



School Council President

Improving School Governance

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5.0

Introduction

Goal

This module provides school council presidents with a better understanding of:

- their role and responsibilities
- what makes an effective council
- how to lead council meetings
- how to engage the community with the school and its objectives.

Overview

The school council president (president) is a parent or community member (not a Department of Education employee) of school council, who presides over, or chairs, school council meetings. A president is elected each year by council members, usually at the first meeting after the annual council elections.

The role of president is important. The president represents the school in the wider community and must be prepared to champion the school, students and staff. The role can be time consuming, but also very rewarding.

An effective president is a key component of a cohesive and effective council. The president must appreciate the responsibilities that the role carries and the governance structure of government schools. This structure includes the Minister for Education, the Department of Education (the department), school councils, the principal and teaching staff. It is important for the president to have a constructive working relationship with the principal, the school councillors and the community.

The president will play a leadership role on the council, which sets the broad direction and vision of the school. The president must be able to run effective meetings, working with council members and the principal.

This training module will help council presidents and those aspiring to the role to understand the nature and extent of their responsibilities and to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to perform the role successfully.

5.1

Roles and responsibilities

Why is this topic important?

The president, together with the principal, provides leadership, establishing the environment in which the council can operate effectively.

On completing this unit, participants should understand:

- the skills required of an effective president
- the role and responsibilities of a president.

The effective president

The president needs to have leadership and management skills.

A skilled president is decisive, fair, open-minded, task-focused, consultative, respectful of the views of others and mindful of the 'big picture'. A good president knows the boundary of their authority and of the council, understands and respects privacy and confidentiality, and how and when to delegate.

A good president makes themselves available to the school community and to other council members. It is important for the president to cultivate a good working relationship with the principal and maintain the support of council members.

Before nominating for president, a candidate should consider what skills and experience they could bring to the position. Do they have an understanding of the school, the school's direction and needs, and do they have the time to learn this? Do they have the patience and commitment to develop good working relationships? Are they prepared to be a role model for professionalism, integrity and sound judgement?

Code of Conduct

School councils in Victoria are public entities for the purposes of the *Public Administration Act 2004*. School councillors are directors of public entities and must abide by the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities (Code of Conduct) issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commission. The Code of Conduct sets the standard of behaviour and requires all councillors to:

- **act with honesty and integrity** – be truthful, open and clear about their motives and declare any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest and report improper conduct
- **act in good faith in the best interests of the school** – work cooperatively with other councillors and the school community, be reasonable, and make decisions with the best interests of students in mind
- **act fairly and impartially** – consider all relevant facts of an issue before making a decision, seek to have a balanced view, never give special treatment to a person or group and do not act from self-interest
- **use information appropriately** – respect confidentiality and use information for the purpose for which it was gathered
- **use their position appropriately** – not use their position to gain an advantage
- **act in a financially responsible manner** – observe all the above principles when making financial decisions
- **exercise due care, diligence and skill** – accept responsibility for decisions and do what is best for the school
- **act consistently with legislative and policy requirements when making decisions**
- **notify the school council if they become a candidate for an election** – in any state, local or federal election and not use the council's resources in connection with their candidature
- **demonstrate leadership and stewardship** – set a good example, encourage a culture of accountability and child safety, and manage risks to keep the school viable and sustainable.

Public Sector Values

School councillors must also abide by and demonstrate the Victorian Public Sector Values set out in the Code of Conduct. These values are responsiveness, integrity, impartiality, accountability, respect, leadership and human rights.

The values underpin the behaviours that the government and community expect of all directors of public entities, including school council members.

The values set out the way that school councillors, as directors of public entities, should behave and act. These behaviours increase trust and confidence in the institution. The community expects employees and school council members to act in accordance with the values. Doing so is central to building and maintaining trust.

When school council members adopt the Code of Conduct and the values, it strengthens the school's capacity to operate effectively and to achieve its objectives.

The values have been adopted by the department and complement the professional standards set for teachers in the Code of Conduct and Ethics issued by the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

For staff and council members, behaving with integrity and respect in everyday decisions and actions goes to the heart of the community's trust in the school and the public education system.



Role of the president

The president has a strategic role in representing the vision, mission and purpose of the school.

