

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

**School Council Training Event
October 21th, 2006**

Presented by Dale Brown, Westmount School Council

Participants in meetings should feel that the time they spent was worthwhile.

An effective meeting depends on preparation and organization before the meeting, and efficient use of time and positive decision-making during the meeting. The School Council Chair is the key to making this happen.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHAIR

The chair of the council is elected by the council members and must be a parent who is not employed by the school board. The chair is a voting member who, in addition to performing the same duties as other council members does the following:

- arranges for meetings
- prepares agendas
- chairs council meetings
- ensures that minutes of council meetings are recorded and maintained
- facilitates the resolution of conflict
- participates as ex-officio members of all committees established by the school council
- communicates with the school principal on behalf of the council.

GROUND RULES

- All School Council meetings are public and open to anyone who wants to attend
- A School Council has a right to hold its meetings in the school
- School Council meetings should be held in an accessible place that is convenient to all members including people with disabilities
- School Councils must meet at least four times a year
- School Councils focus on the bigger picture and discuss issues that affect the whole school community
- School Councils must not discuss individual students or teachers

PURPOSE OF SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETINGS

The purpose of a School Council meeting is:

- To share information
- To hear different people's points of view
- To plan activities
- To provide advice
- To make decisions

SETTING THE STAGE FOR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

- Starts at the first meeting of the year.
- Be sure that the meeting date, time and place are advertised well in advance.
- If possible, select a consistent day for council meetings, for example 2nd Thursday of the month.
- Post signage in the school to help first-timers find their way to the meeting room.
- Review the role of school council and the school council's constitution, processes and procedures.
- Review the Code of Ethics that clearly states how members will treat each other during meetings.
- Include a discussion around "meeting norms" such as respecting each other's opinion. Review these if needed, during the year.
- Be clear from the first meeting that issues of individuals and/or teachers cannot be discussed at council meetings. Be prepared to restate that rule if necessary.
- Be sure each member knows where to get a copy of the School Council Member's Handbook and the School Council's own constitution.
- Develop a process for taking and distributing council's minutes in a timely manner.

MEETING PREPARATION

Before a meeting, the Chair is the composer.....

- Have a process in place for receiving agenda items from school council members ahead of time.
- Meet with the principal a week before the meeting to set the agenda.
- Take a draft agenda with you to the meeting with the principal.
- Know what issues you want the principal to address.
- Bring the issues that have been raised ahead of time.
- Determine whether it is appropriate to bring these issues up at the School Council meeting or whether to deal with them individually.
- Finalize and send out the agenda to the School Council ahead of time; include minutes from the last meeting. Suggest using the First Class School Council account.
- Consider putting a time limit on agenda items.
- Confirm that members who will give committee reports are prepared.
- If a guest is being invited to the meeting, make sure the invitation details have been provided to them.
- Post signage in the school so parents can easily find the meeting venue.

THE AGENDA

- An agenda lists the routine pieces of business that are often forgotten at the beginning of a meeting and acts as a program of what will follow after the routine items.
- An agenda lets members know what will be discussed, giving them an opportunity to come to the meeting prepared for the upcoming discussions or decisions.
- Determine the format of the agenda (and get feedback from School Council to evaluate it).
- Use a consistent format from month to month.
- See below for a sample agenda.

THE MEETING

During the meeting, the Chair is the conductor.....

At the beginning of the meeting:

- Arrange chairs and tables to encourage the sense of inclusiveness.
- Call the meeting to order at the designated time; start on time!
- Confirm that the minute taker is present and ready to record.
- Have a process to record attendance; perhaps distribute an attendance sheet.
- If appropriate, determine if quorum is present.
- Do introductions at every meeting.
- Review and approve the agenda. Have a process to decide whether items can be added to the agenda, or be dealt with at the next meeting.
- Review and approve the minutes of the last meeting.
- Have a process for discussing items, making motions, making decisions.

