

Children

Benefit from Parents and Schools Working Together

*The best school is one where
parents, educators, staff, and
school administrators have a
shared vision and work diligently
together to achieve it.*

by
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Children are at the core of everything in education. The public education system benefits – and our children benefit – when parents are recognized as a valuable resource forming mutually-respectful relationships with the school administration. When we put our collective talents together, we can achieve so much more for our communities, our schools, and our children. This is true during a regular school year and becomes essential within a pandemic environment.

As president of the British Columbia Parent Advisory Council (BCCPAC), I truly enjoy getting to meet and know so many school parent advisory leaders. Before COVID grounded us all, I would often be invited to school districts to discuss the importance of PACs (Parent Advisory Councils) and DPACs (District Parent Advisory Councils), and their role as stakeholders. Although I no longer travel, I still enjoy meeting PAC and DPAC leaders and parents virtually, and hearing about their districts and the relationships between the parents of the school and the school administrative team.

BC is a very diverse province, and the disproportions between school districts can be glaring. I've had the pleasure of speaking with PAC Chairs whose schools enrolled fewer than 100 students, and to some that have populations of more than 1,500 students. Inevitably, conversations with PACs come down to the satisfaction they have regarding their relationship with their school administrator(s). The basis of that relationship rests on three questions:

- 1. Does the school administrator understand the importance of a strong engaged PAC?**
- 2. Does the school administrator energetically work at maintaining a strong relationship with PAC?**
- 3. Does the school administrator believe in the importance of regular communication outside of scheduled PAC meetings?**

PACs are often described as bridges between schools and parents. Although there is some truth to that, I believe we are all part of the same education community. Parents should be providing advice on the development of both short and long term school goals. Parents, teachers, and school administration play an important role in teaching positive values and attitudes. These are an important part of a child's education and can be instilled more effectively when parents, teachers, and school administrators are working together. We want your students and our children to be knowledgeable, and to also be endowed with a sense of responsibility and respect for self, for others, and for their community and beyond.

PACs and school administrators must focus on ways to nurture all students, helping to improve their learning environment and ensuring that the school is thriving. When we put our collective talents together, we can achieve so much more for our school and for our children. It is our mutual obligation to give them everything they need to be happy, healthy, and caring citizens.

To ensure there is a welcoming school climate for parents, school administrators need to encourage and maintain regular interaction with the PAC. Supporting parent engagement is more than a courtesy: it is one of the best ways to create a positive learning environment. To create a school community built on relationships, school staff need to ask parents how they understand parent engagement and then ask how best to nurture it so that there is willingness among parents to involve themselves in multiple aspects of the school community. If school administrators don't make time for parent partnerships, then they are limiting their school's capacity for growth. The school administration must work with PACs to develop a strong sense of community that is based upon caring relationships. Relationships are formed when parents are involved in all aspects of school activities. PACs and administration must take the time to not only meet

with each other, but to listen carefully to what each other has to say. The PAC, as a stakeholder, should be seen as an integral part of the school especially when planning and decision-making are occurring.

In addition to the ever-growing list of administrative duties and responsibilities, communication is a fundamental component of the bond that unites a PAC and school staff. I remember one PAC Chair telling me how her school's Principal phones her a couple of times a month just to do what they call a 'check in'. The Principal does not have an agenda for the phone call, but is basically ensuring that the lines of communication are open. The Chair told me that most of the time these calls are short, but they let her know how important the relationship is to the Principal.

I heard from another parent who talked about how their Principal will call, rather than wait for the next PAC meeting, when there is educational news available from the school district or Ministry of Education. The Principal will take the time to explain how the news might affect their school. The information will be revisited at the next PAC meeting to ensure that everyone fully understands the ramifications, but it is the personal touch that assures the group that the PAC leader and the Principal are working well together.

Many parent leaders have shared with me of how hard Principals and PACs have worked to develop relationships that go beyond meeting once or twice a month. Parents shared how, at their schools, there are always activities designed to bring the PAC and the staff closer.

Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

In addition to forming working relationships with school administrative teams, PACs are recognized in the *School Act*, Section 8, as the collective voice of

parents in the school community and in their role of supporting parents, they have the legislative right to advise school administration on any matter relating to public education. **PACs can:**

- Advise school staff/board of education regarding any matter relating to the school or provincial education
- Advise the school Principal and staff on parents' views and feedback about school programs, policies, plans and activities
- Organize PAC activities and provide parent education
- Encourage parent involvement at the school level and support programs that promote parental involvement
- Communicate with parents and promote co-operation between home and school, providing support for the education of children
- Assist parents by helping them to understand the educational system, and advocating on their behalf; advocacy issues may involve DPACs.
- Act on behalf of parents and students
- Provide financial support for PAC goals

PACs are required to have Bylaws under which they operate (self-governing) and they are composed of, run and managed by parents. This point is non-negotiable, and is key for both parents and school staff to understand. If, for example, the PAC undertakes a fundraising initiative, the funds raised (and the funds received by the PAC from Community Gaming Grants) are the PACs' to manage, distribute and report on. PACs will consult with school staff to ensure school processes and procedures are followed, and any item purchased for the school becomes the property of the school.

All parents/guardians/caregivers with children registered in the school are members of the PAC by default. Each PAC has an Executive, per the PAC's Bylaws, who have been elected by their peers to represent them and to conduct business on their behalf. The PAC must represent all students and families with inclusion and equity, regardless of which parents – and how many parents – are elected to the Executive.