As the chair of school council meetings, the president ensures that matters are discussed openly and that there is full participation of councillors at meetings. Collaborative discussions lead to better decisions.

The president's duties include:

- working towards a shared vision for the school
- participating in the four-year review cycle
- endorsing key planning and reporting documents on behalf of the council
- being a spokesperson and advocate for the council
- chairing meetings
- together with the principal, representing the school at public forums
- promoting the school and its principal to the community.

Following school council elections, the principal will inform the school community and the department of the successful candidates for council membership and the office-bearers. The principal will set up a department email account for the president to facilitate communication between department and the principal.

The president should access this account at least once a week for department communications and ensure that information that is relevant to council business is shared with council members. This account is also used to access the Strategic Planning Online Tool (SPOT), the platform used to document and endorse the School Strategic Plan, Annual Implementation Plan and Annual Report.

The principal and president each have their responsibilities, as outlined below.

The principal ...

- provides school council with timely advice about educational and other school related matters
- prepares the council's agenda in consultation with the president
- reports regularly to school council about the school's performance against the School Strategic Plan
- ensures school council decisions are acted on
- provides adequate support and resources for the conduct of school council meetings
- ensures the vice-president or a member of the council that is not an employee of the department presides at a council meeting, in the absence of the president
- communicates with the president about school council business
- ensures that new school council members are inducted
- ensures that the school council president's details are recorded against the school council president department email account
- provides the president with information on how to access their department email account
- with the president, is the school council's spokesperson and official representative on public occasions
- enacts other responsibilities as set out in legislation and the Ministerial Order 1280 Constitution of Government School Councils.

The school council president ...

- chairs council meetings
- ensures everyone has a say in meetings and that decisions are understood and recorded
- is a signatory to contracts, the School Strategic Plan, delegations and financial accounts and statements
- participates in the four-year school review as an active member of the core review panel
- endorses the school Pre-review Self-evaluation, terms of reference for school review, the school Annual Implementation Plan and Annual Report, and communicates the Annual Report to the school community
- presides at the annual public reporting meeting
- ensures school council and council members remain focused on improving student outcomes
- with the principal, is school council's spokesperson and official representative on public occasions
- casts a second and casting vote when school council votes are tied
- accesses email communications each week from the department through the president's department account, and communicates relevant information to school council members
- provides their details for the school registration process
- signs as a witness when the school's common seal is affixed to official documents.

School council is generally also involved in the school principal selection process. When principal selection occurs, a panel is formed to review applications, interview shortlisted applicants and recommend one or more applicants to the Secretary of the Department to employ.

The selection panel includes councillors and department staff. The president, or their nominee, is a member of the principal selection panel. The president represents the council on the selection panel. Principal selection panel members are provided with training.

The president, on request from the Regional Director, provides input to discussions when a principal's contract comes up for renewal. The president advises the school council of that input at the subsequent meeting of council.

Building relationships

The president needs to build strong working relationships with the principal, other school councillors and the school community. The president and the principal support each other in their respective roles.

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

- upon being elected, meet the principal to discuss key aspects of school council business
- develop a shared understanding of the school's direction and its priorities, as stated in the School Strategic 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.

To build relationships with school councillors, the president can:

- be a good listener and ensure all school councillors have the opportunity to be heard
- be willing to meet individual school councillors to understand their particular perspectives
- welcome and encourage new school councillors to be active participants at meetings
- delegate and share council tasks between members as appropriate.

The president can build relationships with the wider school community by:

- attending school events such as music concerts, art exhibitions and athletic sports and speaking with staff, students and families
- considering meeting local government officers and the local Member of Parliament, with the principal.

New school councillors are briefed on existing school issues and processes. The principal will provide new school councillors with a background information package, which may include:

- Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities
- School Strategic Plan
- Annual Implementation Plan
- Annual Report to the school community
- school council standing orders (if any)
- information about the department's values and ethical decision-making
- current school policies and whole of department policies applying to schools or where to access them
- a sample agenda
- a list of common education acronyms
- council members email addresses, with consent of the members
- a folder or binder in which to file council paperwork
- details of training and support available from the department including links to training and other resource material can be found at **Policy and Advisory Library (PAL), School Council – Training and Good Governance** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy.

5.2

Characteristics of an effective school council

Why is this topic important?

