

November 5, 2011

People for Education Conference 2011

## **School council workshop: A how-to session for council members**

### **Notes from the session**

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*This session offered practical tips on how to reach out to your community, how to run a productive meeting, how to work with school administration and how to tackle other common issues.*

Presenter: Jacqui Strachan, Community Outreach Coordinator, People for Education

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#### Issue: How do we attract more parents?

- Most people feel that their councils are not effective, but feel that the parents involved in Council are committed to Council;
- It is very normal that most Councils don't have enough people at meetings – Stop stressing about how many people come out and make the best of it;
- What is important is to reach out to parents who are not involved;
- Target parents who have talents to contribute by doing a parent survey to find out parent skills and hobbies. Be careful not to pigeon hole parents by their “day jobs” – perhaps the accountant doesn't want to be treasurer, but loves to teach knitting!
- Communicate with parents from other cultures who are withdrawn from school;
- Translate resources for parents – access People for Education website for translated resources;

#### Issue: How do we get teachers and Council working together to support parent engagement?

- Councils need to support teachers and work together – at curriculum nights and at Parent Teacher interviews, teachers can ask parent what their interests are and how they want to help. Teachers can promote Council to parents who want to be involved.
- Ask principal if Council Chair can come to staff meeting to explain role of council and ways Council can work with teachers. Reinforce Councils support of teachers so that teachers aren't scared of parents.
- Teacher engagement starts with the principal – if staff are not feeling valued by principal, they will be reluctant to do any extra activities;
- Council should offer support to principal to assist in developing teacher involvement;
- Ask teachers what they want from Council/Fundraising;
- Ask for a teacher rep on Council – role can be shared among teachers;
- Parents can make teachers nervous, talk to them like they are your friend, trust that they know what they are doing and show them your support;
- Remind everyone that Council goal is student success and everyone needs to work as a team;
- Organize parents so that instead of giving the teacher token gifts at Christmas, everyone donates a small amount toward items needed for the classroom;
- At book fair, have teachers make list of books they want for their classroom that parents can donate;

#### Issue: Principal's personality is degrading school atmosphere and enrollment in small community.

- This can be a big problem because the principal can set the tone of the school;
- Let the principal know Council is there to help;
- Give the principal the benefit of the doubt;
- Many boards are switching principals every 5-7 years – this is decided by each board. Frequent principal changes can be harmful to developing good relationship between principal and school community (including parents and staff);
- Council talk to Supervisory Officer (S.O.) and Trustee if no progress with principal;

- Make sure school's Principal Profile is up to date and on file with board;
- Different board policies:
  - S.O. is supposed to speak to Council Chair in advance of principal change;
  - Council has opportunity to meet with potential candidates and interview them;
  - Council meets with S.O. with candidate credentials (without names) to give feedback to S.O.;

Issue: How do we access the \$500 Parent Involvement Funds?

- Each School Council receives \$500 per school, which is allocated by Ministry of Education to each board;
- Boards can make decision as to where funds are directed;
- Most boards put the \$500 in school's budgets as a separate line item;
- Some boards require Councils to provide year end report how \$500 was spent;
- If you don't use it, you lose it!
- Suggestions on People for Education website as to how to use \$500;
- Many Councils review school budget with principal;

Issue: Council meetings are mostly discussion of reports, no time for conversation about school issues – how can we make meetings more effective and faster?

- Send out reports before the meeting so members have time to read them and submit questions prior to the meeting;
- Use a more business-like approach:
  - Communicate the rules of the meeting;
  - Acknowledge speakers;
  - Appoint timekeepers so that all speakers have equal opportunity;
  - Use Roberts Rules of Order – modify to suit personalities of council members;
  - Keep meeting structured;
- Work shouldn't happen at Council meetings – use Committee meetings to plan, just report at Council meeting;
- Report on certain items every other meeting if there are too many issues to report at every meeting;
- Hold general Council meetings which include all parents, any new issues which are raised are referred to Council executive for discussion, and planning for future meeting;
- Meet/email principal draft agenda in advance;
- Send out agenda before meeting;
- Do not allow last minute agenda items – if new items are raised, add to agenda for next meeting;
- Keep meetings 1.5 hours;
- Don't get bogged down with topics that can't be discussed at Council – NOT PERSONAL OR PERSONNEL;

Issue: Historically Council meetings are held at either lunch time or at 4:30 which makes it hard for many parents to be involved (but which is more convenient for principal):

- Principal (or Vice-Principal) must attend Council meeting;
- Council sets meeting dates and agenda – not Principal in isolation;
- Council members should determine dates that work best for majority of members;
- Consider rotating meetings to allow many parents to attend (this month lunch time, next month evening to accommodate any shift workers);

Issue: Cliques of parents in school are intimidating to new parents or parents wanting to become involved:

- Assign buddy/mentor to new parents and exchange contact info so that new parent has someone to contact with questions/concerns;
- Examine what is happening to cause "clique" feeling and actively work to eliminate that feeling;
- Reassure parents that their voice is important, all parents are equal;
- Part of Chair's role to be peacemaker, sometimes have to take active role in diffusing difficult situations;
- Remember that as a Council member, you are acting as a representative of all parents in the school, you may have to set aside your personal opinion and make decisions for the best of the whole school community;

- Use principal board staff as resource;

Issue: Who should be Community Rep and how do we get one?

- Community Rep connects the school to the broader school community and provides wider perspective;
- When sending out election forms to school community, give description of community rep role, ask for volunteers;
- Approach variety store/pizza shop in neighbourhood;
- Police or fire departments;
- Groups – social, community, religious;
- Neighbourhood daycare;
- Lunchroom supervisor, crossing guard, newcomer settlement worker;
- Past and future parents;
- Parish priest;

Issue: How do we develop an email list of parents that can be accessed by Council, and what should we use it for?

- The reality is that email is the way most people communicate, but some principals are scared that council will use email for a purpose contrary to school goals – need to establish trusting relationship between Council and Principal and remember that email list should only be used for appropriate communication to all parents;
- In High School, most parents want a way to get information about school, would appreciate weekly email bulletin – What is Happening at School this week:
  - Sports teams in newspaper;
  - General info for parents;
  - Picture/Retake day;
  - Take your kids to work day;
  - Upcoming Events;
- At Open House in spring for Kindergarten, have sign up sheet for parents;
- Include permission sheet in first day of school package for email address to be shared with Council – all parents fill those papers out and return them so this is the best time to get their email address;
- Be relentless – use every opportunity when parents are in the school to ask them if they want to sign up to be on the mailing list:
  - Parent teacher interviews;
  - Concerts;
  - Barbeques;
- Ask class parent to build the list for their class;

Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations [www.ohfsa.on.ca](http://www.ohfsa.on.ca) – independent association, all monies raised are not part of school account.

Negotiate with outside companies to sponsor school events – contact [amujib@parkwayhonda.com](mailto:amujib@parkwayhonda.com) for suggestions of how to do that.