


# ***SITE COUNCIL***

# ***HANDBOOK***



Bellingham Public Schools  
Adopted, 1995  
Revised, 2008

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# I. INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE IS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

## Overview

School improvement is the paramount purpose of site-based decision making. This fundamental belief forged the structure of Bellingham's Site-Based Decision Making Policy in 1992 (Policy 6520 <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/policies/6520Policy.htm> ) and continues to shape the procedures and activities of Bellingham's site councils.

There is no question that the instructional practice of the classroom teacher is the single most important factor in improving student achievement. Educational research on effective schools demonstrates, however, that a structured and total school program is also essential for student success.

The key elements of a successful school program include: a well-defined school mission, strong leadership, an emphasis on academic success for all, student engagement in learning, professional development opportunities for staff, and the inclusion of parents as partners in the educational process.

A successful school program does not just happen. It is the result of the efforts of many to assess the needs of the school, to develop a school-wide improvement plan, to implement changes and improvements over time, and build commitment to the school and its program through the staff, students, and parents of the community. The district's mission and multiple support systems are also essential to guide and support the effectiveness of the instructional program of individual schools.

In Bellingham School District, our vision of site-based decision making is not a simple picture of each school "doing its own thing." Rather, it is an interdependent relationship between the district's mission, standards, goals, and beliefs, and the goals, needs, and characteristics of each school. This balance of district accountability and school autonomy has been critical to our success.

Site-based decision making is not a substitute for the leadership and management of the school by the principal. Nor is it a scheme to usurp the responsibility of the staff to make professional judgments about instruction.

School site councils were created by School Board policy to involve all stakeholders in the school improvement process and in other important decisions which affect the success of the school's instructional program.

## Lessons From National and State Reform

Site-based decision making is part of the state and national school reform movement. Since the mid-1980's, pioneering school districts experimented with different organizational structures in order to involve teachers, parents, administrators, and students more intimately with important decisions about schooling. Terms like "collaboration," "decision-by-consensus," "empowerment," "shared leadership," "site-based management," and "site-based decision making" became synonymous with the reform effort to reduce bureaucracy in large school systems and make schools more responsive to the needs of students at the local site.

The track record on site-based decision making is mixed. In some school systems, site-based decision making failed because it served only to create new bureaucratic authority at the site level without legitimately involving teachers, the principal, parents, or students. In other school systems, it has succeeded because it was used as a collaborative tool for school improvement.

Site-based decision making in and of itself does not lead to school improvement. To be effective, site-based decision making must be understood and supported by the entire school community. This support and understanding allows for continuous inquiry, for innovation in developing meaningful programs and creative classroom practices, and for unwavering attention to the task of improving instruction to better serve the needs of all students.

The Washington State Legislature in 1994 (HB 1209) recognized the importance of site-based decision making by providing additional funding to support staff development to improve student learning. The District continues to fund reform using funds from Initiative 728.

## II. SITE-BASED DECISION MAKING POLICY

### Origins

The Bellingham School District and the Bellingham Education Association agreed to a "Memorandum of Understanding" in December 1991 which called for the study of school-based decision making in order to make a policy recommendation to the Board of Directors. The Site-Based Decision Making Committee was composed of teachers, administrators, classified staff, and parents. The Committee gathered input from employees and parent groups from each school.

The Bellingham Board of Directors conducted a study session on site-based decision making in October 1992. The information shared at that study session highlighted the opportunities, as well as the pitfalls, of site-based decision making in other school districts in the United States. A system of site councils and the creation of the School Leadership Council were outlined during this study session. After two public readings and further opportunities for community input, the Bellingham Board of Directors unanimously approved Board Policy 6520 on November 11, 1992.

### The Policy Defined

- Site-based decision making is both a philosophical and a practical approach to decision making. As a philosophy, it is a collaborative approach to problem solving and planning which values consensus among teachers, classified staff, parents, administrators, and students. As a practice, site-based decision making is a process for addressing the fundamental issues of school improvement and student learning at the school site.
- School site councils will exist at each school. All site councils will be comprised of certificated and classified staff, parents, and the principal. Student and community member participation is optional. Members of the councils will be elected and their positions will rotate. Bylaws will help structure the formal aspects of membership and decision making.
- The Bellingham School District retains the fundamental responsibility for developing district goals, instructional and programmatic guidelines, and policies.
- School site councils will periodically submit to the Superintendent and Board a School Improvement Plan outlining fundamental goals, strategies, allocation of budget, and assessment of progress in meeting goals and other improvements in student learning. Proposals such as the Late Arrival/Early Release Plans will also be submitted to the Deputy Superintendent and Board for annual approval.