A strong, united school 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 president plays in an effective school council.

The importance of good governance

Good governance enables the school 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 president and individual school council members, supported by effective meeting and decision-making procedures.

Effective school councils are characterised by a mutual and respectful sharing of information, knowledge and ideas. There is a focus on open communication where members can exchange information, share experiences, express different perspectives, pose questions, clarify viewpoints, explore relevant research and develop a shared vision for the school. Good governance involves decisions based on accurate information, sound judgement and effective implementation.



What makes a school council effective?

An effective school council is one that:

- focuses on improving student learning outcomes and educational opportunities from a governance perspective
- involves the community in conversations about key educational issues and challenges
- is actively involved in the development of the School Strategic Plan
- promotes meaningful parent and community participation and actively seeks the views of its community
- has a clear understanding of its role 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 who trust and respect one another
- evaluates and communicates with the school community about its activities
- regularly reviews and evaluates its own performance using the department's online school council self-assessment tool
- appropriately delegates to individual members and subcommittees
- 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 to achieve the goals in the School Strategic Plan. For example, school council members could network with organisations outside the school in areas such as fundraising and facilities development.

The Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 set out certain legal requirements in relation to the operation of school council meetings. These requirements cannot be overridden by the standing orders determined by a school council. See the **Governance module** for a list of legal requirements and **School Council – Meetings** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-meetings/policy.

It is good practice for a school council to establish standing orders. Standing orders should be reviewed each year following completion of the election process. In addition to the legal requirements, school councils are encouraged to provide additional guidelines, which might cover agendas, meeting etiquette and length of meetings.

Roles of school council members

It is the responsibility of the principal and the president to ensure school council members understand their role.

There is no legal requirement for a school council to have a vice-president, but many do. The vice-president will chair meetings when the president is absent. The vice-president must not be a department employee or a student member of the council.

All school council members have a responsibility to:

- come prepared to contribute at meetings
- attend school events and seek to understand the school's operations
- support the president and the principal
- maintain effective financial governance and oversight of the school annual budget
- actively promote the school to the community
- comply with the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities and behavioural expectations set out in the department's values.

It is recommended that a school council elect a treasurer who is not an employee of the department.

School councillors should be advised at the first meeting of the new council (post the annual election process) about their financial responsibilities and the policies and procedures that are required to be followed.

The school council is responsible for overseeing the school's financial performance and ensuring all funds coming into the school are being properly spent and authorised. This information is outlined in the Improving School Governance (ISG) finance module.

An interactive, online, training mini-module, **Being a school council member**, is available as part of the department's online training. For further information, please see **School Council – Training and Good Governance** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy. School councillors can self-register to access the Interactive Online training through **The Big Canvas learning management system (LMS)** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/resources. The self-paced online training includes mini modules, videos and activities.

Delegations

The Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 allow school councils to delegate their powers and duties, however a school council cannot delegate any of its functions or powers in relation to the approval of the school budget or Annual Report.

There are a number of powers or functions a council may delegate to the principal, usually from the beginning of a school year, to assist in the efficient running of the school. A school council must generally obtain written approval from the Minister for Education to delegate a power or duty to a person or body other than the principal.

The delegation must be recorded in the minutes and in a register of delegations which must be kept by the council. For the delegations fact sheet and template, see **School Council – Powers and Functions** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-powers-and-functions/policy. The instrument of delegation (including terms and conditions of the delegation) must be signed by the president and delivered to the delegate (usually the principal).

The school council may revoke or amend a delegation in writing at any time. A person or body to whom a delegation has been made must provide a written report about any activities performed by the delegate, at each ordinary meeting of the school council.

Annual planning for school council business

Just as schools benefit from strategic and annual planning, so do school councils. The school council president can take a leadership role in planning the school council business for the year ahead. This begins with discussing school priorities with the principal and new council, following annual elections and appointment of office bearers.

From the discussion, an annual work plan can be developed, providing a month-by-month schedule of the business of council for that year.