During the meeting:

- Follow the agenda; discuss one piece of business at a time.
- Keep the group focused on its purpose; cut off discussion if necessary to move the meeting forward, e.g. "polite interrupting".
- Keep an eye on the clock; be aware of the timing of discussions; keep to the agenda time limits.
- Work continually to involve all members. Encourage participation by all, even the quietest members. Develop a process that allows all to contribute.
- Keep track of those trying to get your attention and try to be fair in your recognition of speakers; consider keeping a list.
- Try to bring out all sides of an issue.
- Ensure there are no unanswered questions in the group.

- Remind members of behaviour norms as necessary. Make an effort to keep order and maintain appropriate decorum.
- There is a fine line between being on a “power trip” and keeping order as a function of enforcing the rights of members to a well run and orderly meeting.
- Offer advice or suggestions, if necessary.
- Give the chairperson the authority to close off items by summing up.
- Clarify and summarize when appropriate.
- Move the group towards decisions.
- Check for consensus.
- Put aside problems or new issues that are raised in the course of the meeting that sidetrack you from the agenda. Have a process for getting these items on the current agenda or next agenda.
- Be clear about follow-up actions and assign names to responsibilities. Share and delegate responsibilities as much as possible to keep the workload manageable.
- Assist the group in using agreed-on procedures.
- End the meeting on time or get agreement to extend the meeting for a specified period of time. Table items until the next meeting if necessary.

At the end of the meeting:

- Make sure assignments and agreements are clear.
- Confirm the date, time, and place of the next meeting.
- Identify any items that may be on that agenda.
- Encourage feedback about your “meeting leadership style” and evaluation of the meeting’s effectiveness by all participants.
- Debrief or adjourn the meeting.

After the meeting:

- Check with the recorder to make sure that the minutes are clear before distributing.
- Help others carry out the decisions made during the meeting.
- Follow up with commitments agreed upon for the next meeting.

Guidelines for keeping minutes:

- State whether this is a regular or specially called meeting.
- Give the name of the council and the time, date and place of the meeting.
- State the name and position of person chairing the meeting as well as who the minute taker is.
- Note whether or not minutes of the last meeting were approved.

- List the names of members who are present, those sending regrets and those absent.
- State the names of guests and where they are from.
- State whether committee reports are given; if so, include summaries of the reports in the minutes.
- Record discussion of old business and new business.
- State all motions or recommendations and whether they were accepted or rejected. Record suggestions that do not become motions.
- Give the names of people who make motions or suggestions and the names of people who second motions, if the Council uses the motion format.
- Summarize the discussion of each recommendation.
- Make note of any announcements.
- Record what went on in the meeting after old and new business – such as speakers or presentations.
- State the time when the meeting ended.
- The Chair should review the minutes before sending them out to the members.
- Review the minutes for error or omissions at the next meeting.

WAS IT AN EFFECTIVE MEETING?

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

- the meeting had a purpose
- they have a sense of accomplishment
- they contributed to the discussion
- they were valued by others
- creative ideas, alternatives, or solutions were generated
- they were able to share different points of view
- they are committed to the decisions made and the actions taken
- they are willing to work together again

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. A set of operating bylaws will help your council work effectively.

Your council will have to make many decisions. Deciding how decisions will be made is the first order of business for a new school council. There are two basic ways of making decisions: the less formal way is by reaching consensus; the more formal way is by voting (e.g., following Robert's Rules of Order).

Each process is described below.

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. ***Caution: 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.***

Consensus:

- gives all council members an effective voice in decisions;
- makes sure all participants contribute to the decision;
- builds on differing opinions, 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.

Consensus does not mean:

- a unanimous vote;
- everyone's first choice;
- that everyone agrees;

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.

Consensus Building Phrases

Some suggested phrases for the chair to use as council members try to reach consensus:

- Let's begin by getting a reaction from everyone in the group.
- Let me summarize what I hear you saying.
- Let me repeat what I think I heard you say.
- Let me ask you. . . .
- Has everyone had the opportunity to express an opinion?
- Let me see if I can pull together a recommendation.
- Is anyone uncomfortable with this recommendation?
- Let's take five minutes to re-evaluate our positions and prepare statements to share with others.
- Do you want to table this question and discuss it again at the next meeting?

