



Adapted from Improving School Governance – a school council training package
<http://www.schoolgovernance.vic.edu.au/home>
And [Ontario Regulation 612/00](#) of the *Education Act*
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MODULE 5: School Council Chair

Goal

This module serves to provide school council Chairs with a better understanding of:

- their role and responsibilities as a school council Chair
- what makes a school council effective
- how to lead school council meetings
- how to engage the community in the school and its objectives.

Overview

The school council Chair is a parent or community member (not a Board employee) who serves as chair of school council meetings. The Chair is elected annually by all school council members.

The school council Chair (Chair) must be able to run effective meetings, work effectively with all council members and with the principal, to lead the development of the broad direction and vision of the school. An effective Chair is a key component of a cohesive school council. The Chair needs to understand the responsibilities of the role and the structure of TDSB schools, and to have a constructive working relationship with the principal, other school council members and the community.

Being school council Chair is an important responsibility. The Chair represents the school in the wider community and must be prepared to champion the school, its students and its staff. The role can be time-consuming but very rewarding.

This training module will help those people elected Chair of their school's council and those aspiring to the role of Chair to understand the nature and extent of the role and to develop the skills and knowledge to perform their responsibilities successfully.

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5.1 Role and Responsibilities

Why is this topic important?

All school council members should know and understand their roles and responsibilities, and the functions and objectives of the council, particularly the Chair. The Chair, with the principal, provides leadership, establishing the environment in which the council can operate effectively.

On completing this unit, the participant should be able to:

- understand the skills required of an effective Chair
- understand the roles and responsibilities of a Chair.

The effective Chair

The role of Chair requires leadership and management skills.

An effective Chair is assertive, neutral, task-focused and aware of the big picture. A good Chair knows the boundary of their authority and the authority of the school council as a whole, and understands and respects privacy and confidentiality obligations. A good Chair knows when to delegate.

A good Chair is available to the school and to the other members of school council when needed. The Chair should have a strong and successful working relationship with the principal, and the support of all school council members.

Before being nominating for Chair, a candidate should consider what they could bring to the position. Do they have an understanding of the school, its direction and its needs, or the time and willingness to learn this? Do they have the patience and commitment to develop good working relationships? Are they prepared to be a role model in the school community for professionalism, integrity and sound judgment?

Role of the Chair

The Chair has a strategic role to play in representing the vision, mission and purposes of the school, and ensures school council fulfils its role and functions. As the chair of council meetings, the Chair ensures relevant matters are discussed, that there is full participation at meetings and that effective decisions are made.

The Chair's duties include:

- arrange for meetings in consultation with the principal
- preparing the meeting agenda in consultation with the principal
- developing and working with the principal and community towards a shared vision for the school
- endorsing key school planning and reporting documents on behalf of the council
- being an effective spokesperson and advocate
- chairing meetings of school council
- promoting the school to the community
- ensure that minutes of council meetings are recorded and maintained
- facilitating the resolution of conflict
- participating as ex-officio members of all committees established by the school council
- communicate with the school principal on behalf of the council
- representing the school in public forums with the principal.

The Chair and the principal have distinct responsibilities as outlined below. They are to:

The principal

- provide council with timely information and seek advice about educational and other matters
- prepare the council's agenda in consultation with the Chair
- report regularly to council about the school's performance against its strategic plan
- ensure council decisions are acted on
- provide adequate support and resources for the conduct of council meetings
- communicate with the Chair about council business
- be a signatory on school council financial accounts

The school council Chair

- effectively chair council meetings (ensure everyone has a say in meetings and decisions are understood and recorded)
- be a signatory on financial accounts
- preside at the annual public reporting meeting
- ensure council stays focused on improving student outcomes
- with the principal, be council's spokesperson and official representative on public occasions
- when council votes are tied, have the second or casting vote
- monitor mail and e-mails
- ensure the School Statement of Needs is updated annually.

Building relationships

The Chair needs to build strong working relationships with the principal and the community. The Chair supports the principal in their role.