## Legal Implications

Site-based decision making in the Bellingham School District, as in many districts, raises questions about the legal rights, responsibilities, and authority for decision making in public education settings. Local school boards in the state of Washington have the legal authority to create advisory committees, including site-based advisory councils. School boards may not further delegate their duties to any other body, including site-based advisory councils. The non-delegable duties vested by the state legislature to school boards include, but are not limited to:

1. Hiring -- School boards hire all employees.
2. Discharge -- School boards have the responsibility to discharge for sufficient cause certificated and classified employees and the school district superintendent. The school district superintendent has the responsibility to recommend discharge for sufficient cause of personnel to the school board.
3. Probation and Nonrenewal -- The superintendent has the responsibility to place certificated employees on probation and if sufficient remediation does not occur, to non-renew their contracts.
4. Salaries -- School boards adopt salary schedules governing salaries of all certificated employees and set all employee salaries as well. They also enter into collective bargaining agreements.
5. Evaluations -- School boards adopt criteria for evaluation of all administrators, certificated classroom teachers, and support personnel. The actual evaluations are done by the school principal for teachers and support personnel, and the school district superintendent, or his designee, for principals.
6. Instructional Materials -- School boards have the authority to approve or disapprove instructional materials.
7. Budgets -- School boards adopt the annual district budget.

# III. ROLES, RELATIONSHIPS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Site-based decision making requires special roles and relationships for all who serve on a site council. The responsibilities that the site council and principal assume means a new way of doing business within the school, between the school and the central office, and between the school and larger school community.

In past decades, the principal often set school rules and policy with little input from staff or parents. Typically, a school district was responsible for implementing curriculum and instructional programs from central services. Parental involvement was relegated almost exclusively to PTA functions. And it was nearly inconceivable that students would have the opportunity to help develop a school's instructional improvement plan.

The educational process is vastly more complex today and requires a sophisticated approach involving staff, students, parents, and central office administrators. In order to be effective, school districts must develop clear performance standards, adopt appropriate curricular guidelines, require periodic student assessments, and provide ample opportunities for professional development in order for the mission of the district and school to be met. Teachers and school administrators must then translate school board policies and district guidelines into effective teaching practices and meaningful learning experiences that truly meet the needs of students.

The principal, teachers, classified staff, parents and students have legitimate perspectives and concerns which need to be addressed in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the instructional program. The site council is responsible for developing consensus around these many perspectives and concerns.

The impact of site-based decision making has been different at each school in Bellingham. The school's culture, the principal's leadership style, and the school's size and organizational (committee) structure are factors that influence the role and agenda of the site council. Each site council has a different way of doing business. In Bellingham, we have worked to ensure that all site councils conform to Board policy and the procedures outlined in this handbook. We also encourage site councils and principals to adopt plans and procedures that are tailored to the needs of their school's students, staff, and communities.

## The Principal's Special Role

There are high expectations for the school principal in the Bellingham School District. The principal is expected to work collaboratively with the site council and see that it functions effectively. For this reason, it is vital that the principal works closely with the site council's chairperson or facilitator in developing the site council's agenda and in utilizing effective methods of problem solving and planning.

The role of the principal is not a passive one in which he or she merely helps facilitate the site council's agenda and activities. Rather, it is expected that the principal will play an instrumental role in helping shape the vision, goals, and values of the school through collaborative problem solving and planning. There are, of course, numerous situations in which the principal alone is responsible for making final decisions in managing and leading the school.

The principal is expected to work for continuous improvement in the school program in multiple settings. The principal is expected to demonstrate knowledge of the district's performance standards and

curriculum. He or she is also expected to work directly with teachers and other staff members in developing effective instructional strategies and programs that best serve the needs of all students.

The principal is the singular leader of the school who works with a variety of individuals and groups to achieve the mission and goals of the school. Although the site council may be the formal vehicle for helping design program goals, it is the principal and staff who are responsible for seeing that district and school goals are reached.

## Central Services and School Site Coordination

The success of the Bellingham School District in meeting goals outlined in the district's Strategic Plan is dependent upon the coordination of all parts of the organization. Effective alignment of goals, resources, and services between the central office and the schools is critical to the success of each school as well as to the success of the school district as a whole.

The Superintendent and other central office administrators provide leadership, resources, and other kinds of support and service to the schools. It is the specific role of central administration to develop and improve essential systems within the organization so that the learning environment for students and staff will be as effective as possible. The systems managed and coordinated through central services include:

*Superintendent's Office*  
*School Administration*  
*Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment*  
*Information and Communication*  
*Library/Media/Technology*  
*Federal/State/Special Programs*

*Maintenance, Planning, and Operations*  
*Student Services*  
*Special Education Services*  
*Business and Finance*  
*Human Resource*

Each of these systems is organized into special departments and offices. The administrator for each area provides a variety of services throughout the district and supervises numerous other employees who work in or serve our schools. Communication between central service personnel, principals, school staffs, and site councils is essential.

Effective leadership for our schools is an interactive process. Like principals, central office administrators are responsible for involving the key stakeholders through committees, advisory groups, task forces, etc., to maintain clear direction and develop broad consensus. They are also singularly responsible for providing special leadership and expertise and for making numerous decisions in consultation with the Superintendent and his leadership team.

