CHAPTER 11

Parent and Community Engagement – Working with School Councils, Parent Involvement Committees, and Communities

Education is a shared responsibility. Trustees are part of a team that includes parents, guardians, students, teachers and other board staff, community agencies, interest groups, and the provincial government and its agencies.

The involvement of parents and community members in the education system enriches the learning environment and directly contributes to student achievement and well-being. Active community involvement also helps to create strong, democratically vibrant communities.

School boards can promote a healthy partnership with parents and the community by:

- Ensuring schools and the school system are accessible and welcoming to parents and other members of the community
- Allowing the public open access to relevant information about educational policies, programs, and services
- Encouraging meaningful opportunities for input and advice into decision-making at the school and board level.

Strong school-community partnerships are good for schools and good for the communities they serve. Each school is a rich community resource with assets that include its facilities (both inside and outside), equipment and materials, entertainment (sporting or artistic events), human resources (both the staff and the students), programs for students, and courses for the broader community.

Promoting Parent Engagement

Parents want to know what their child is supposed to be learning and doing at school, how they are progressing and how they can help their child at home.

Parent engagement strategies should create a welcoming environment for parents and make it easier for them to participate in their children's education. When schools succeed in engaging parents there is a strong and positive connection to improved student achievement.

The evidence of the benefits of families being involved in their children's education is overwhelming. Parental engagement in their children's learning positively affects the academic performance in both primary and secondary schools and leads to:

- Improved academic achievement
- Greater cognitive competence
- Greater problem-solving skills
- More school enjoyment
- Consistent school attendance
- Fewer behavioural problems at school.

Studies show that children whose parents are involved demonstrate greater social and emotional development including:

- More resilience to stress
- Greater life satisfaction
- Greater self-direction and self-control
- Greater social adjustment
- Greater mental health
- More supportive relationships
- Greater social competence
- More positive peer relations
- More tolerance.

These advantages continue throughout childhood into adulthood.

Examples of parent engagement encompass a wide range of activities, including:

- Participating on School Councils, Parent Involvement Committees (PICs) or school board advisory committees
- Attending school events and committee/board meetings
- Volunteering for field trips and school activities
- Ensuring a quiet place is available to do homework
- Helping with homework and actively reading with children
- Meeting with teachers and other school staff
- Spending time talking to children about their day at school.

Whether the activity is in the school or in the home, parents can be authentically engaged in their children's education and contributing to their success.

Parent Engagement Policy

Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010) formally recognizes and supports a vision of parents as both valued partners and active participants in their children's education. This policy:

- Recognizes, encourages and supports many forms of parent engagement

- Recognizes and supports the important role parents have in contributing to their children's learning at home and at school

- Identifies strategies to remove barriers to parent involvement (e.g. communications and language)

- Supports parents in acquiring the skills and knowledge they need to be engaged and involved in their child's learning

- Provides a parent voice at the local level through PICs, school councils and individual parents talking to teachers and principals.

The policy provides the vision of parent involvement, sets out four strategies to support parent engagement, and includes an action plan for schools, boards and the Ministry of Education. The policy also showcases some of the many exemplary practices across the province. The full policy is available at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/policy.html.

There are two formalized groups that support parent engagement: School Councils and PICs. The mandate and structure of each group is set out in Ontario Regulation 612/00:

School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees.

Within the Ministry of Education, the Parent and Community Engagement Office helps develop and implement parent engagement initiatives across the province in support of student achievement and well-being. This includes the publication of School Councils: A Guide for Members and Tips for School Councils. Both resources are available on the Ministry of Education website, at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/council/guide.html.

The Role of School Councils

Active and involved school councils offer parents and guardians an effective way to contribute to their children's learning. Every publicly funded school in Ontario is required to have a school council. Improving student achievement and promoting accountability are among the key purposes of a school council. School councils are made up of individuals representing parents, the school, and the community. They provide advice to principals and, where appropriate, to the local school board. Part of a school council's advocacy is to ensure their school responds to local needs and reflects local values.

Strong school councils help build strong school communities. The school council provides an avenue for consultation, advice, and information sharing among all members of the school community. School councils are encouraged to represent and share the views of their community and to establish open, inclusive practices that invite participation.