To build the relationship with the principal, the Chair can:

- upon being elected, meet the principal to discuss key aspects of the school
- with the principal, develop a shared understanding of the school's direction and its priorities, as stated in the School Improvement Plan
- arrange to meet the principal on a regular basis ahead of every school council meeting to discuss the agenda, issues to be tabled and any background information that needs to be circulated
- keep up to date with school matters that may affect school council and the community
- inform the principal of community matters that may be relevant to the school
- introduce the principal to key members of the school community as necessary, particularly if the principal is new to the school
- be available if the principal needs to discuss matters relevant to the school
- understand the role of the principal and those matters of the school that are operational and therefore not the responsibility of the school council
- respect the privacy and confidentiality obligations of school council matters shared by the principal.

To build the relationships with council members/parents, the Chair can:

- be a good listener and ensure all parents have the opportunity to be heard
- be willing to meet individual parents to understand their particular situation
- welcome and encourage new parents to be active participants at meetings
- share council tasks between members as appropriate
- attend school events such as music concerts, art exhibitions and athletic sports and speak with staff, students and families

- consider meeting with the local trustee, local councillor and the local Member of Provincial Parliament, with the principal.

5.1 Chair - The effective Chair

Goal

To enable school council Chairs to reflect on the effectiveness of their leadership style.

Steps

Use the self-reflection chart to guide your reflection on your own leadership style.

Make time to discuss your reflections with the school principal and other members.

1. How effective is your leadership?
2. As school council Chair you are responsible for the effectiveness of your council. You help set the agenda for council meetings, chair the meetings and act as a spokesperson for school council. Use this chart to assess your effectiveness and that of your council.

Do you...

- I meet the principal before every school council meeting to discuss the agenda and other issues of concern.
 - I make myself available to the principal and the school whenever needed.
 - I am open, fair and candid in my dealings with all school council colleagues.
 - I support all council colleagues and ensure they are heard at council meetings.
 - I look for opportunities to build relationships with others in the local community, particularly influential individuals and groups.
 - Our school council meetings are conducted according to our by-laws and always run to time.
 - Our school council minutes are a true and accurate record of our meetings.
 - I make it my business to report back to the school community after every school council meeting.
3. Three things I might do to increase the effectiveness of my leadership are:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)

Conclusion

Consider leadership improvement areas that you have identified in the self-reflection chart. Discuss with the school principal how this can happen.

5.2 Characteristics of an effective school council

Why is this topic important?

A strong, united council with a clear vision and a willingness to contribute positively is a feature of a successful school.

On completing this unit, the participant should be able to:

- understand what makes a school council successful
- understand the role the Chair plays in an effective council.

The importance of good governance

Good governance enables the council to perform efficiently and effectively and to respond strategically to changing demands and educational challenges.

Good governance relies on the professional leadership of the principal, the Chair, the school council and effective meeting procedures.

In an effective school, school council processes are characterized by a mutual sharing of information, knowledge and ideas. There is a focus on open communication where all members are able to exchange information, share experiences, express different perspectives, pose questions, clarify viewpoints, explore relevant research and develop a shared vision and way forward. Good governance also involves ensuring decisions are made and implemented appropriately.

What makes a school council effective?

An effective school council is one that:

- focuses on improving student health and wellness, learning outcomes and educational opportunities
- involves the community in conversations about key educational issues and challenges
- is actively involved in the development of the School Improvement Plan
- promotes meaningful parent and community participation and actively seeks the views of its community
- has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities
- includes members who represent the diverse views of the school community
- has a clear and consistent process for decision-making
- maintains high ethical standards
- has members with trust and respect for one another
- evaluates and communicates with the school community about its activities
- regularly reviews and evaluates its own performance
- appropriately delegates to individual members and sub-committees
- devotes time to its own growth and development, through induction and training.

An effective school council should support the development of strategic partnerships to assist the school achieve the goals in the School Improvement Plan. For example, council members should consider and discuss opportunities to work with organizations outside the school in areas such as fundraising and extra-curricular program opportunities.

It is good practice for a council to establish by-laws to assist the council to operate effectively and efficiently. By-laws should be reviewed each year following completion of the election process.