The schedule may include:

- scheduled tasks that are required to be completed each year, such as the endorsement of the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) in the SPOT
- endorsement of the Annual Report, and providing a copy to the Secretary of the Department, by 30 April
- presentation of the Annual Report to the school community at the annual public reporting meeting
- significant events, including reviews or development of the School Strategic Plan (SSP)
- a schedule of policies due for review and a timeline that allows for community consultation and additional research, if required
- discussion and completion of the school council self-assessment tool annually, which can help to identify the strengths of members, and opportunities for further support, development and training
- consideration of the **Skills and Expertise Guide**, located in **School Council – Elections** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-elections/resources with respect to recruitment and development of the council.

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

Feature	Detail
An effective school council works together	The school council should be seen by all school council 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 actual, pecuniary or non-pecuniary conflicts of interest
School council offers strong support to the principal and school	School council members should ask searching questions and provide relevant, constructive feedback; however, they should avoid gossip and sharing negative opinions outside of council meetings
School council stays focused on its objectives and functions	School council members understand their responsibilities, as distinct from those of the principal, the teaching staff and the department
School council is led by a strong president	School council elects a president, who will have the respect of and who respects, the principal, the council and the community
An effective school council thinks strategically	School council decisions and actions reflect and support the future direction of the school
Real discussions are followed by real decisions	School council members attend meetings, having prepared carefully and are ready to contribute. Differences are left at the discussion table and decisions are acted upon promptly
School council builds trust in its community	School council develops and maintains a reputation of trust through its responsible actions and good communication

School council annual self-assessment

Self-assessments are an important process for reflecting on school council effectiveness. All councils, as boards of public entities, must have adequate procedures in place for assessing their own performance under the *Public Administration Act 2004*.

School council members will operate effectively when they have an understanding of governance roles, responsibilities and a consistent process for decision-making.

The president can take a leadership role in the review of and reflection on the effectiveness of the council as a group. The annual self-assessment process should identify areas of strength, and areas for improvement.

An online self-assessment tool has been designed by the department to assist school council presidents, principals and all council members to reflect on their roles and the effectiveness of the school council as a whole. The council as a group, can undertake the annual self-assessment, then discuss the results in small groups or as a team and develop an improvement plan.

Most school councils will identify some areas of focus. For example, they may agree that some council operational practices could be improved, or they may wish to build particular knowledge and capabilities by undertaking training.

As a result of the annual self-assessment, councils may review and revise their standing orders, their sub-committee structure and the effectiveness of their meetings. It is important that school councils and individual councillors work collaboratively and purposefully.

The department's self-assessment tool can be accessed through the **School Council Portal – Login required** at scp.educationapps.vic.gov.au or through **School Council – Training and Good Governance – Resources** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/resources.

5.3

How to run effective school council meetings

Why is this topic important?

Well-conducted meetings are critical to an effective and properly functioning school council. There must be at least eight meetings a year and at least one every term. The president, as the presiding officer or chair, is responsible for the conduct of the meetings.

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

- recognise the elements of an effective meeting
- confidently chair school council meetings.

Elements of an effective meeting

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

Effective and accountable decision-making in meetings requires:

- a clear articulation of how the school council conducts its business, which could be outlined in standing orders
- a carefully prepared agenda
- papers relevant to specific agenda items circulated in advance
- all members preparing adequately for the meeting
- frank and open discussion
- accurate and timely records of decisions and meeting minutes
- the ability and willingness to seek independent and external professional advice when necessary
- a subcommittee structure or working groups that meet regularly to support and enable the work of school council.

An interactive, online, training mini module, **Running effective meetings**, is available at **School Council – Training and Good Governance** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy. School councillors can self-register to access the Interactive Online training through **The Big Canvas learning management system (LMS)** at lms.learneryo.com/DETSC. The self-paced online training includes mini modules, videos and activities.

Who presides at a meeting?

The school council president must preside at school council meetings. If the president is unable to preside, the meeting must be conducted in the following manner:

- if a vice-president has been appointed by the school council, the vice-president must preside at the meeting if available
- if the school council has not appointed a vice-president, or the vice-president is unable to preside, the school council must decide on a member of the council, other than an employee of the department, or a student member, to preside

A department employee, including the principal, is ineligible to be school council president or chair a school council meeting. However, the principal does preside at the first and special meetings after the completion and declaration of the school council poll.

Decision-making

School council decisions are made by a majority of the members eligible to vote and present at the meeting, provided the majority are not department employees and not less than one half of the members currently holding office are present. This represents a quorum, which must be in place for each school council meeting.