## Site Council Responsibilities

The primary responsibility of the school site council is to promote student achievement and school improvement through school improvement planning and collaborative decision making and problem solving. The Site-Based Decision Making Policy 6520 affirms the importance of these processes. The primary tasks of school improvement planning, decision making, and problem solving are addressed in later sections of this handbook.

There are a variety of other tasks and functions for which the site council is responsible. These tasks and functions are important for the site council to perform in order to be effective. Listed below are those which site councils share in common:

### **Membership**

The general terms of site council membership are defined in the Site-Based Decision Making Policy. Parents, teachers, and classified staff are elected to their positions by the vote of their individual constituent group. The number of parents and certificated staff must be equal. The size of the site council and the total number of members may be determined by the site council. Community members and students are welcome to be members of the site council. The principal is always a member.

### **Bylaws**

The specific rules governing membership, elections, terms of office, meetings, rules of procedure, amendments, etc., are defined in site council bylaws, which are required by Board policy. Bylaws are proposed by the site council to the Board of Directors for approval at the inception of the site council. Bylaws may be changed internally through the amendment process.

### **Code of Conduct**

In addition to bylaws, some site councils have chosen to write a “code of conduct” in the effort to set high expectations for the overall behavior of site council members. Often these are written as a statement of values which guide site council relationships and business.

### **Calendar of Business**

The site council should approve and communicate a schedule of regular meetings, meeting times, and other activities throughout the year. Meetings are open to the public.

### **Facilitation and Agenda Setting**

Bylaws should indicate who will facilitate the meetings and by what process. The policy stipulates that the principal will not be the meeting facilitator. However, the principal should play an active role with the site council chairperson/facilitator in setting the agenda in advance of regular meetings. It is desirable for the meeting agenda to be posted and made known to site council members prior to meetings. Some site councils rely on a single facilitator or chairperson throughout the year. Others rotate this position. To enhance effectiveness, many site councils designate a timekeeper, recorder, and group processor. The group processor helps remind the group of its rules and agreements regarding procedure and may also help the group assess its effectiveness at the end of the meeting. “What did we do to help our students today?” or, “Let’s summarize what went well and what we can improve upon,” are key prompts to help site councils work effectively.

### **Regular Meetings**

Meetings should be conducted with a written agenda. Many site councils set time limits for all agenda items. The agenda should formally include time for comments or concerns from staff, parents, students, or community members. Time for public remarks may be reserved at the beginning or end of each meeting. Not all site council business can be accomplished in a business meeting. Many decision making or planning activities may be delegated to committees, to the staff, or to the principal. Formal decisions of a significant nature, however, should be ratified or agreed upon in a formal meeting of the site council. It is important for the site council to preserve a “group memory.” Formal minutes should be taken at each meeting. These minutes, or a summary, should be posted and made available to all site council members. It is recommended that site council minutes be shared with others such as staff and PTA leadership.

### **Special Meetings**

Special meetings are often needed to conduct activities which are not appropriate for a business meeting. Study sessions, community forums, evaluation and planning meetings, orientation sessions, and so forth, are often more appropriately scheduled for longer time periods and perhaps less formal settings.

### **Communication**

It is important for the business of the site council to be made known publicly by posting agendas and minutes in the school office, by sending a written summary home to parents in newsletters, and by verbally communicating at staff and parent organization meetings. Without frequent communication, the site council limits its ability to build consensus and keep the school community informed of issues vital to the welfare of the school.

### **Trouble Shooting**

The Deputy Superintendent or Executive Director for School Administration is available to help any site council which requests assistance with a special problem. Experienced Site Council members, along with the Deputy Superintendent, can work with site councils when requested.

### **Review of the Budget**

The site council has the responsibility to work with the principal to help identify budget priorities and allocations to best meet the needs of the instructional program. It is not the business of the site council to micro-manage the school and its budget. Ultimately, the principal is responsible for finalizing budget priorities and allocation. However, it is appropriate for the site council to review the instructional program budget(s) to establish spending priorities.

### **Early Release**

Board Policy 2280 allows for the alteration of the school day, for up to eight days, to provide time for staff development, planning, and training during the regular school day. Early release days ([http://www.bham.wednet.edu/district/documents/Calendar\\_08\\_09.pdf](http://www.bham.wednet.edu/district/documents/Calendar_08_09.pdf)) are optional and amount to a few hours before or after school. Site councils request these days prior to each academic year. Their use must be integrated into the school's improvement plan and must be approved by the Board of Directors. No instructional time may be lost as a result of early release days.

### **Principal Selection**

When a principal vacancy occurs, the Deputy Superintendent will work directly with the site council, whenever possible, in the selection process for the new principal. The site council will be asked to gather important data from staff, parents, and students regarding the needs of the school. The Superintendent has sole responsibility for recommending the selection to the Board of Directors for final approval.