Roles of school council members

It is the responsibility of the principal and the Chair to ensure council members understand their role. There is no legal requirement for a council to have a vice-Chair, but many do. The vice-Chair can chair meetings when the Chair is absent. The vice-Chair is also a non-Board employee.

It is recommended that a council elect a treasurer who is also not an employee of the Board.

All school council members have a responsibility to:

- come prepared and ready to contribute at school council meetings
- attend school events and seek to understand the school's operations
- support the Chair and the principal
- actively promote the school to the community

- comply with the code of conduct for school council members and behavioural expectations set out in the Board's values.

Features of an effective school council are included in the table below:

Feature	Detail
An effective council works together	The council should be seen by all members as being greater than the sum of the individuals of which it is comprised. Discussions may be lively however the council's decision overrides individual opinion.
Members set aside their own special interests	Members add value through personal skills and experience, but must be prepared to set personal interests aside for the good of the overall situation and to prevent any potential, perceived or real, pecuniary or non-pecuniary conflicts of interest.
Council offers strong support to the principal and school	Council members should ask searching questions and provide relevant, constructive criticism; however they should avoid sharing negative opinions outside of council meetings and gossip.
Council stays focused on its objectives and functions	Council members understand their responsibilities as distinct from those of the principal.
Council is led by a strong Chair	Council elects a strong and capable individual to be its Chair, one who will have the respect of the principal, the council and the community.
An effective council thinks strategically	Decisions and actions reflect and support the future directions of the school.
Real discussions are followed by real decisions	Council members attend meetings, having prepared carefully and are ready to contribute. Differences are left at the discussion table and decisions acted upon promptly.
Council builds trust in its community	Council develops and maintains a record of trust through its responsible actions and good communication.

[Ontario Regulation 612/00](#), confirms the advisory role of school councils and clearly states that their purpose is to improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. This regulation also clarifies the role of school councils and establishes their right to express their views on any issues that are important to them. Ontario Regulation 613/00, also released in December 2000, is an amendment to Regulation 298 (Operation of Schools, General). It sets out the duties of principals regarding school councils, in addition to the duties already described in Regulation 298. All references to Regulation 298 in this guide include the amendments contained in Ontario Regulation 613/00. Both regulations, released under the *Education Act*, require school boards and principals to solicit views from school councils and report back to school councils on any advice received. They also ensure that all school boards and school principals across the province consult with and respond to their school councils in a consistent manner.

5.3 How to run effective school council meetings

Why is this topic important?

The key to an effective school council is the conduct of its meetings. There must be at least four meetings a year and at least one every term. The school council Chair, as the chair, is responsible for the conduct of the meetings.

Many school councils have sub-committees and working groups that also meet regularly. These committees make recommendations to the council. Their conduct should be no less effective than those of school council.

At the end of this unit, participants should be able to:

- recognize the features of an effective meeting
- confidently chair successful school council meetings.

Features of an effective meeting

Meetings are held to allow council to make decisions related to its functions as advisory to the principal. Meeting dates should be set at the start of the year by the principal and the Chair to suit the school's calendar. They should not be scheduled at the same time as other important school events or religious holidays.

Effective and accountable decision-making in meetings requires:

- a clear definition of how the council conducts its business
- a carefully prepared agenda
- papers relevant to specific agenda items circulated in advance
- an expectation that all members will prepare adequately for the meeting
- frank and open discussion
- accurate and timely records of decisions
- ability and willingness to seek independent and external professional advice when necessary
- a sub-committee structure that supports and enables much of the work of school council to make recommendations to the council.

Decision-making

Council decisions are made by a majority of the members eligible to vote and present at the meeting, provided the majority are non-Board employees and not less than one half of the members currently holding office are present.

All decisions of council are voted upon. The numbers for and against should be recorded in the minutes. The principal is a non-voting member. Where votes are tied, the Chair has a casting vote.

All motions must be recorded. The motion mover and seconder, and the outcome must be minuted.

There is no provision for proxies to vote on school council matters at a meeting. However, a member may be present at a meeting by videoconferencing or teleconferencing if the Council has that capacity.

