SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP COUNCILS

Getting Started

Partnership Council Considerations

Successful school partnerships maintain positive team-building skills. Four key considerations are:

☑ **Time.** Volunteering to be a school partnership council member takes time, patience, and energy. Ensure council members feel valued and that the amount of time devoted to council business is clearly stated and understood by all.

☑ **Issues.** All school partnership councils face issues that may move them beyond their typical comfort zone. During regular meetings, take time to build relationships, trust, and support for positive risk-taking, and to talk about how you will deal with issues.

☑ **Leadership.** Strong leadership plays a critical role in the effectiveness of any council or activity. A chairperson who is organized and enthusiastic can keep meetings and initiatives on track and moving forward. Other members who take on key roles for sub-committees can broaden the base of leadership and add commitment to projects.

☑ **Skill Building.** When school partnership councils consult with others and work together, members develop leadership skills that make the committee stronger and help it to last longer. All council members develop the skills to step into a leadership role when needed. This ability distributes the workload more evenly and reduces stress levels for everyone.

(For more detailed information related to team mandates and goal setting, please see A Toolbox for Leaders, p. 15).

Encouraging Involvement

Parent, family and community partnerships support school-based activities that enhance positive teaching and learning. Because partnerships evolve over time, and activities and members change, it is important to develop or review guidelines for council work at the beginning of each school year. By doing so, any changes that may have occurred in the school or broader community that affect the current year's work can be addressed quickly. Here are some suggestions:

☑ **Seek input from the school community.** Timely input is a productive way to identify meaningful priorities that meet the changing needs of the community. Some examples of collecting input would be: town hall meetings, surveys, interviewing key community members, focus group meetings, and using data collected through the school planning process.

☑ **Remain consistent with the views of the entire school community.** Keep in mind the diversity of the community when planning and making decisions.

☑ **Remain consistent with school division policies and procedures.** Many school divisions have adopted specific strategies for discussion, decision making, and communication that may assist school partnerships.

☑ **Maintain ongoing communication with the school community.** Keep the community informed of roles, mission, vision, priorities, plans, and activities. A variety of ways to inform the community include: newsletters, open meetings, announcements, and advertisements.

☑ **Involve families.** A child's understanding of values and traditions related to the home and community environment. As a result, parents form a natural link between communities and schools. Encourage all parents to bring essential community perspectives to planning and decision making.

☑ **Encourage all forms of community involvement and support.** Encourage wider involvement in schools. Identify, access, and coordinate community resources.

☑ **Encourage a student-centred direction.** Promote the best interests of all students.

☑ **Maintain high ethical standards.** Part of building positive relationships involves being caring and discreet. Encourage discussions that focus on the entire school community and that are within the roles and responsibilities of the partnership council.

Maintaining Involvement

Working together helps to maintain a connection between school partners. It offers parents and staff a sense of ownership and pride in their efforts to enhance the success of all learners. Maintaining active involvement has many stages and challenges including:

☑ **Consultation.** Before and while developing a school partnership council, encourage parents to indicate which activities and programs are compatible with their needs, strengths, and interests. This process helps to ensure relevant goal setting and commitment.

☑ **Strong Commitment.** Written policies and administrative support also aids in effective parental involvement. Written policies reinforce the importance of parental involvement and help to form the context for council activities. School support may be available to school partnership groups by providing resources, meeting space, duplication equipment, and the means of communication such as bulletins and newsletters.

☑ **Ongoing Communication and Planning.** Clear communication and mutual support are keys to active and sustained involvement. Positive relationships are strengthened when school staff and parents communicate clearly and frequently with each other about school policies, programs, or the individual growth and development of students. Some suggestions to maintain involvement include:

- Schedule meetings at times that are convenient to most parents and community members. Adjust times by consensus.
- Welcome students and other young people to meetings.
- Encourage participation from all segments of the community. School partnership councils work best when the representatives reflect the diversity of the students in the school.
- Create a positive atmosphere of co-operation and trust.
- Keep meetings brief and on topic.
- Share information openly and keep all members fully informed of opportunities for involvement.
- Give positive feedback for work that has been accomplished.
- Maintain ongoing communication of upcoming events; celebrate results of recent events.
- Distribute the workload evenly with reasonable timelines for completion.

