

Bylaw 9012-B: Board Member Electronic Communications

Status: ADOPTED

Original Adopted Date: 11/01/2008 | Last Revised Date: 12/15/2020 | Last Reviewed Date: 12/15/2020

CSBA NOTE: The following optional Board bylaw should be modified to reflect district practice. The Brown Act (Government Code 54950-54963) requires that Governing Board members conduct district business at properly noticed and agendaized public meetings. In general, Board members should keep in mind that, for purposes of the Brown Act, electronic communications are subject to the same conditions and the same rules of confidentiality that are applicable to other forms of communication, such as individual conversations, telephone calls, or paper copies of documents. However, the ease with which electronic communication can be shared and forwarded requires extra caution.

Furthermore, although Board members are not considered employees, there may be tax implications if the district provides Board members with laptop computers or subsidies for an Internet connection. In some circumstances, such provision or reimbursement may be considered a taxable benefit. Also see AR 3513.1 - Cellular Phone Reimbursement.

The Governing Board recognizes that electronic communication is an efficient and convenient way for Board members to communicate and expedite the exchange of information within the district and with members of the public. Board members shall exercise caution so as to ensure that electronic communications are not used as a means for the Board to deliberate outside of an agendaized Board meeting, circumvent the public's right to access records regarding district business, or restrict access to a public forum.

CSBA NOTE: Government Code 54952.2 defines a "meeting" as any congregation of a majority of the members of the Board at the same time and location, including teleconference location as permitted by Government Code 54953, to hear, discuss, deliberate, or take action upon any item that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board. Government Code 54952.2 prohibits a serial meeting, defined as a series of communications of any kind, directly or through intermediaries, involving a majority of the Board to discuss, deliberate, or take action on any item of district business outside of an authorized meeting. Thus, a series of emails, as well as other electronic communications such as postings on an online forum, that ultimately include a majority of the Board could lead to a Brown Act violation. While the safest course of action is to not send an email to another Board member that, if forwarded, could lead to a discussion about district business by a majority of the Board, given the prevalence of email, such a practice may not be practical. However, in order to help prevent an inadvertent violation, Board members may wish to consider including a "do not reply/forward alert" in the subject line of emails, as appropriate.

A majority of the Board shall not, outside of an authorized meeting, use a series of electronic communications of any kind, directly or through intermediaries, to discuss, deliberate, or take action on any item that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board. (Government Code 54952.2)

CSBA NOTE: CSBA's GAMUT Meetings is an electronic board meeting management application for use by districts and county offices of education that streamlines meeting preparation and provides easy and secure access to meeting materials, including Board meeting agendas, supporting documents, and minutes. Further information is available on CSBA's web site.

Examples of permissible electronic communications concerning district business include, but are not limited to, dissemination of Board meeting agendas and agenda packets, reports of activities from the Superintendent, and reminders regarding meeting times, dates, and places.

CSBA NOTE: Pursuant to Government Code 54952.2, as amended by AB 992 (Ch. 89, Statutes of 2020), Board members may engage in separate conversations or communications with members of the public on an Internet-based social media platform that is open and accessible to the public as long as a majority of the Board does not use the platform to discuss among themselves business within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board and members do not comment on or use digital icons (e.g., "likes" or emojis) to express reactions to communications made by other Board members. Consequently, a Board member is prohibited from responding directly to any communication from other members of the Board on a social media platform regarding matters that are within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board.

Board members may engage in separate conversations or communications with members of the public on a social media platform to answer questions, provide information, or solicit information regarding a matter that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board, as long as a majority of the Board does not use the platform to discuss among themselves any business of a specific nature that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board. A Board member is prohibited from responding directly to any communication from other Board members regarding matters that are within the subject matter jurisdiction of the Board or using digital icons (e.g., "likes" or emojis) to express reactions to communications made by other Board members. (Government Code 54952.2)

CSBA NOTE: Board members who use a social media platform to communicate with the public about district business or Board activities should be cautious about blocking access to members of the public. In *Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University v. Trump*, the court held that President Donald Trump's twitter account was a public forum from which the government may not exclude people based on their views and that blocking critics from viewing and replying to the account excluded individuals from a public forum in violation of the First Amendment. While there is not a clearly defined rule as to whether a board member's social media account is a public forum, the holding has been used in cases restricting school board members from blocking members of the public from their social media. See *Garnier v. Poway Unified School District*.

