



# *Parent Engagement Consultants Group*

## *School Council Newsletter*

*September 2015, Volume 1*

### **ONTARIO SCHOOL COUNCILS AND PARENTS – WELCOME TO YOUR NEWSLETTER**

Our organization, Parent Engagement Consultants Group was formed to provide services to parents in Ontario schools. Our main focus is on school councils. There are many organizations that support parent engagement in Ontario; however, few that focus on school council operations, involvement and skill building.

We welcome you to this newsletter which will be provided free of charge to all school boards in Ontario, and we encourage you to distribute it to all parents, specifically those on your school councils.

The content will focus on skill building subjects as well as the celebration of school council achievements as a way of networking and idea sharing. To this end, we invite you to submit your articles and photos of activities, challenges and celebrations of your council.

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In addition, a page will be devoted to Frequently Asked Questions, which is a council member's opportunity to submit a question and receive a response. This section is necessary because so many people have the same questions and have to do their own research to get answers, this page will reduce the effort needed to get information.

We invite you to register to receive these newsletters directly by emailing:

[info@parentengagementconsultantsgroup.com](mailto:info@parentengagementconsultantsgroup.com).

## What Is the Key to Parent Engagement in Schools?

One of the things that experience has taught us about increasing parent engagement in schools is that it cannot be "taught". It must come from the passion of a parent that is inspired by a number of things that happen at the school.

Perhaps it is the welcoming feeling a parent gets when they register their child at the school. This leads to the question, "what role can I play at the school to contribute to the success of the school and assist the students?" Perhaps a very passionate school council chair talks directly to some parents about the great experience they are having being a school leader on the council. Let new parents know how welcomed and how valued their input would be.

Sometimes parents become involved in the school because there are specific items that concern them at the school: parking safety, lack of play area or structure, supervision in the yard, overcrowding, school closings, etc. Rather than allow these items to foster negative attitude around the school, acknowledge that these are real concerns and welcome these parents to the school council to raise these common issues for discussion and to gain more information. Perhaps participating in advocating these issues to the school board will give everyone a sense that they have a valuable role in making a difference at their school beyond just identifying these concerns to the Principal.

For years school boards have addressed the area of parent engagement by running events, providing speakers and doing training workshops by staff. In my experience, the absolute best person to speak on this subject and to train school councils are parents who have had years of background in the elementary, secondary, local board and provincial level. We know that there are rules and regulations that school councils need to be aware of. Presenting these in a way that can be taken back and used immediately by a council has the single biggest impact on increasing membership. A parent who has learned the ropes by facing the challenges and overcoming them can be the biggest inspiration to school council members.

We have just completed a ten-month series of school council training workshops. Attendance increased steadily month after month and soon it was not just parents attending; Principals and Superintendents began to attend as well. What led to this success was the format; with half the session focused on specific training by parents who were able to discuss how the topic (i.e. school planning, budgeting, understanding the school learning plan, meeting ethics and many more) from many different perspectives.

These sessions are relevant to parents who are new to the public school system, parents who have been on councils for years and now understand they need a lot more skills and information to fulfill their roles on the council to the best of their ability, as well as very experienced parents who have been council members for years. Besides the technical training, each session featured almost an hour of group work on the subject of the night generating new school partnerships and school council members feeling the support of other councils in their board. It also brought together councils in the same neighbourhood to discuss how the topic of the night might be something they can host joint meetings on and develop new school relationships. This type of workshop serves to inform and increase parent engagement throughout a school board.

Parent engagement for other community members has to be designed to suit the school culture. Largely the families of the school community determine the culture. Different cultures require varying ideas about how to engage parents in the school. What would it take to get them to take ideas and make them work at home? Parents may be the ones that will be the most successful in helping in this area. School councils could work with the administration and staff to create a monthly idea on how a parent can interact with their child to increase their learning each month. This could be something fun that brings the whole family together. The council could send out a monthly newsletter with this type of activity included and use this as an opportunity to invite parents to join them at a meeting and bring ideas they think would be good for the next month.

A community that feels they make a tangible contribution to the success of the school is the true key to PARENT ENGAGEMENT! Make all volunteers feel valued by respecting their voices at meetings, their contributions to fundraising activities and most of all for working with their children at home to increase student achievement.

Each issue of this newsletter will feature a new idea for increasing parent engagement in school. If you would like to contribute some successful ideas that have worked for you please send them along and we will include them in this newsletter.

Written by: Theresa Pastore  
Parent Engagement Consultant

## THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is often seen as a formality simply to conduct the election of school council members for the school year: a task to be completed as quickly as possible at the beginning of the school year. In fact, it is a great vehicle to increase parent involvement on the school council.