School boards and principals are required to consult school councils before they make decisions on certain matters. A comprehensive list of the areas requiring consultation with school councils by principals and school boards is set out in regulation as well as in the ministry's guide. School councils are,

in turn, expected to consult parents of their school community about matters under their consideration.

School councils are required to operate within the framework of the regulations and any applicable board policies. School boards are encouraged to work collaboratively with school councils to ensure that the regulations and board policies are clearly understood and that all parties comply.

The Role of Parent Involvement Committees

Every school board is required to establish a PIC. Regulation sets out provisions for the composition, function,

and mandate of the PIC. The ministry provides funding to support the work of this committee.

PICs are formal structures and important advisory bodies to the board. They are a vehicle for the participation of parents at the board level. Their purpose is to support, encourage and enhance meaningful parent involvement to improve student achievement and well-being throughout the board and its schools.

The PIC is a parent-led committee; the chair/co-chairs are parents and the majority of members are parents. The director of education, a trustee of the board and up to three community representatives are also members of the PIC. Subject to board by-laws, a PIC can include a principal, teacher and/or support staff. PICs help the school board to communicate with parents and to ensure parents have a voice.

While school councils are school-based advisory structures, PICs focus on matters that affect more than one school. The PIC provides information and advice to the board on effective parent engagement strategies and practices. PICs also communicate with and support school councils,

and undertake activities to help parents support their children's learning at home and at school. The PIC regulation also provides that the ministry may solicit the advice of PICs on matters that relate to student achievement and well-being.

PICs can assist school boards by identifying strategies to increase parental engagement, including outreach to parents who find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system or other factors. PICs can

promote the initiatives of school councils, encourage dialogue on relevant board policies and help share effective practices that support parent engagement in their children's learning. They can also help to identify parent and school council training needs within the district and contribute to the development of workshops, forums and conferences to address these needs.

Parents Reaching Out Grants

Ontario's Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grants encourage

parent engagement at the local, regional and provincial levels. They are designed to support parents in identifying barriers to parent engagement in their own community and to find local solutions to get more parents involved in their children's learning.

There are two types of grants:

- PRO Grants to School Councils support school-based parent engagement projects.
- Regional/Provincial Grants for which parent organizations, PICs, publicly funded school boards, non-profit organizations and postsecondary institutions operating in Ontario can apply.

More information about application requirements and deadlines can be found at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/reaching.html.

Promoting Community Involvement

School boards and school communities can also encourage partnerships with:

- Local professionals, seniors, and other individuals
- Community associations, such as multicultural associations, service clubs, and citizen groups
- Child care centres and community groups (YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, recreational programs, etc.)
- Religious institutions
- Artists, musicians, and cultural organizations
- Municipalities (through parks, libraries, and other community facilities)
- Community colleges and universities
- Police and fire services
- Health care institutions, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and family health clinics
- The private sector, including businesses, boards of trade, and chambers of commerce.

All of these potential partners can help to enrich the quality of life in the school community.

Community Engagement

Community engagement in public education values the right of community members to have input into the decisions that affect the lives and education of the community's children. It is the process of building relationships with community members who will work with the school board as an ongoing partner and support its mission with the end goal of making the community a better place in which to live.

The *Education Act* underscores the importance of community engagement when the elected board sets strategic directions and establishes its goals. Trustees are expected to consult with parents, students, and constituents of the board on the board's multi-year strategic plan. The elected board must make its constituencies aware of the plan and report on progress on implementation of the plan. The plan demonstrates the board's responsiveness and accountability to its community and reflects community values and priorities.

Community engagement is not an exercise in public relations. It is a collaborative process aimed at reaching a shared understanding of preferred solutions to identified problems or key community needs and priorities.

How Trustees Can Support and Promote the Parent and Community Voice

Trustees can support the work of school councils and PICs by:

- Promoting the value of school councils and PICs to the community

- Facilitating communication among school councils within the trustee's area

- Helping to establish contacts between councils and their communities and between councils and the board's PIC

- Providing a communication link among school councils, the PIC and the board

- Ensuring that the board establishes policies for school councils, in consultation with school councils

- Ensuring that school councils are able to provide input into the development of board policies related to the areas listed in Ontario Regulation 612/00

- Ensuring the board reports back to school councils or the PIC on the actions taken by the board in response to advice provided by school councils or the PIC (Boards are not bound by school council or PIC recommendations, but they are required to report back on actions taken or not taken)

- Evaluating the board's method of reporting back to school councils
- Making school councils and the PIC aware of relevant board policies
- Ensuring that all those who are involved with school councils and the PIC work within the provisions of the regulations and any applicable board policies
- Promoting and encouraging collaborative relationships among the board, school councils, the PIC, and the broader school community.

