

Written by Mark Jaeger
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The Northern Ozaukee School Board has found itself caught in a semantic trap of its own making.

Concerned that last-minute changes could be made to policies without the public having a chance to offer input, the board has opted to follow a strict interpretation of its own procedures.

According to board protocol, new or revised policies are introduced for a first reading, with final action to come during a subsequent meeting.

The procedure allows district residents to react to a proposal before it is adopted by the board.

The problem, several board members have said, comes when policies are changed based on board deliberation between the first reading and the final adoption.

If substantial changes are proposed between readings, several members have suggested the process needs to start over.

The classic example has been the proposed changes to the policy on video media use in schools. The policy has generated in-depth discussion at several board meetings, with the focus on determining what videos are acceptable for classroom use.

The Policy Committee had recommended restricting the screening of R-rated materials to 11th and 12th grade classes.

Based on comments from staff members, the committee changed its recommendation to allowing R-rated materials in all high-school classes, because grade levels are often commingled. Those materials would require the prior approval of the principal, and a student could be pulled from a class showing restricted materials if a parent requests.

Board discussion of the proposal led to another revision, back to the original 11th and 12th grade standard.

The final recommended wording states “the use of potentially objectionable materials is strongly discouraged.”

Each change triggered a reintroduction of the policy, prolonging the review process.

Board member Paul Krause said concern about unduly delaying policy approvals has had a chilling affect on the suggestion of minor changes.

“Everyone is afraid of making simple word changes, because they don’t want it to have to return for another first reading,” Krause said.

The policy stems from the stated premise that “videos can be used as an adjunct to almost any curriculum area and can be an effective teaching tool, but they can also be misused and overused if they supplant instead of supplement instruction or are used to reduce the amount of

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reading and responding required for a class.”

The policy expected to receive final approval at this month’s board meeting, unless more revisions are made.

The board’s requirement that proposed policies be left intact will force a reintroduction of guidelines governing finances.

The Policy Committee recommended reducing the discretion the superintendent has in authorizing spending. The current policy says the district administrator will not allow spending in any budget area by more than 5%, but the committee asked that ceiling be reduced to 2%.

During the first reading of the policy, board members said even that discretion went too far.

“I think that any change plus or minus should be approved by the board. It is fiscally irresponsible without board approval,” said Board member Kendall Thistle.

Board President Connie Conine said it is unlikely any budget irregularities could sneak up on the board.

“With our business manager and superintendent, I am not concerned about this happening without our knowledge. If we get a bill that exceeds the budget, what can we do about it?” Conine said.

The board asked that the zero-deviation be written into the revised budget policy, triggering a new consideration at the next meeting.

The board is also expected to take action on a pre-employment drug testing policy, which requires drug screening before a job can be offered. The policy received a first reading at the last board meeting.