

School Council Meetings

EFFECTIVE MEETING STRATEGIES

You will know that a council meeting has been effective when all participants feel that:

- **the meeting had a purpose;**
 - ✓ Make sure that parents know and understand the purpose of the meetings.
 - ✓ have clearly established missions, goals and objectives
 - ✓ pursue activities and events that support student success – don't let personal issues or the concerns of individual parents dominate the meetings
- **they have a sense of accomplishment;**
 - ✓ set council meeting dates (and topics, if possible) early in the year and publicize them regularly
 - ✓ develop a dynamic and proactive action plan at the beginning of the year – and follow it
 - ✓ set an agenda for each meeting and send it out ahead of time
- **they contributed to the discussion;**
 - ✓ keep meetings short – start and finish on time
 - ✓ use the agenda to set time limits for reports and discussion – try to stay within those limits
 - ✓ set up sub-committees to handle more involved issues and have most of the discussions at that level – ask sub-committee members to come to council with clear recommendations for action
 - ✓ encourage more “co” roles on council (e.g. co-chair, co-treasurers) – when one member retires, the person in the “co” role will have the skills and experience to take over the position
- **they were valued by others;**
 - ✓ survey parents for topics of interest or speakers they would recommend
 - ✓ invite special speakers or guest experts to present at meetings (topics don't always have to be about school) – invite neighbouring schools and other members of the community to attend
 - ✓ invite students to present on specific topic
- **creative ideas, alternatives, or solutions were generated;**
 - ✓ make meetings fun – provide food and allow some time for socializing
 - ✓ avoid having a lot of discussion about fundraising at each meeting

Meetings

12. (1) A school council shall meet at least four times during the school year.

(2) A school council shall meet within the first 35 days of the school year, after the elections held under sections 4 and 5, on a date fixed by the principal of the school.

(3) A meeting of a school council cannot be held unless,

(a) a majority of the current members of the council are present at the meeting; and

(b) a majority of the members of the council who are present at the meeting are parent members.

(4) All meetings of a school council shall be open to the public.

(5) A school council is entitled to hold its meetings at the school.

(6) All meetings of a school council shall be held at a location that is accessible to the public.

Preparing for and Running Meetings

Establishing Meeting Dates and Publicizing School Council Meetings

- ➔ Establishing a meeting schedule for the entire year should probably be done at the first meeting of the school year. Some councils find it best to schedule meetings at the same time on the same day.
- ➔ School council meetings should be well advertised to ensure that anyone who has an interest in matters before the council knows that there is an open, sincere invitation for them to attend.
- ➔ Principals can facilitate this by communicating with parents and the community on a regular basis to keep them informed of the activities being undertaken by the council.

Meetings can be publicized within the school community in various ways:

- Circulate the year's meeting schedule as widely as possible throughout the community.
- Advertise in school and community newsletters, noting important or special agenda items.
- Post meeting dates on the hat's-on sign outside the school, if one is available.
- Use a phone-tree system to remind parents of upcoming meetings.
- Publicize meetings at community events.
- Post meeting dates on the school's website.

The Meeting Space

- ◆ School councils are entitled to hold their meetings at the school. School council meetings must be open to the public,
- ◆ The meeting space should be set up in a way that encourages participation,
- ◆ The meeting space should be generous, and tables should be provided for council members.



Tips for Meetings

1. **Be prepared.** Know what you are going to do and why. Know what your priorities are, the alternatives, the time frame and who will give reports.
2. **Have an agenda.** Know what business will be conducted and in what order. Direct the meeting toward the purpose established for the meeting.
3. **Delegate work.** Guide and lead the group. Don't do it all yourself. Take advantage of the talent and experience in your group.
4. **Don't cover too much ground.** Keep expectations realistic. Plan your agenda so that sufficient time is set aside for priority items. Always adjourn at the designated time.
5. **Learn by doing.** Not every meeting will run smoothly, but the job of chairing will become easier with each meeting

CREATING AN AGENDA

A carefully planned and organized agenda is key to a successful meeting.

A good agenda briefly outlines;

- What you intend to discuss and in what order.
- A reasonable time frame, which allows sufficient time for discussion of all the agenda items,
- Items on the agenda should reflect the priorities of the school council, which should reflect the concerns and interests of the school community.

The task of developing the school council meeting agenda is usually the responsibility of the chair/co-chairs and the principal.