Setting the agenda

The principal in consultation with the Chair should set the council meeting agenda with enough time to distribute it to all members of the council, along with any reports or background material prior to the meeting. It is the principal's responsibility to ensure school council members are suitably resourced.

The agenda lists business that council will discuss during the meeting. A simple agenda may include:

- welcome and apologies
- minutes of the previous meeting (voted upon)
- business arising from the minutes
- principal's report
- reports from sub-committees including finance sub-committee
- general business
- correspondence (incoming and outgoing)
- close.

If a council does not have sub-committees, the chair may introduce the finance and other reports.

Usually, councils ask members to submit items for general business ahead of the meeting so they can be included on the agenda. It is for the Chair to determine if other general business matters raised at the meeting, that are within a function of the school council, will be discussed. There may not be sufficient time for the discussion. The Chair should decline to discuss any matters unrelated to a function of the school council.

When discussing the proposed next meeting agenda with the principal, the Chair should ask:

- Does the item fit within a function of the council?
- Is the item operational (and thus a responsibility of the principal)?
- Should the item be dealt with elsewhere?
- Does the item warrant council's time?

Chairing the meeting

As chair, the Chair should open the meeting on time and call council members to order. To ensure an effective meeting, the Chair should:

- have a good understanding of the constituting by-laws
- have sought a briefing with the principal ahead of the meeting on any complex or sensitive issues
- manage the discussions during the meetings to ensure business is expeditiously addressed. For this, the chair needs to understand the powers of the chair and be willing to use them judiciously to ensure that council keeps to the point. These powers include the authority to bring discussions to a conclusion and bring on a vote
- ensure that no member dominates a discussion and encourage all members to express an opinion
- before calling for a vote, summarize points made in the discussion
- be prepared to delegate contentious matters to individuals or sub-committees for more research or discussion
- keep an eye on the scheduled closing time of the meeting and try to pace the discussion to complete the business by that time
- call for a specified extension of time if that is required
- ensure that members know the date, time and venue of the next meeting before officially declaring the current meeting closed
- ensure that the decisions of the council are correctly recorded. When council approves the minutes, the chair presiding at that meeting signs the minutes.

Stages of the meeting

School council meetings should follow a consistent format. An agenda should be prepared and distributed with draft minutes from the previous meeting and any reports from the principal and Chair, finance and other sub-committees, to council members no less than five days before the meeting.

Minutes of the meeting

Accurate minutes should be made of every meeting of school council, and of its sub-committees. Minutes form a record of the council's activities and decisions and actions that need to be taken. Councils should appoint a minute-taker at the beginning of each year.

When school council minutes are submitted for confirmation, only questions regarding their accuracy are to be raised. The chair of that meeting must sign the minutes once council has accepted them as being a true and accurate record of the meeting.

The minutes should be sent to the principal and Chair as soon as possible after a meeting for comment, and then distributed, by the principal, to all members of council before the next school council meeting, where they are considered and accepted.

The school council should keep the community informed about its operations by publishing a report following each meeting in the school newsletter and/or on the school website or posting the minutes or by keeping a binder of minutes in the school office.

Managing conflict and the conduct of meetings

At times, some school councils may experience members expressing strong conflicting views. There may be occasions where individual members are not working cooperatively with other members. It is the Chair's responsibility, as chairperson, to manage any conflict or conduct issues that arise during the course of a meeting.

The principal is responsible for managing any matters that extend beyond the meeting.

Some strategies for the chairperson dealing with difficult situations include:

- dealing respectfully with all comments and contributions
- using clearly understood protocols to ensure all views are represented
- stopping one individual dominating the meeting
- bringing the discussion back to school council's core objectives, which include: assisting in the efficient governance of the school; ensuring that decisions affecting students of the school are made in students' best interests; enhancing the educational opportunities of students of the school; and ensuring the school and the school council complies with its legal obligations
- delegating the discussion to a sub-committee, or to a future school council meeting
- anticipating matters that might result in conflict between members and introducing them in a way which seeks to minimize tension
- being prepared to let an aggrieved member express their view, but then being prepared to close the debate
- reminding members of the code of conduct for school council
- not taking sides and treating an individual's grievance as legitimate
- The Chair should be mindful of council members acting contrary to the code of conduct or speaking against council decisions to members of the community. The principal and the Chair may need to meet the individual separately and remind them of their obligations under the code of conduct.