Once a decision is reached by consensus, your council may choose to formalize it through a motion. The result of the vote should be unanimous.

Consensus takes time, commitment, patience, and persistence. As a process, it will strengthen your team by building trust, valuing the diversity of opinions, and energizing and involving all members as equal participants.

VOTING:

Decisions reached by voting often expedite the business of a meeting as they usually take less time to reach. If your council chooses to reach decisions by majority vote, everyone on the council should be well informed, and the council as a group should discuss all of the implications before a vote is called by the chair.

If your council decides to make decisions by majority vote *formally*, some simple rules of order can be followed. The following simplified rules of order may be useful:

Making a motion

1. An individual must be recognized by the chair before “obtaining the floor” to make a motion. This means that the chair must let a person know that it is his or her turn before that person can speak to the council and formally propose a course of action.

2. Once an individual has the floor, he or she may make a formal proposal, or motion, beginning with the statement “I move that . . .”.

3. Before the motion can be considered, another individual must second the motion by saying “I second the motion”. This does not necessarily indicate that he or she agrees with the proposal, only that he or she believes that it is worthy of discussion.

4. Once a motion has been made and seconded, the chair restates the Motion (“states the question”) so that everyone clearly understands what is being proposed. From this point on, until the motion is voted on, all discussion must focus solely on the question.

5. If members of the group wish to discuss the motion, the chair opens debate. Each participant may speak to the question twice, but no one may speak a second time until everyone has had the chance to speak once.

6. If no one wants to speak further to the issue, the chair may ask the council if it is ready for “the question” (ready to vote on the proposal). The chair then repeats the motion and conducts the vote by asking for those in favour and those opposed. (The vote may be conducted by a show of hands, by standing, or by secret ballot.)

7. The majority needed to pass a motion should be stated in the school council bylaws. In case of a tie, the motion is defeated.

Amending a motion

Until the chair states the question (repeats the motion) for a final vote, the person who made the motion may change it, although the original seconder may wish to withdraw, requiring another seconder. Once the question has been stated, however, the motion can be amended in one of the following ways:

1. The person making the motion may ask to change the original wording. The chair will ask if anyone objects. If no one objects, the wording of the motion is changed. Debate continues on the motion as amended.

2. If someone does object, the question of whether to allow a change in the wording of the motion is put to a vote. If the group consents to the change, debate continues on the motion as amended.

3. Someone else may move to amend the motion by saying, “I move to amend the motion by.. .”. If so, the normal process for a motion, as outlined above in the “Making a Motion” section, is followed.

4. An amendment to the amendment may also be proposed, but a third amendment is out of order.

5. If the amendment has been defeated, discussion returns to the original Motion.

Withdrawing a motion

1. At any time before a vote, the person making the original motion may ask to withdraw it. The motion to withdraw does not require a seconder. Once the question is withdrawn, it is as if it never existed.

2. If the chair has already stated the question and a request to withdraw the motion is made, the chair asks if there is any objection. If there is none, the motion is withdrawn. If someone objects, the request to withdraw the motion is put to a vote.

Tabling a motion

A motion to table a motion means to set it aside for discussion at another time so that more pressing business can be discussed or more information about the issues can be obtained.

The following rules apply to tabling a motion:

The motion to table a motion takes precedence over the discussion of the motion.

The motion to table a motion requires a seconder. There can be no debate on a motion to table.

Motions that are null and void

Any motions that contradict provincial laws and regulations, local policy, or school council bylaws are out of order and invalid, even if voted on and passed by a majority vote.

METHODS FOR STIMULATING DISCUSSION, HEARING ALL OPINIONS

- **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
- **Think, pair and share:** have participants spend time writing their opinion on a topic, discuss it with a partner and then have one person of the pair share with the group.
- **Parking Lot:** a bulletin board is designated the “parking lot”; Council members use post-its to jot down ideas, questions or concerns and post these on the parking lot
- **Questionnaire:** develop a brief questionnaire to get input on an issue

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 flipchart
 - 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 flipcharts and report back to the main group after the time limit has been reached.
- **Brain writing:** This is similar to a round table, but with more individual participation. Give index cards to each group and ask each group member to write down one idea on each card. The cards are then exchanged and new ideas or comments are added by other members of the group. A facilitator summarizes and groups the ideas and comments.
- **Snowball activity:** have participants work in pairs to develop an idea. Have two pairs discuss their ideas together and agree as a foursome on an idea. Have two groups of four come together and agree on an idea.