When developing an agenda, be sure to:

- provide a place on the agenda for welcoming guests

and introducing new people and nonmembers;

- remember to include "declaration of conflict of interest" at the beginning of the agenda (review the minutes of the previous meeting and include items that need revisiting ("business arising from the minutes");
- determine if there is any "old business" or updates that should be included;
- include time for committee reports;
- determine what "new business" should come before the council;
- include time for brief reports from the principal and student, staff, and community representatives;
- include a period of time for general questions

SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETING

[Date, Time]

[Location]

Sample Agenda

1. Welcome and introductions (15 minutes)
 - Icebreaker or team building activity
2. Approval of Minutes (5 minutes)
3. Business arising from minutes /updates (10 minutes)
4. New business (45 minutes in total)
5. Principal's report (20 minutes)

TVDSB Update

6. Reports (45 minutes in total)
 - Teaching/ Non-Teaching Member
 - Student Representative
 - Home and School/ Parent Group
 - Community representative
 - TVDSB – Email Communication

General information updates (maximum 5 minutes)

Next meeting date, time, and location

Include Parent Involvement Funds (\$500) initiative planning as a regular agenda item

School Councils – Effective Meetings

School councils should have the opportunity to fully discuss every agenda issue. Generally speaking, the chair is responsible for facilitating this process. Meetings are most successful and productive when council members listen and present their ideas effectively.

The key to understanding is listening to and really hearing what others are saying. A major barrier to effective communication is a tendency to evaluate without listening first to what others have to say. The following will help you listen to and really understand what others are saying:

- ✓ Give your full attention to the speaker.
- ✓ Think about what the speaker is saying and take notes, if you find that helpful.

- ✓ Ask questions or paraphrase to clarify meaning

Council members should make every effort to present and convey information, opinions, and feelings clearly and succinctly. Doing so will promote good communication within the council.

The following will help you present your point of view clearly:

- ♦ Think about what you want to say.
- ♦ Jot down key points.
- ♦ Avoid using jargon that others may not understand.
- ♦ Ask for feedback to ensure that everyone understands your position.

Methods for Stimulating Discussion

- ❑ *Chair initiation.* The chair invites a wide range of people to speak, and all who wish to speak are given the opportunity, with time limits given to each speaker.
- ❑ *Pairing.* People are randomly paired off to discuss an issue and then report back to the group.
- ❑ *Table-go-round.* The chair invites each person around the table, in order, to speak to an issue (if he or she chooses), with a time limit given for each speaker.
- ❑ *Absolute quiet.* School council members are given a specific amount of time to think, read, or make notes relating to the issue being discussed.

Methods for Generating Ideas

Brainstorming. The following ground rules help brainstorming become an effective problem-solving tool:

Work with the whole council. Ensure that everyone is clear on the issue to be brainstormed.

- Invite ideas from council members, recording them on a chalkboard or flip-chart.
- Accept all ideas without either positive or negative comment.
- Encourage quantity, not quality – the more ideas the better.
- Modify and combine ideas.
- Finally, ask school council members to rank the ideas they feel are the best.

Round table. This process is similar to brainstorming, but with the group subdivided into small groups of four to six people. Give each group a time limit. Record all ideas on flip charts and report back to the main group after the time limit has been reached.

Keeping Minutes of School Council Meetings

School councils must keep minutes of all council meetings, and these must be available at the school for examination by anyone without charge.³ Minutes are usually recorded by the secretary of the school council and are to be kept at the school for a minimum of four years.

- Accurate minutes provide school council members and the school community with a brief but clear summary of what went on at a meeting, including decisions, future plans, reports, and who is responsible for what.
- School council minutes should note discussion areas but should not include the discussions themselves.
- Minutes should also include a list of those attending the meeting and those who are absent. (Note that it is a good idea to pass around an attendance sheet during the meeting and have those present sign it. The meeting chair can check with members at the end of the meeting to ensure that they have signed the sheet.)

Setting Goals and Priorities

It is important that your school council establish priorities and set goals, and stick to them. Otherwise, there is a real chance that your council will wander, wondering what to do first or, even worse, trying to do too much and not being as productive as it could be.

All members of the council, including the principal, will have the opportunity to review information about past and current achievement, imagine the school's future, and develop specific plans for achieving their vision for the future.

The school council may want to open their planning discussion by asking these questions:

- ➔ Where are we?
- ➔ Where do we want to go?
- ➔ How will we get there?
- ➔ How will we know when we have arrived?

Making Decisions

Running a school council meeting can be as formal or as informal as your council decides, but even informal meetings require some ground rules to help people work together and reach good decisions.

Consensus

In trying to reach consensus, members have to put much effort into trying to find alternatives to which everyone can agree. Because everyone helps reach, and must agree to, the final decision, all members have the chance to influence and understand the decision. As a result, the final decision may be reached with less conflict than with a formal vote and should receive everyone's support.

One caution:

Consensus:

- gives all council members an effective voice in decisions;
- builds on differing perspectives and values;
- allows for flexibility in arriving at solutions;
- can result in better-informed, more creative, balanced, and enduring decisions;
- ensures that final decisions have the support of everyone, thus promoting a sense of commitment to and ownership of the decisions;
- creates a sense of common purpose;
- allows all council members to maintain the integrity of their personal values while agreeing to a new solution.

The following are the basic steps to take to arrive at consensus:

- ✓ Identify the issue or problem.
- ✓ Relate the issue to goals.
- ✓ List the alternatives or solutions.
- ✓ Explore and weigh the solutions in terms of meeting agreed-on goals.
- ✓ Choose the solution that best meets the goals.
- ✓ Plan to implement the solution.
- ✓ Arriving at a decision that everyone can support requires time, a clear process, skill, and the full participation of all members.