5.3 Chair- Online learning activity B- How to run effective school council meetings

Goal

To enable school council Chairs to test their understanding of the role of the school council Chair, the requirements for an effective school council meeting, and how to run an effective school council meeting.

Steps

Review the scenarios and provide responses.

Compare your responses to the suggested responses.

Situation One

One council member continually dominates school council meetings, no matter what item on the agenda is being discussed. You are aware that some other members hardly speak at meetings.

Enter answer here:

Situation Two

You receive a letter from a parent upset at how the principal has handled a situation that resulted in her son being suspended for three days. The parent believes the suspension was not warranted and the principal was victimizing her son. The parent wants this matter raised at school council and plans to attend the next council meeting to see that it is.

Enter answer here:

Situation Three

You are about to close the school council meeting when a council member indicates he wishes to have a matter discussed. He starts by saying some parents are concerned about the behaviour of a teacher outside school hours.

Enter answer here:

Situation Four

Your council has been considering a contentious issue for several meetings. Finally a motion has been put and the voting sees five votes for and five votes against. As Chair and chair, your vote went for the affirmative.

Now what do you do?

Enter answer here:

Situation Five

The finance sub-committee has recommended that council not renew the council's contract with the current fun fair vendor. It recommends the school should hire a new vendor, who is the brother-in-law of the principal.

Enter answer here:

Situation Six

School council decides it is time to review the school dress code and sets up a working party to consider this. Policy states the community must be consulted on changes to the dress code. How should you proceed?

Enter answer here:

Situation Seven

As Chair of the school council, you are approached by a small group of staff members who would like to have a discussion with you about the school. You feel this is positive and agree to meet with them. At the meeting the group commences to make direct comments about their dissatisfaction with some teacher colleagues and the principal.

Enter answer here:

Conclusion

The key points to remember are:

- the school council Chair is responsible for the effective running of school council meetings
- the Chair needs to be able to work effectively with all school council members, the principal and the wider school community
- the school council Chair needs to ensure the focus of council is on governance, not school operational issues
- working with the principal, the Chair needs to ensure that any concerns raised are addressed.

5.4 Engaging the school community and beyond

Why is this topic important?

The work of the school council needs to be known and understood by the school community, including families, students, staff and other stakeholders. If the community shares and has input into the vision and values of the school council, and has participated in the process, then the community is likely to offer greater support.

Council should establish effective mechanisms for communicating its decisions to the community, to enable consultation and to receive feedback.

At the end of this unit, the participant will understand:

- the importance of community consultation and engagement
- how to establish two-way communication with the school community.

Sharing information

School council members are drawn from the key stakeholders of the school: parents, staff and the wider community. As individuals, they bring diverse views to the council for working together to develop a shared vision for the improvement of student outcomes. Council decisions can affect the school and its stakeholders, and they generally need to be communicated to, and understood by the community.

Minutes should be taken at every school council meeting and accepted by the council as a fair and accurate record. Although they serve as a record of all decisions they are not public documents.

The principal should keep the community informed about the operations of the school council by publishing a report following each meeting.

There are various channels the principal can use to report to the community about the operations of the school council, including:

- the school website
- the school newsletter
- direct mail to families
- emails to families and students.

Councils should be wary of “word-of-mouth” communication or using third parties to broadcast decisions. At times, school council may consider the local media an appropriate channel for their news and information.

Another key opportunity for the community to be informed of the school council activities is at the public reporting meeting a council must hold at least once each year. At this meeting the school council reports on the proceedings of council since the date of the previous public meeting. The council must present the Annual Report and, if council accounts have been audited, a copy of the audited accounts at the meeting.

Some school councils use this public meeting as a celebration and recognition of the school’s achievements as well as an acknowledgement of those who have contributed to the school over the previous year.