Rather than holding the AGM within the first 15 – 20 days of school, consider holding it closer to 25 – 30 days following the first day of school. Use this time to speak to parents, especially those new to the school and promote the positive experience of being a member of the school council. The curriculum night is an excellent time to have a table with school council members present to speak with parents on the accomplishments of your council last year and to provide information on the valuable role of the council in partnering with the administration to improve the academic experience of all students in the school. If you can create interest among parents, a large part of your work is already a success. Ask those interested in the school council to attend the AGM to hear more and to consider nominating himself or herself as a voting member.

To make the AGM more valuable to those in attendance, consider having a speaker that will be relevant to the school community. Some of the most successful AGM's have included speakers such as the local public health nurse to provide information on healthy eating (school lunches, why the brain operates better with proper nutrition, etc.), the local public library representative to provide information on their programs and events for families, the community police representative to speak on safety and the school bus company to provide a talk on bus safety (this is important not only for those who use the bus every day, but, for all parents whose children may go on a school bus on a field trip). If possible, a teacher or two might speak on what will take place in their classrooms during the new school year, as this will usually bring out parents.

If your school struggles to engage parents, you might consider bringing in a keynote speaker to present on the value of an involved parent in increasing

*Watch for a new brochure from Parent Engagement Consultants Group titled "The Role of the School Council" which will provide a tool to engage parents and promote the value of partnering with a school.*

## THE AGM – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is it possible to conduct the school council election at the first meeting of the council each year?

The first formal gathering of parents is usually the Annual General Meeting. It must be clear that this meeting is for the purpose of electing school council members. Separate minutes must be kept for the AGM, which record the election results. Many councils move directly into their first meeting of the year immediately following the AGM.

Are executive positions elected at the AGM?

No. The AGM is to elect the voting Members of the Council. Executive positions are elected by the voting members of the school council at the first meeting of the council (which is often held immediately following the AGM).

Is it beneficial to conduct the AGM immediately in the new school year?

It is actually preferable to hold the AGM later in the month of September as it gives the Principal and school council members a chance to encourage new parents to participate in the elections.

My school has only had two parents on school councils for years. Why is there a need to change?

While it may seem easier to operate with a small group, there are many reasons to work to increase participation on your council, including:

- It is valuable when making decisions to have the input of more of the school community, especially in the area of spending money raised in the school.
- It makes the council less about personal opinions and issues and more about the whole community.
- It changes perception that the council is a “club” for a select few.
- It addresses concern that the council is basically the Principal and a couple of parents who are “friends” of theirs.
- More is accomplished when there are more people to take on the work.
- larger councils demonstrate that parents are valued partners and welcomed at the school.
- If the school faces challenges/changes that will affect the parents through their children i.e.. additions, school move, closure, etc. having a large parent base that supports the administration is an asset.

## TIMING OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**SEPTEMBER 8, 2015**  
First day of school

**SEPTEMBER 15, 2015**  
Letter to Community re: AGM

**OCTOBER 5, 6, 7, 2015**  
AGM / School Councils Elections

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- 1. When electing school council co-chairs, can they form a team and run together? If there are other parents running independently to be co-chairs, do they have the right to run as a team?***

Regulation 612 is silent on this item. The concern with people running as teams for elections is that if one has to step down you could consider the co-chairs position vacant since they ran on the basis of there being two specific people leading the council. The logical process for filling this vacancy would be to vote in two new members to act as co-chair.

This question demonstrates the need for clear by-laws which set out the process to elect and replace executive members.

***Please submit your questions to [info@parentengagementconsultantsgroup.com](mailto:info@parentengagementconsultantsgroup.com)***

## THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

### Regulation 612 Process

-An election shall be held during the first 30 days of each school year, on a date determined by the chair after consulting with the Principal.

-The Principal of the school shall give 14 days written notice of the date, time and location of the election to every parent with a child enrolled in the school. This notice may be given by providing notice to the parent's child to deliver or by posting the notice in a location accessible to parents.

-A person is eligible to be elected if they are a parent/guardian of a child at the school, providing they are not employed at the school. If they are employed by the board elsewhere, they must declare this prior to the election.

-The election will be conducted by secret ballot.

-The number of parents to be elected shall be established by the council by-laws or as the board establishes.

-Following the election, the Principal shall inform the community who has been elected to the council.

### Getting the Message Out

As with all things, communication is the most important tool in getting parents to attend the Annual General Meeting and consider becoming part of the school council. Consider some of the following suggestions:

-Send a letter home to parents promoting the benefits of parent engagement.

-Communicate the accomplishments of the current year school council to let parents know what a valuable part they can play in the school.

-Post messages on the parent bulletin board in the school about the meeting including the speaker that will take part.

-Dedicate a portion of the website to the Annual General Meeting.

-Have the Principal speak about the important role of the school council at curriculum night and encourage parents to run for election.

-Speak to new Junior Kindergarten parents at orientation about becoming involved in the school council. Often the most enthusiastic parent members can come from the earliest grade.