The chair should ensure that everyone is heard equally and that quieter or less assertive members are not overshadowed by more vocal or assertive members.

Communication

Communication is the key to ensuring strong partnerships and a successful school council. It is crucial to achieving increased involvement and greater influence for parents in their children's education.

School councils must have sound methods of communicating with the school principal, with the school board, with parents, and with each other.

Chair/Co-Chairs and School Council Members

Chairs/co-chairs must ensure that council members are accessible to each other. Council members with questions, issues, or simply agenda items to add to the next meeting's agenda will need to know how to contact the chair. It is a good idea to develop a list of contact numbers, addresses, and e-mail addresses for all council members at the beginning of the year and to distribute the list to all members.

Chair/Co-Chairs and the Principal

The need to develop a good working relationship between the chair/co-chairs and the principal at the beginning of the year cannot be stressed enough.

Trust, respect, and open communication are the nucleus for an effective partnership and, ultimately, an effective school council. To accomplish this, the chair/co-chairs and the principal must establish an effective way to communicate outside of regular meetings. This includes such things as how each would like to receive information (e.g., by maintaining in-boxes in the school office for materials related to the council, by using e-mail). It may also mean establishing a procedure for what is to happen when an urgent issue arises.

School Council - Creating Public Awareness

Throughout the year, there will be many opportunities for your school council to assume a significant public profile in the school and in the school community, and it is important that you make the most of those events.

Opportunities may take the form of:

- ➔ setting up a school council information table on parent-teacher interview nights;
- ➔ sending students home with a newsletter that could include the council's meeting minutes;
- ➔ posting the council's meeting minutes on the school's website;
- ➔ hosting special events that bring the school community into the school;
- ➔ making use of regular mailings, such as the mailing of report cards, to include a school council update, a list of the council's activities for the year, or the school council's meeting minutes;
- ➔ having the chair/co-chairs speak at various school functions;
- ➔ making personal contact with parents by phone or at special meetings;
- ➔ setting up a school council display in the main foyer of the school;
- ➔ making use of public service announcements and other forms of free radio, TV, and newspaper advertising;

School Council Fund-raising

Some school councils may decide to include fund-raising as one of their priorities. Fund-raising activities may be conducted as long as they are in accordance with board policies and guidelines and the funds raised are to be used for a purpose approved by the board. A school council may find that it is unable to continue a fund-raising activity in which it was previously involved, as the funds raised are not used for a purpose approved by the board. Similarly, a school council may find that it must change the way in which it fund-raises for an approved purpose to comply with board policies and guidelines.

Section 19(1)(1)(iv) of Regulation 612/00 requires that boards solicit school councils' views when developing policies or guidelines regarding fund-raising. Ultimately, if school councils decide that they would like to continue with certain fund-raising projects, they must work with their boards to develop policies or guidelines that permit the fund-raising and the use of funds for particular purposes.

School councils should be aware that, because the school board is a corporate entity and the school is not, any funds raised by the school council (and any assets purchased with those funds) belong, legally, to the board. The board may have policies specifying that the money raised by the council (and any assets purchased by the council) will remain with the school. However, such policies are not legally binding in the event that the school is closed.

All fund-raising activities conducted by the school council must be included in the annual report prepared by the school council.

School Councils - Conflict of Interest

School councils are advisory bodies and would almost never be in a position to make decisions that would be of financial benefit to individual council members. However, a conflict of interest may exist whether or not a monetary advantage has been or may be conferred on the school council member or his or her family.

A conflict of interest may be actual, perceived, or potential:

Actual: When a school council member has a private interest that is sufficiently connected to his or her duties and responsibilities as a council member that it influences the exercise of these duties and responsibilities.

Perceived: When reasonably well-informed persons could reasonably believe that a school council member has a conflict of interest, even where, in fact, there is no real conflict of interest.

Potential: When a school council member has a private interest that could affect his or her decision about matters proposed for discussion.

A conflict of interest for a school council representative is any situation in which the individual's private interests may be incompatible or in conflict with his or her school council responsibilities.

A school council member should try to avoid situations in which:

- a conflict of interest is likely to result;
- the member's ability to carry out his or her duties and responsibilities on the council may be jeopardized;
- the council member or his or her relatives gain or benefit indirectly;

Sample Conflict of Interest By-law

1. Any time the school council does business with the potential for monetary gain/loss with any person, agency, or company, and a member of the school council has a vested interest in any way with that particular person, agency, or company, that member shall declare a conflict of interest and shall not discuss or vote on any such resolution relating to the matter.
2. Each school council member shall avoid situations that could result in an inconsistency between the overall goals and vision of the school council and a personal or vested interest, that arise in connection with his or her duties as a school council member. Should an issue or agenda item arise during a council meeting where a council member is in a conflict of interest situation, he or she shall declare conflict of interest immediately and decline from the discussion and resolution.