- **Problems/Solutions:** have council members work in small groups; Use chart paper to have participants identify problems/issues and possible solutions; Have someone from each group share their group's work
- **Carousel Brainstorming:** post chart paper, each with a different question or topic around the room; Have participants work in groups to add ideas to each chart as they move around the room
- **K-W-L:** Participants complete a chart on a topic divided into three parts:
K - What you already **know** about the topic
W - What you **want** to learn about a topic
L - What you **learned** as a result of reading or experience
The participants complete the first two parts (K,W), read some material or listen to a speaker, then complete the last part (L) of the chart.

METHODS FOR FACILITATING DECISION MAKING AND PRIORITY SETTING

After ideas have been generated by one of the methods described above, the following strategies can be used to help the council make decisions and set priorities:

- **Pro/con analysis:** In this process, participants develop possible solutions for an important issue that needs to be resolved, and focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives developed. It is best that members complete this process before a motion is put forward and the issue is voted on or before members try to reach a decision by consensus.
- **Voting:** After all ideas have been listed, each member votes on what he or she considers the three or four best ideas by putting a coloured sticker or a coloured check mark beside the ideas he or she thinks are best. The number of stickers or check marks beside each idea will determine the ranking (i.e., the idea with the most stickers beside it is first, etc.). The recorder then lists the ideas in the order of their ranking.
- **Value voting:** This method is useful for obtaining feedback when time is limited. The chair/co-chairs ask each member to take a position on each idea (e.g., strongly agree, agree, or strongly disagree). Each position category is then tallied to arrive at a direction, rather than a decision.
- **Multi-voting:** This variation of brainstorming allows the group to narrow down the number of ideas presented. After brainstorming, the ideas are numbered and similar ideas are combined. Each member then writes down the numbers of those that he or she feels should be discussed. No more than one-quarter of the ideas on the master list should be chosen. After getting feedback from members, those ideas in which few were interested are eliminated and the remaining ideas are kept for further discussion.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to our kids!!

SAMPLE SCHOOL COUNCIL AGENDA

September 20, 2006 - 7:30 p.m.
Meeting Location

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. confirm minute taker
3. Review and approve current meeting agenda
4. Review and approve previous meeting minutes
5. Guest speaker
6. Business from previous meetings
7. Chairperson's Report
8. Principal's Report
9. Student Council Report
10. School Generated Funds Report
11. School Improvement Plan (SIP)
 - Committee #1
 - Committee #2
 - Committee #3
12. H.W.D.S.B. Update
13. Next Meeting Date
 - **Month, day, time**
14. Adjournment.

SAMPLE CODE OF ETHICS

A member shall:

- be guided by the mission statement of the _____ School Council
- endeavour to be familiar with school policies and operating procedures and support them
- practice the highest standards of honesty, truth, accuracy and integrity
- encourage a positive atmosphere where individual contributions are encouraged and valued
- limit discussion at the School Council meetings to matters of concern to the school community as a whole
- not initiate or participate in discussion which focuses on any individual that is normally inappropriate at a School Council meeting except when warranted under specific requirements of this constitution
- consider the best interests of all students
- respect the confidential nature of some school business and respect limitations that this may place on the operation of the School Council
- not disclose confidential information
- use appropriate communication channels when questions or concerns arise
- promote high standards of ethical practice within the school community
- declare any conflict of interest
- accept no payment for School Council activities

RESOURCES

A Reference Binder for School Council Chair and Members, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

www.hwdsb.on.ca/schools_curriculum/councils/pdfs/School_Council_Reference_Binder2005-06.pdf

School Councils – A Guide for Members, Ontario Ministry of Education

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/council/guide.html

Ontario School Council Support Centre

www.schoolcouncils.net

Roberts Rules of Order Website

www.robertsrules.com

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