All decisions of school council are voted upon. The numbers for and against should be recorded in the minutes. The principal is a voting member. Where votes are tied, the presiding member has a second and 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 school councillor may be present, and therefore vote, at a meeting by video conferencing or teleconferencing.



Setting the agenda

The principal, in consultation with the president, should set the council meeting agenda with enough time to distribute it to all members prior to the meeting, along with meeting papers, which may include reports or background material.

As executive officer of school council, it is the principal's responsibility to ensure school council members are suitably resourced and supported to adequately participate at meetings.

The agenda lists business that council will discuss during the meeting.

A simple agenda may include:

- welcome and apologies
- possible conflicts of interest
- minutes of the previous meeting (to be confirmed as accurate by vote)
- business arising from the minutes
- principal's report
- president's report
- reports from subcommittees, including finance subcommittee
- general business
- correspondence (incoming and outgoing)
- closing comments and date for the next meeting.

If a school council does not have subcommittees, the principal may introduce the finance and other reports.

Usually, principals ask members to submit items for general business ahead of the meeting so they can be included on the agenda. It is for the president 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 president 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 president should ask:

- does the item fit within a function of the school council?
- is the item operational (and thus a responsibility of the principal)?
- should the item be dealt with elsewhere?
- does the item warrant school council's time?



Chairing the meeting

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

- have a good understanding of the:
 - Ministerial Order 1280 Constitution of Government School Councils
 - Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities
 - Standing orders of council (if any)
- 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 thoughtfully addressed and on track. For this to occur, the chair needs to understand the powers of the chair and be willing to use them carefully to ensure that debate and discussions are focussed and to the point. Presidents have the authority to bring discussions to a conclusion and bring on a vote when they feel all members who have a view have had the opportunity to present their view
- ensure that no school councillor dominates a discussion and encourage all councillors to express an opinion
- before calling for a vote, summarise points made in the discussion objectively and impartially
- be prepared to delegate contentious or complicated matters to individuals or subcommittees 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 councillors know the date, time and venue of the next meeting before officially declaring the meeting closed
- ensure that the decisions of the council are correctly recorded. When council approves the minutes, the chair person 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, together with draft minutes from the previous meeting and any reports from the principal, president, finance or other subcommittees, to council members, ideally, no less than five business days before the meeting.

Minutes of the meeting

Accurate minutes should be made of every meeting, and of its subcommittees. Minutes form a record of the council's activities and focus on decisions and actions that need to be taken.

Minutes must be a fair and accurate record of the meeting and accepted as such by council members. Although minutes serve as a record of all decisions, the minutes are not public documents. A person does not have a right to access the minutes of a school council meeting or other documents or records of a school council under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*.

School councils should appoint a minute-taker at the beginning of each year. If this person is not a member of school council, they must act as a silent observer without voting rights. It is expected the minute-taker maintains confidentiality of meeting discussions.

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 president as soon as possible after a meeting for comment, and then distributed, by the principal, to all members of school council before the next meeting, where they are considered and confirmed.

The minutes should be recorded for future reference. Consideration should be given to ease of access when the minutes need to be provided for compliance evidence, such as the annual child safety training required for compliance with the Child Safe Standards, and assessed during the school's minimum standards compliance assessment.

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 school councillors. It is the president'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 individuals from dominating the meeting
- ensuring the matter is within the scope of the school council's powers, duties and functions
- 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 are made having regard to the students' best interests;
 - enhancing the educational opportunities of students at the school; and
 - ensuring the school and the school council complies with its legal obligations
- delegating the discussion to a subcommittee, 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 minimise tension
- being prepared to let an aggrieved member express their view, but then being prepared to close the debate
- reminding members of their obligations under the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities
- not taking sides and treating an individual's grievance as legitimate.

The president should be mindful of school council members acting contrary to the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities, which includes the Public Sector Values, or speaking against council decisions to members of the community, as this may bring the council or its decisions into disrepute. The principal and the president may need to meet the individual separately and remind them of their obligations under the Code of Conduct.

Department policy and guidance on school council functions is available at **School Council – Powers and Functions** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-powers-and-functions/policy.

An interactive, online, training mini module, **Reaching agreement and resolving conflicts**, is at **School Council – Meetings** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-meetings/guidance/interactive-online-training.