Whenever a Board member uses a social media platform to communicate with the public about district business or Board activities, the Board member shall not block access to a member of the public based on the viewpoint expressed by that individual.

CSBA NOTE: The prohibitions in the Brown Act apply only to discussions regarding district business. Like other citizens, Board members are permitted to use email to discuss personal, nondistrict matters.

Board members may use electronic communications to discuss matters that do not pertain to district business, regardless of the number of Board members participating in the discussion.

CSBA NOTE: The following optional paragraph may be revised to reflect district practice. Many districts have established bylaws or other protocols describing how the Board has agreed to handle questions, concerns, or complaints received from members of the community. For example, see BB 9200 - Limits of Board Member Authority and BP 1112 - Media Relations.

Board members shall make every effort to ensure that their electronic communications conform to the same standards and protocols established for other forms of communication. A Board member may respond, as appropriate, to an electronic communication received from a member of the community and should make clear that the response does not necessarily reflect the views of the Board as a whole. Any complaint or request for information should be forwarded to the Superintendent in accordance with Board bylaws and protocols so that the issue may receive proper consideration and be handled through the appropriate district process. As appropriate, communication received from the media shall be forwarded to the designated district spokesperson.

CSBA NOTE: Electronic communications received and sent by Board members are subject to disclosure upon request pursuant to the California Public Records Act (CPRA) (Government Code 6250-6270) depending on the content of the communication and whether it is "prepared, owned, used, or retained" by the district in its normal course of business. District legal counsel should be consulted as appropriate. Also see BP/AR 1340 - Access to District Records and BP/AR 3580 - District Records.

In *City of San Jose v. Superior Court*, the California Supreme Court held that a public official's communications about public business, even if sent or received on the official's personal account or device, are public records and are not categorically excluded from disclosure under the CPRA. The court observed that the CPRA requires public agencies to use "reasonable effort" to locate existing records in response to a public records request, but that such searches need not be extraordinarily extensive or intrusive. For further information, see CSBA's Legal Alert: Tips for Governing Boards in Response to Public Records Act Ruling on Electronic Communications.

To the extent possible, electronic communications regarding any district-related business shall be transmitted through a district-provided device or account. When any such communication is transmitted through a Board member's personal device or account, the Board member shall copy the communication to a district electronic storage device for easy retrieval.

Policy Reference Disclaimer: These references are not intended to be part of the policy itself, nor do they indicate the basis or authority for the board to enact this policy. Instead, they are provided as additional resources for those interested in the subject matter of the policy.

State References

Ed. Code 35140

Ed. Code 35145

Ed. Code 35145.5

Ed. Code 35147

Gov. Code 11135

Mesa Union School District

Board Approved: February 16, 2021

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Gov. Code 54950-54963	The Ralph M. Brown Act
Gov. Code 54952.2	Meeting, defined
Gov. Code 54953	Meetings to be open and public; attendance
Gov. Code 54954.2	Agenda posting requirements, board actions
Gov. Code 6250-6270	California Public Records Act

Management Resources References

Attorney General Publication	The Brown Act: Open Meetings for Legislative Bodies, 2003
Court Decision	City of San Jose v. Superior Court (2017) 2 Cal.5th 608
CSBA Publication	Legal Alert: Tips for Governing Boards in Response to Public Records Act Ruling on Electronic Communications, March 2017
CSBA Publication	The Brown Act: School Boards and Open Meeting Laws, rev. 2014
Website	California Attorney General's Office
Website	CSBA

Description

Cross References

1100	Communication With The Public
1112	Media Relations
1114	District-Sponsored Social Media
1114	District-Sponsored Social Media
1312.1	Complaints Concerning District Employees
1312.1	Complaints Concerning District Employees
1312.2	Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials
1312.2	Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials
1312.2-E(1)	Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials
1312.3	Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.3	Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.3-E(1)	Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.3-E(2)	Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.4	Williams Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.4-E(1)	Williams Uniform Complaint Procedures
1312.4-E(2)	Williams Uniform Complaint Procedures
1340	Access To District Records
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3320	Claims And Actions Against The District
3320	Claims And Actions Against The District
3580	District Records
3580	District Records
9000-B	Role Of The Board
9005-B	Governance Standards
9010-B	Public Statements
9121-B	President
9200-B	Limits Of Board Member Authority

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