Inviting Public Input

Trustees have an important role to play in informing school councils and community members about how they can influence decision-making at the board level, either through public deputations or, in some boards, through board advisory or consultative committees. All district school boards have procedures for public deputations to the board of trustees or its standing committees. Some boards also have advisory or consultative committees to represent the viewpoints of parents, other community members, and secondary students. The goal in all cases is to invite public input in a way that is focused, inclusive, time-efficient, and accessible.

The Ministry of Education's Multi-Year Strategic Planning: A Guide for School Board Trustees (http://www.edu.gov. on.ca/eng/policyfunding/ leadership/guide_school_ board_trustees.pdf), released in 2017, is a resource designed to support Ontario school boards with their responsibility to develop, implement, and monitor a multi-year strategic plan. This guide makes a distinction between two types of engagement with stakeholders: ongoing community engagement and formal stakeholder engagement. It includes questions such as:

- What is the level of parent and community engagement in our board?
- What have we done to identify and remove barriers that prevent marginalized families from becoming more involved?

Making Connections in the Community

In addition to working in their own school board, some trustees choose to sit on other boards in the community, such as library boards, district health councils, hospital boards, and boards of trade. Trustees may also participate in community service clubs. Although this involvement is not a requirement of the trustee's role, the building of links with other services and agencies in the community strengthens mutual understanding of the needs of students and

families and promotes confidence in publicly funded education.

Strategies for Engaging Communities in the Key Work of School Boards

Be committed. A school board should not simply view community engagement as one of its projects but as a way of doing business.

Be accountable. Let the community know that the board leadership is committed to engaging with them and be clear about roles and responsibilities for maintaining communication. Let the community know that

their input makes a difference in outcomes and keep them informed of the progress in strategic planning efforts.

Be transparent. Board information, business practices and decision-making processes should be highly visible, easily accessible and accountable and open to participation.

Schedule public forums appropriately. At forums, consider limiting verbal input to three to four minutes per person, and invite presenters to provide a short summary to serve as the "official record" of their presentation.

Build trust. This means building or rebuilding relationships with constituent groups including board staff, students, parents, volunteers, community members and business leaders.

Know the board's communities. Get to know stakeholders thoroughly. Take the time to gather more information if it is needed.

Make effective use of all communication vehicles. Don't underestimate the power of clear, succinct messages in parent newsletters and the local media. Take advantage of

Have a clear challenge process after decisions are made. After any public debate is complete and decisions have been made, ensure that the process used to reach the decision is known. If individuals still object to the outcome, make sure everyone knows in writing what the challenge process is – if there is one – and make it available to the unhappy stakeholders.

Explore new tactics. Be creative in the methods used to encourage stakeholders to become actively engaged in the board and its schools. From parents and senior citizens, to business and religious communities, take the necessary steps to target information to them and invite their increased awareness and participation in ways that work uniquely for them.

Have welcoming schools. How do people in the community feel about approaching the schools? Are they made to feel welcome or are they made to feel like they are intruding?

every school gathering. Ask to speak at local civic organizations. Most people want to know what is going on and want to support public education.

Use technology and online communities. Social media platforms help give voice to citizens who care about public schools but do not want to attend public engagement activities.

Be clear and use simple language. Every message should be viewed as a "report to the shareholders." Don't assume prior knowledge. Every message should stand on its own. Only use educational terms if absolutely necessary and then define them.

Use graphics and lists where appropriate. Key information in point-form or conveyed through an appealing graphic is more user-friendly than dense text.

Deliver key messages in ways most likely to reach the target audience. Audiences want to hear what the core message is. They don't want it buried in the process that was followed.

Frame the essential questions to guide dialogue. Reflective thinking can be enhanced by pointed questions. Invite key constituents to respond to these questions. Wide-open public forums may invite confusion and grandstanding.