Supporting Communication

When working in a school partnership, good communication is essential. How clearly we communicate our ideas is often the key to effective decision making. When people come together to make decisions, agreements are often as common as disagreements.

"When we take positive approaches to resolving our disputes, we are creating opportunities to build strong working relationships. When our relationships are built with trust, respect, and creative problem solving, we are setting positive examples for our students." (*Working Together: A Guide to Positive Problem Solving for Schools, Families, and Communities*, 2004)

☑ **Agreement**

School partnership councils are positive role models for everyone in the school when agreements are reached after initial disagreements. Communication that resolves issues in a positive manner usually includes

- understanding school processes/policies
- using clear, respectful language and behaviour
- identifying and stating areas of agreement and disagreement
- being aware of potential difficulties
- working together to reach an agreement as soon as possible

☑ **Disagreement**

Communicating with different partners in a variety of settings can sometimes be challenging. Disagreements can be helpful to decision making and occur even when groups work well together. When a compromise is reached over a difference of opinion it often results in a positive change. When disagreements occur, effective councils and committees work hard to resolve differences and to continue to work in a positive way.

☑ **Understanding Conflict**

Working together creates a sense of social responsibility that allows all participants to feel accepted and valued.

Although there are strategies that may be helpful in resolving disputes or disagreements, a successful outcome depends on the willingness of people to work together. (See page 25 for helpful hints for resolving disagreements.)

☑ **Suggestions for Effective Communication**

- Show interest in and listen to what other people have to say.
- Be aware of personal body language and that of others.
- Rephrase what the speaker is saying to ensure the message was understood correctly (i.e., Did I understand…).
- Consider the audience; try not to hurt feelings or alienate other members.
- Encourage group members to share their thoughts and ideas.

- Recognize complaints and gossip as emotional responses. Refocus members towards productive discussions within the responsibility of the council.
- Express support for the ideas of others.
- If you disagree, disagree in a respectful way.
- Consider requests for information/feedback as a natural process.
- Be sympathetic towards the feelings of others.
- Consider the position of other people to understand their points of view.

☑ **Information Sharing**

School partnership council members represent the parents of the school and the community at large and are role models for others. It is therefore important that communication with others is clear, responsible, and timely. An atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and inclusion is created when lines of communication remain open and respectful. Helpful strategies for partnership councils include

- keeping in touch with your community, partners, parents, principal, superintendent, and trustee
- promoting an inclusive environment by considering every parent of a student in the school as a participant
- announcing meetings well in advance and providing child care, whenever possible, to encourage members to attend
- making the agenda flexible so members have the opportunity to raise issues and concerns
- providing opportunities to hear from a number of different partners
- meeting on an a regular basis
- establishing formal communication links with the school board to:
  — discuss issues of mutual concern
  — give and receive information
  — invite board members to council meetings
- working with other organizations to:
  — share successes and failures
  — receive and offer support and information
  — be aware of provincial perspectives

School partnership councils may have diverse memberships (e.g., parents, elders, youth, teachers, and principals). Individual communication skills help to build and strengthen a group's ability to work together.

Sharing Student Success

When we choose to involve ourselves positively in the lives of young people, everyone benefits.

• As a community, we become stronger. As people, we become healthier in our relationships, our homes, and our visions for the future.

• There are many ways to be involved, and all types of involvement are important to the development of successful school experiences.

• When we focus ourselves on positive parenting at home and attend school concerts or open houses, we support student success. When we get involved with our children as they work on their homework, we partner with schools to support student success.

• When we volunteer, respond to school surveys, communicate with the school, and encourage our children to do well at school, celebrating their learning, we become partners with schools in creating positive environments for student success.

• When we become members of partnership councils, we formalize our relationship together to assist in decision making and program planning that fits with the unique characteristics of each of our communities.

There are many important reasons for working together to support student success and all of them are positive. We all have a part to play in educating the whole child. After all, our children are our future.