### Sample Agenda Annual General Meeting

Welcome

Principal Address

Chair Address

Annual Summary of Activities Report from previous year's council

Annual Financial Report from previous year

Speaker/Presenter

Review Nominations

Request any self-nominations from the floor

Election Committee conducts election

Adjournment

(Excellent time to serve refreshments and get to know new council members)

**\*\*\*Providing child minding will help encourage participation at the AGM. Contact your local secondary school for students who need community hours to provide care.**

## **PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOL WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT – THEN WHY DOES IT REDUCE**

When you review any literature on the effects of parent engagement in schools, the main points include increased student achievement, more regular attendance at school, greater graduation rates and increased confidence. At what time are these factors more important than in secondary school when our children are facing their most challenging times in school and are working towards their graduation from the secondary level while preparing for the next step in their lives.

Unfortunately, research shows that parent engagement at school and at home declines at this stage in a child's education.

It is sometimes a difficult time for parents to stay involved because children begin a new chapter in their lives where they want to be more independent and often don't want to have their parents present at the school. They will tell us that they are embarrassed if their friends see their parent at school or their parent is actively involved with their teachers. This is a time when we have to put aside what our children may say and GET INVOLVED.

Often, when a parent becomes involved in the school council, the positive work of the council and its support of the students in the school changes the child's concern about having their parent volunteering as part of the council. Whether the school council funds a trip, provides a speaker for the student body or invests in new computer equipment for the tech lab; their work is recognized as a valuable asset by the student body and can be something their child feels proud of. It can be something as simple as providing tables of treats on special occasions like Halloween, Valentine's Day or Christmas.

It is a time to engage the parent community in events which include topics like "supporting your child's transition to high school", "building academic confidence in an adolescent", "beyond secondary school, the path to work, college and university", etc.

It is important for school council leaders to communicate with the parent community the message that parent involvement is crucial. Ongoing communication and regular agenda items for school council meetings providing tips for parents on how to effectively engage with their children in areas of homework assistance, supporting their child by attending school events, participating in teacher conferences, how to support their child's goals, how children learn differently etc., will assist in increasing parent involvement at your secondary school.

Researcher Simon (1999) found that although study habits, attitudes and behaviour patterns may be set by a student's senior year an adolescent's success is influenced by his or her family even through the last year of high school. This research aligns with many other studies of a similar nature and signifies the importance of parents staying engaged in their children's education through to post-secondary school.

Research also indicates that the same barriers to parents being involved in elementary school continue to be true in the secondary panel. Low income, single parent, lower educated, language challenged families engage at a much lower percentage than other

parents. The challenge for every secondary school council is to find creative ways to address these issues and work in conjunction with the school administrators to present strategies for parents to become educational partners with their children and the school. It is difficult to determine how to get parents into the school so that you can begin spreading the message about the importance of parent involvement. Perhaps consider speaking at an event such as a school performance or parent-teacher interview evening. You may consider working with the school administration and teachers to host a multi-cultural night with families providing a dish and information on their home country. This is an excellent opportunity for the students to learn and for parents to meet on a more casual basis. It is a great time for current school council members to circulate and discuss upcoming meetings or events that will focus on issues that are a priority for the school community.

The message that our children need us even more in secondary school will be one that may surprise many parents, but hopefully will encourage them to participate more actively in their children's education and school.

### **The Importance of School Councils During Labour Disruption**

The province of Ontario may be facing some difficult challenges as the school year begins in September. There has been much talk about a strike or limited strike actions by our teachers throughout the province.

This is an extremely important time for school council leaders to stay involved with the parent community. Providing support and keeping the message about engagement positive is vital during a time of uncertainty.

School council members may consider some of the following tips to accomplish the above:

- Do not talk politics – keep conversation focused on the importance of the school community staying in touch despite any disruption in labour.
- Put together a phone tree with parents numbers and let them know you will be contacting them to keep them informed of when the council will meet again.
- Prepare a newsletter, including an article from the Principal updating parents on the status of teacher negotiations. Include in this newsletter some tips on how parents can work with their children at home during any disruption in the school year.
- Ask the Principal if you are able to host a parent meeting at the school for council members from the previous year and any that might be interested in participating in the upcoming year.
- Encourage parents to organize "play dates" for the younger students to keep the community interaction going.
- Network with other school councils and share ideas on how to keep the school community vibrant.
- STAY POSITIVE!!!!

# Organizations that support parent engagement and school councils in Ontario



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**Watch for upcoming issues which will include articles on:**

**Regulation 612, Roles and Responsibility of Council Members, Running Effective Meetings, Developing a three year plan, Conflict Resolution, Members Code of Ethics, Fundraising Fundamentals, Writing and Executing a successful PRO grant, School Partnerships etc.**

**Guest contributors will include The College of Teachers, Canadian Parents for French, The Learning Partnership, Georgian College, Roy Fernandes and Young People's Theatre on inquiry based learning and many more.**

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