



## Public Participation at Governing Board Meetings

Given the renewed interest in citizens utilizing the public participation feature at governing board meetings, it is imperative that districts review their policy and develop ways to share that policy with the public to avoid questions or confusion during a meeting. Clear and consistent procedures are necessary to ensure the board not only hears from its constituents but also can conduct the business the board has on its agenda.

Boards may want to consider the following when reviewing their public participation policy:

- Does the board policy on public participation match the current practice of the board?
- What type of public participation will be allowed?
  - Limited call to the public: public comments only for items on the agenda
  - Open call to the public: public comments for items not included on the agenda
  - Both limited and open
- Will public comments be made directly or submitted and read by the board secretary?
- How much time will speakers be allowed?
  - Will the time differ if the speaker is speaking as an individual or on behalf of a group?
- Is there a total time limit for public participation (e.g., no more than 30 or 60 minutes per meeting)?
- What happens if there are more speakers than time allows? How will speakers be prioritized?
- Some boards allow members of the public to yield or "give" their time to another person. This practice is not recommended. However, if you do, you should consider how much time a single speaker can accrue.

### Best Practices for Public Participation

While Arizona Revised Statutes require boards to make their meetings observable to the public, there is no legal requirement to offer public participation. Still, nearly all Arizona school districts have policy that allows for call to the public or call to the audience to provide an opportunity for their community to address the board.

Governing boards have flexibility in how they structure the opportunity to hear from community members, students, staff and parents. It is critical that your policy on public participation (model policy BEDH) matches your practice.

Here are some suggestions to help the public participation at your meetings:

- Display the public participation guidelines (including rules of decorum) in your meeting room and on your board webpage.
- Review and/or create speaker cards for completion by each person wanting to speak during the public participation part of the agenda.
- Restate the time limit and what will happen if speakers go over that at every meeting. For example, if a speaker exceeds the three-minute limit, the microphone will be cut, and the board president will call the next person for public participation or proceed with the next item on the board's agenda.

Members of the public from outside your district cannot be prohibited from speaking. However, knowing the speaker's relationship to the district adds important context to their comments. Boards can include a place for the individual to write the school attendance area in which they live or, if outside of the district, the city in which they live on the speaker card. Speakers can also be asked to state their name and the city in which they live when they begin their comments. (If a speaker refuses to name their attendance area of city in which they live, it should be noted.)

#### **Public Participation and Arizona's Open Meeting Law**

Share with the audience at every meeting the limitations of Open Meeting Law as it relates to items not on the agenda. Many community members are unaware that Arizona's OML does not allow for board members to comment or ask questions regarding an item not on the meeting agenda and may misinterpret their silence as disinterest or disrespect.

#### **Managing Disruption**

The most difficult thing about the public participation part of a meeting for a board president is interrupting speakers who are not adhering to the time limits or addressing a subject of an agenda item if you allow for limited call to the public. It is imperative that the board president is firm but polite and consistent in the way your policy is administered so that all community members are treated fairly.

Remember, the board has business to complete and should not be waylaid by a chaotic public participation process. If the board is unable to conduct its business, they can elect to recess until decorum is restored and/or adjourn and reschedule, if necessary.