School councillors can self-register to access the interactive online training through **The Big Canvas learning management system (LMS)** at lms.learneyo.com/DETSC. The self-paced online training includes mini modules, videos and activities.

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, and has participated in the process, then the community is likely to offer greater support.

School 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 and duty of confidentiality

School council members are drawn from the key stakeholders of the school: parents, staff, students and the wider community. Confidentiality and the proper use of information is an important component of the Code of Conduct for school councillors.

As individuals, council members bring diverse views to the council and work together to develop a shared vision for the improvement of student outcomes. School council decisions can affect the school and its stakeholders. Therefore, decisions should be communicated to, and understood, by the community, at the appropriate time.

The deliberations and different points of view expressed by individual council members should not be communicated to the community. Council members must feel confident that their views will be treated confidentially by council members so that they feel comfortable to canvas their views and contribute to the decision-making process.

Councillors must respect privacy and use their discretion and good judgement when dealing with school council information. For example: council members should not discuss who said what, or what the different views of councillors may have outside of the council meeting. Private information from council meetings that could identify a staff member, student or their family must not be discussed, such as, information that could identify applicants in a principal selection process. The school council president and principal can provide guidance on any matter and the need for confidentiality, if required.

School councillors are expected to use the information that they gain in the course of their council responsibilities for its intended purpose only. Members must use the information at council meetings to guide their discussions and decision-making. They must not use the information, including privileged or sensitive information, to obtain an advantage for themselves or another person or to cause concern or loss of the community's trust.

Minutes should be taken at every 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, and therefore are not subject to Freedom of Information laws.

The principal, as executive officer of the school council, should keep the community informed about the operations, or decisions 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
- digital communications
- direct mail to families
- emails to families and students.

School councils should be wary of “word-of-mouth” communication or using third parties to broadcast decisions.

Another opportunity for the community to be informed of school council activities is at the public reporting meeting that 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 school council must present the Annual Report and, if council accounts have been audited, a copy of the audited accounts must also be provided.

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 president as spokesperson

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

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

- at information nights for prospective students and their families. The president may be called upon to explain the role of school council and its activities – and to seek expressions of interest from parents willing to join council
- at graduation ceremonies or major fundraising events. The president may take this opportunity to thank staff and 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 president is a key asset for the school in engaging with the community.

Consultation with the community

School council is required to gather information and consider the views of the school community for the purpose of making significant decisions related to the school and its students.

School council should be prepared to consult with the school community and as needed, with the local community. There are some issues, such as the student dress code, on which the school community must be consulted.

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

Consultation is an important way to demonstrate that:

- community opinions, ideas and contributions 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 or other mechanisms for providing feedback and ideas allow interested community members to contribute to decision-making.

In planning a forum or focus meeting, ensure that all voices can be heard, and consider use of interpreters/translators and protocols to enable full participation.

Other ways of consulting the community may include:

- inviting individuals to a council meeting to provide information or expertise to assist the school council
- requests for input, feedback or ideas via email or other communication channels.

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

School council meetings are ordinarily open to the school community and conducted according to standard meeting requirements as described in the standing orders. Visitors or observers can be present at school council meetings with the agreement of the principal and a decision of council. Visitors can request to speak, but must do so through the person chairing the council (usually the president).

Engaging the community

Consultation provides members of the school community with an opportunity to provide input into the decision-making process of school council.