Interpreters and translators may need to be provided at these meetings to ensure that all families can understand the information being presented and engage in the discussions.

The Chair as spokesperson

The Chair is spokesperson for the school council, and not the school. The principal has the dual responsibility to represent the school and the school council to the community.

The Chair should be prepared to explain school council policies, plans, priorities and activities. Some Chairs, in consultation with the principal, write articles for the school newsletter to explain council actions, or attend parent meetings.

There are occasions when the Chair may be required to speak to the community, such as:

- at information nights for prospective students and their families. The Chair may be called upon to explain the role of council and its activities – and to seek expressions of interest from parents willing to join council
- at graduation ceremonies. The Chair may take this opportunity to thank families for their support of the school and the students
- at special ceremonies, such as the opening of new school buildings or the dedication of new facilities.

In this role, the Chair is a key asset for the school in engaging with the community.

Consultation with the community

School council should be prepared to consult with the school community and, as needed, with the local community. School council is legally required to inform itself and take into account any views of the school community for the purpose of making decisions related to the school and its students. There are some issues, such as the school dress code, into which the school community must have input.

However, consultation with the community does not mean the community makes the decision. Council seeks the opinion, advice and views of the community and then makes its decision.

Consultation shows the community that:

- opinions, ideas and contributions of others are valued
- the matters discussed are not always straightforward
- assistance is sought and welcomed
- people have different points of view about the best way forward.

Community forums or focus meetings allow interested community members to contribute to the council's decision-making.

In planning a forum or focus meeting, ensure all voices can be heard, and consider use of interpreters/translators and protocols for enabling all to participate.

Other ways of consulting the community may include:

- inviting specific individuals to a council meeting to provide information or expertise to assist the council
- online surveys.

Where councils have sub-committees, members of the wider community should be invited to participate. This can be an excellent introduction to the work of the school council. Sub-committees make recommendations to council, so it is an opportunity for opinions and ideas to be heard. Sub-committees must have at least three members including at least one school council member.

Council meetings are normally open to the school community and conducted according to standard meeting requirements. Visitors or observers can be present at council meetings with the agreement of the principal and a decision of council. Visitors have a right to speak but must do so through the person chairing the meeting (usually the Chair).

Engaging the community

Consultation provides members of the school community with an opportunity to provide input into the decision-making process of council. However, it can sometimes mean that only the vocal few have their ideas

and opinions heard. On key issues, school council should seek direct input and engagement from its community in addition to consultation.

This approach to community engagement can be extended to the Chair and principal regularly conducting small invitee community forums.

The aim is to engage the community in school council work and to also reflect the school community's input through the decision-making process. The result of such actions is a greater belief and confidence by the community in its school council.

Addressing concerns and complaints

A Chair is likely, from time to time, to receive a complaint about the school, either verbally or in writing. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the following steps can be taken:

- if the complaint relates to a function of the school's council, then the matter should be brought to the attention of the council. Ask the complainant to put their concern in writing and address it to the council. The complaint should be discussed at a council meeting. The principal should contact the complainant advising how the matter has been or is proposed to be resolved
- if the matter relates to the operation of the school, for example, a complaint regarding a teacher, class structure, subject timetable, or similar, the complainant should be advised the matter is not a school council matter and should be directed to contact the principal to discuss their concerns. The principal would then manage the complaint
- a written complaint should be noted on the council meeting agenda as incoming correspondence with no further action required from the council
- If the complaint is about the principal, the complainant should be advised to contact the Superintendent of Education.

Many complaints arise from miscommunication or lack of communication. A culture of respectful and appropriate communication from the council may reduce complaints. Some concerns raised by parents are complex; however in all cases an open, consistent approach that is courteous, efficient and fair best addresses parent concerns. Such an approach provides opportunities to build partnerships between schools and families.

When dealing with complaints, the principal and the Chair must ensure confidentiality and privacy of the matter. The Board has policy and procedures to address parent complaints – the [Parent Concern Protocol](#). It should be posted so that parents and the school community can view it.