meetings. ● Facilitate the Board meeting, supporting the effective flow of the discussion and encouraging input from all trustees while staying on task, moving forward, and maintaining proper meeting decorum. ● Model the tone and behavior the Board wishes to convey to the community. ● Serve as the primary spokesperson for the Board.
Facilitating the Board Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow Robert's Rules of Order and ensure alignment with the Brown Act ● Introducing an item: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Item presentation ○ Motion made and seconded ○ Board clarifying questions ○ Public comment on the item ○ Board discussion / additional questions ○ Vote