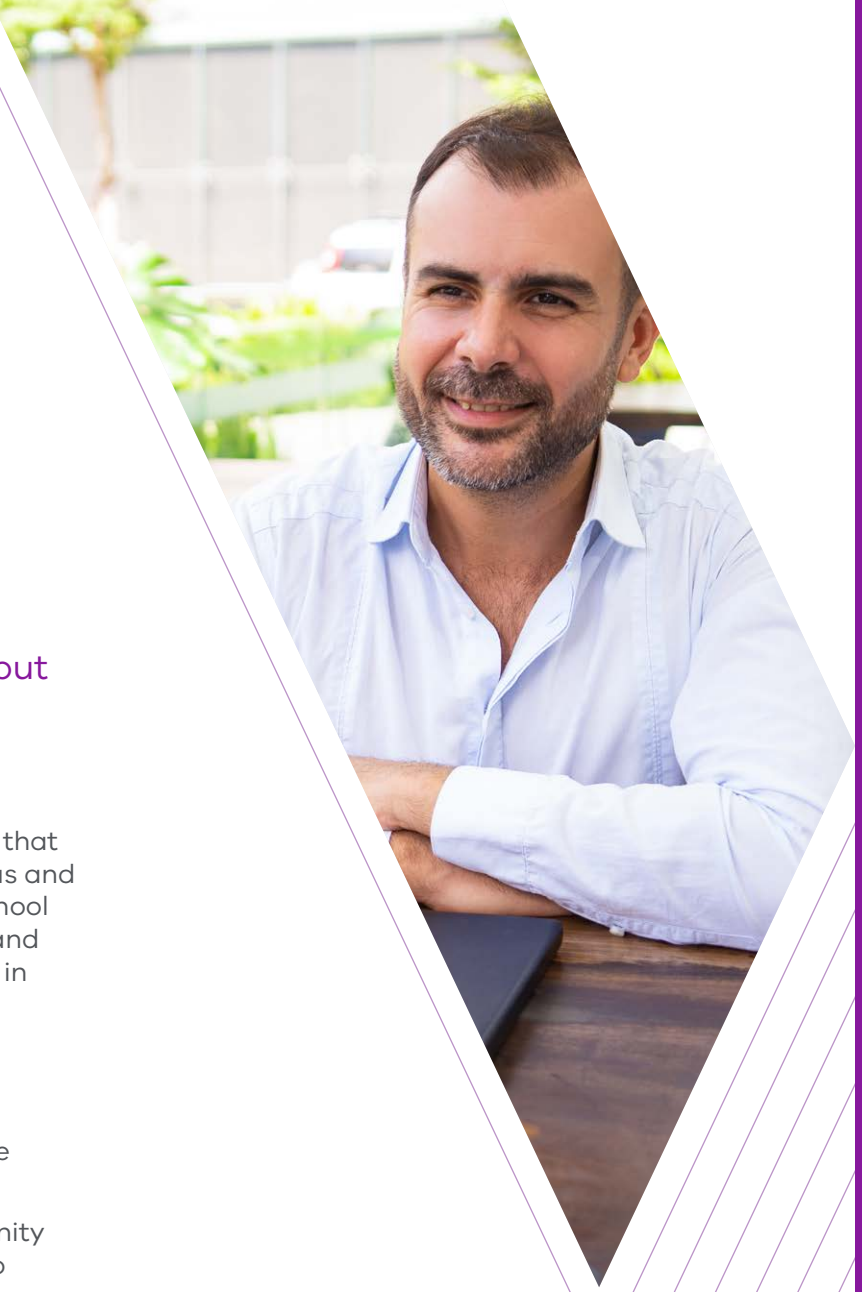
However, it can sometimes mean that only the vocal few have their ideas and opinions heard. On key issues, school council should seek direct input and engagement from its community in addition to consultation.

This approach to community engagement can be extended to the president 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.

An interactive, online, training mini module, **Community engagement**, is available at **School Council – Training and Good Governance** in the **Interactive Online Training System (LMS)**, at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/resources.

School councillors can self-register to access the interactive online training through **The Big Canvas learning management system (LMS)** at lms.learneyo.com/DETSC. The self-paced online training includes mini modules, videos and activities.



Addressing concerns and complaints

A president 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 council, then the matter should be brought to the attention of the school council. Ask the complainant to put their concern in writing and address it to the school council. The complaint should be discussed at a council meeting. The principal as the executive officer 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 regional office
- for complex complaints advice may be sought from the School Operations and Governance Unit or the relevant regional office. Contact details are provided under 'Support for school councillors'
- if the complaint or concern relates to child safety, the school councillor should immediately notify the principal or school leadership
- for allegations of improper or corrupt conduct, or fraud, contact the **Fraud and Corruption Control Unit** on **03 7022 0121** or email the Fraud and Corruption Control Unit fraud.control@education.vic.gov.au
- for independent reporting of allegations of improper or corrupt conduct contact the **Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission** on **1300 735 135** or email IBAC at info@ibac.vic.gov.au.

Many complaints arise from miscommunication or lack of communication. A culture of respectful and appropriate communication from the school 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 president must ensure that confidentiality and privacy is maintained at all times.