PAC meetings are for parents of children enrolled at the school. School administrators and staff representatives should be welcomed to attend PAC meetings as regular invited non-voting guests; often their input and insight is invaluable to the discussions. Similarly, PAC executives should be meeting regularly with their administration team. PACs may request to present at staff meetings when deemed necessary to share information. Working together and sharing information is key to building and maintaining this relationship for the benefit of students.

PACs communicate with their parent community through meetings where issues of importance regarding their school are discussed. PACs will then advise school administration of the parent position, expecting that this information will become an important part of the decision-making process. In addition to regular meetings, the PAC will also communicate with the parent body through newsletters, telephone, email, and websites so that all parents have the opportunity to provide input regarding school decisions.

Many within the education sector do not realize that PACs are neither required nor obligated to fundraise. The practice of fundraising began many years ago, and today there is a heavy reliance and an expectation for the practice by both parents and schools. It is a major concern to parents that there continues to be both 'have and have-not schools', and the resulting inequity. It is important for district administration to

understand that not all PACs have the same ability to raise funds.

There are many things a PAC can and should do that isn't connected to fundraising, and aligns with their role under the *School Act*. During this particular school year, parents are relying on their PAC to keep them informed and updated: they are the link between administration and parents. Some parents will always feel more comfortable sharing their concerns with PAC members. It is often the role of the PAC to act as a conduit and bring forward issues that parents have shared. A well-functioning PAC that has a solid working relationship with the administration and staff will in turn benefit the school community.

District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC)

District PAC (DPAC) is the official representative body of parents/guardians of children in a school district. The *School Act* provides DPACs the power to advise the board of education respecting any matter relating to education within the district, including educational policy. As a district stakeholder, DPAC – like the other stakeholders – should have representation on all standing committees, and on any advisory committees, ad-hoc committees, or working groups.

Recognized in the *School Act*, Section 8, DPACs are required to have Bylaws under which they operate (self-governing) and are composed of, run and managed by parents. DPAC bylaws provide direction on the level of participation of invited guests, and what to do if a trustee or school district employee is also a parent at a school. The DPAC is comprised of elected parent representatives from district PACs and serves as an umbrella organization for local PACs; all PACs in the district are – by default – members of the DPAC, but many DPACs require member PACs to register with them.

DPACs can:

- Assist parents in forming/dissolving a PAC in every school
- Assist member PACs and parents in obtaining information and communicating with district personnel
- Help parents navigate the school system locally
- Advocate for greater parental involvement in the education system
- Support and encourage PACs and parents in accessing the school system at all levels by providing regular forums for the exchange of ideas and information to ensure that public education serves the best interests of all students

DPAC meetings are for PAC representatives and parents of children enrolled in public schools in the district. District administrators and trustees should be welcomed to attend DPAC meetings as regular invited non-voting guests. Similarly DPAC executives should be meeting regularly with their senior district teams. DPAC can – and should – set up meetings with whomever they determine is appropriate within the district.

DPACs communicate directly with their PAC parent community, gathering and discussing issues of importance regarding their district (items such as Strategic Planning, District Budget, Long Range Facilities Plan) in order to adequately advise those that influence their district decisions. In addition to DPAC meetings, communication may also be accomplished through surveys, newsletters, email, and websites so that all PAC parents have the opportunity for input.

It's to the advantage of the local PACs and their parent communities to be connected with their DPAC, both

electronically and through engagement. The DPAC needs to communicate directly with its PAC members and parent community and, for that, parents need to provide contact details to their PAC. This means that if individuals don't provide email or other contact information to their DPAC/PAC, neither the DPAC nor the PAC is able to communicate directly with PAC parents.

A solid DPAC with the engagement and support of its local PACs will benefit students and the school district.

Provincial Parent Advisory Council (BCCPAC)

BCCPAC is a non-partisan, registered non-profit charity established in 1922. We are governed by a volunteer Board of Directors elected annually by our membership which consists of DPACs and PACs who pay an annual fee, and through which we represent the parents/guardians/caregivers of more than 565,000 children in provincial public schools. As the provincially mandated voice of parents in public schools, we have the authority to get involved and to share concerns directly with the Minister of Education and Ministry staff.

BCCPAC is the provincial voice of parents on K-12 public education and related issues, and we directly support DPAC and PAC members and individual parents. We promote, support and advance meaningful parent participation throughout the public education system in order to advocate for the success of all students; and, through our membership, promote leadership, communication, cooperation, and representation in British Columbia at the school, school district and provincial level.

We advocate for systemic changes at the provincial table. BCCPAC sits at that table alongside our education partners — The BC School Trustees

Association (BCSTA), The BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA), The BC School Business Officials Association (BCASBO), The BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA), The BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF), The Canadian Union of Public Employees, BC (CUPE BC), Metis Nation BC (MNBC) and the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) — and the provincial government. BCCPAC has a credible and respected voice, and is uniquely positioned to ensure that the parent perspective is heard loudly and clearly. We communicate and meet regularly with the Ministry of Education and our education partners.

This year, and for the coming year, parent advocacy and advocacy for school-aged children has never been more important. The parent/guardian/caregiver perspective at the provincial table has been critical during the pandemic and the return to school. We are the only provincial group that is 100% dedicated to parents and their children in public school. All other education partners represent their members who are employees in the system: that is their primary mandate. In all cases, parents engaged in their school, district or provincial PAC are volunteers who give their time for their community, and who do not receive any remuneration.

There is ample research to support the importance of parent involvement in schools. Parent involvement is associated with a wide range of outcomes, such as improved student learning and a positive community support for the school. By working together, parent advisory councils and school administration can best meet the needs of our students.