The department requires schools to develop a policy and procedure to address parent complaints. This policy should be developed by the principal in collaboration with parents and the school community and be consistent with the department's **parent complaints policy**. For more information, see **Complaints – Parents** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/complaints/policy.

Managing conflict on council

School councillors must abide by the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities and work together in the best interests of the school, including:

- assisting in the efficient governance of the school
- ensuring that the council's decisions affecting students are made having regard to the best interests of the students as a primary consideration
- enhancing the educational opportunities of students at the school and
- ensuring the school council adheres to all legal requirements.

The policy **School Council — Conduct and Conflict of Interest** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-conduct/policy provides information and advice on the Code of Conduct and managing conflict on council should it arise. In an environment where mutual trust and respect prevail, conflict can be a positive force. It can encourage people to find creative solutions, clarify an issue, increase the involvement of members, encourage growth, and strengthen relationships. However, conflict or misconduct can divert energy from the group, compromise morale and create suspicion and disharmony.

Support for school councillors

The School Operations and Governance Unit (SOGU) of Schools and Regional Services provides advice and guidance to school councils on a range of governance issues. Councillors can contact **SOGU** directly by email at school.council@education.vic.gov.au for information and advice.

Councillors can also contact their regional office for information and advice.

School council training

The department offers a range of free comprehensive training to school councils of Victorian government schools. The training is based on the five modules of the **Improving School Governance (ISG) materials: Governance, Strategic Planning, Finance, Policy and Review** and **School Council President**.

There is also an induction video for school councillors and additional online training modules on effective meetings, conflict resolution and reaching agreement, elections and succession planning, community engagement and being a school councillor.

The ISG school council training suite is free of cost to school councils of Victorian government schools and can be accessed on the department's website **School Council – Training and Good Governance** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy.

Facilitated virtual/face-to-face training

The facilitated virtual or face-to-face training is based on four modules of the **Improving School Governance (ISG) materials: Governance, Strategic Planning, Finance** and **School Council President**. Training is accessed by contacting **Synergistiq** on **03 9946 6801** or email sct@synergistiq.com.

Interactive online training

School council members can also access an interactive online training program featuring videos and activities on all five ISG training modules, including the Policy and Review module. Additional training mini modules include; effective meetings, conflict resolution and reaching agreement, elections and succession planning, community engagement and being a school councillor.

Online training can be accessed individually or in small groups, at a time and place convenient to participants. Access to the Interactive online learning is gained through **The Big Canvas Learning Management System (LMS)** at lms.learneyo.com/DETSC. This link is located in **School Council – Training and Good Governance** at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy.

Training can be completed as a whole module or in part, participants can bookmark and return to a module at a later time. A certificate can be downloaded on completion of a module.

Resource links

Further information, related policies and advice can be located on the department's Policy and Advisory Library (PAL) at www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal including:

Annual Implementation Plan (AIP)
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/annual-implementation-plan/policy

Complaints – Parents
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/complaints/policy

Principal Selection
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/principal-selection/overview

School Council – Composition and Office Bearers
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-composition-and-office-bearers/policy

School Council – Conduct and Conflict of Interest
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-conduct/policy

School Council – Liability and Legal Proceedings
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-liability/policy

School Council – Meetings
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-meetings/policy

School Council – Powers and Functions
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-powers-and-functions/policy

School Council – Subcommittees
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-subcommittees/policy

School Council – Training and Good Governance
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-council-training/policy

School Strategic Plan
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-strategic-plan/policy

Values – Department and VPS Values for School Employees
www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/values-department-vps-school-employees/overview

Further information

Education and Training Reform Act 2006 – Victorian Legislation
legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/education-and-training-reform-act-2006

Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017
legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/statutory-rules/education-and-training-reform-regulations-2017

School Policy Templates Portal – Login required
edugate.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edrms/keyprocess/cp/Pages/home.aspx?Redirect=1

Strategic Planning Online Tool (SPOT) – Login required
apps.edustar.vic.edu.au/spot

Code of conduct for directors of Victorian public entities – Victorian Public Sector Commission
vpsc.vic.gov.au/ethics-behaviours-culture/codes-of-conduct/code-of-conduct-for-directors-of-victorian-public-entities

