



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION INPUT ON PROPOSED REGULATION ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT COMMITTEES

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Ministry on the features of a proposed regulation regarding Parent Involvement Committees (PICs).

We have canvassed our members for input and received a broad range of comments. Many of our members will also have submitted this input directly to the Ministry.

The input from our Member Boards indicates vibrant activity at many levels in involving parents in meaningful ways that support and promote their children's success in school. There is also a strongly expressed value in working with the larger community to build an environment of true partnership to meet a broad range of needs.

In developing a regulation for Parent Involvement Committees, the key for school boards is to establish clarity between the role of PIC members and the legislated role of trustees as municipally elected officials with significant accountabilities under the *Education Act*. Boards look to Parental Involvement Committees to help them with strategies to increase parental engagement as a foundational factor in sustained student achievement. The Regulation should promote this advisory, supportive function. We emphasize the advice offered in the following comment:

"PIC and school council membership is a voluntary community activity. Membership and activities can be recommended and encouraged but should not be legislated. Policy and guidelines need to be open enough to allow the Board PICs and school councils to address issues which affect them and where they can have an impact".

We offer a number of key comments and suggestions about this direction as a whole. The specific feedback related to the question areas in the Ministry's consultation document follow those comments and suggestions.

Key Comments and Suggestions

The key belief expressed by our membership is the vital and positive connection between parent involvement in schools and the success their children experience in their academic achievement and in the life of the school. In common with all our education partners we want to support the role of parents in the education of their children and to have avenues whereby they can become meaningfully involved. As one trustee commented:

“An important role of a Parental Involvement Committee is to encourage meaningful parental involvement at the school level. Parents will recognize when the input is valued. The ultimate goal is to have parents as active partners in their children’s learning.”

One overarching observation we would like to make is the relationship between the role and mandate of PICs and the responsibilities and accountabilities of trustees as recently set out in *The Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act* (Bill 177) and regulations made there under, including the Provincial Interest Regulation. Two in particular are highly relevant and appear to entail significant overlap:

“A member of the board shall:

- *“consult with parents, students and supporters of the board on the board’s multi-year plan*
- *bring concerns of parents, students and supporters of the board to the attention of the board;”(Bill 177)*

It is going to be important to be clear about the distinctive roles held by individuals who are locally appointed as members of Parent Involvement Committees and the mandated requirements of trustees who are democratically elected by the public through municipal elections and held accountable through government legislation for a range of education responsibilities. Any Regulation would have to uphold the legislative onus that falls to trustees and the mutually supportive relationship trustees and PIC members share in ensuring parent and community involvement. While the input from our members was unequivocally supportive of parent involvement, there were a number of comments on the potential for blurring or duplication of roles:

“I am all for involvement of the community within the school system; it is so important to have the public, parents and community involved; it is not however, the mandate to recreate a Board of Trustees”

“We believe the consultation document requires greater clarity on whether the PIC is an advisory committee to the District / Board of Trustees or an independent body. Some of the terminology used in the proposed text leads to confusion on the governance and structure of the PIC in relation to the District and Board of Trustees.”

We are confident that the specific input that follows will help to clarify these issues.

The Role and Mandate of PICs

The feedback from our members indicates that a key role for PICs is to increase parent engagement and involvement in their children's education. A suggestion was made that the mandate should encompass:

- *To support, encourage, and enhance meaningful parental involvement within schools and across the district, including, outreach to parents who find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system or other factors.*
- *Participate and encourage collaborative dialogue with external community partners with the objective of developing strategies for enhancing parental engagement and outreach.*

There were also comments indicating that aspects of the role and mandate as outlined overlap with the Trustee's role and that the potential role of PICs would be engagement as a key factor in supporting achievement both at the Board and Provincial level.

With regard to specific roles set out in the Ministry's consultation document, additional comments are included here:

Seek the advice of parents, school councils and interested community members and communicate this advice to the director and trustees.

The Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act (Bill 177) specifies that trustees have the legal responsibility to consult with parents and bring their concerns forward to the Board. When it comes to seeking advice of parents and community members the respective and mutually supportive roles of PIC representatives and trustees need to be clearly delineated and respected. It is important that the proposed regulation clarify that the PIC is an advisory body to the Board and that the roles of members of the board and members of PIC are distinct from each other.

Encourage dialogue among school councils, the PIC and the board on relevant board policies, such as those that affect student achievement.

There is general support for this aspect of the role. It is noted that boards and parent involvement councils often struggle with defining which are the board policies that affect student achievement.

Provide advice to the director and trustees on how to engage parents in support of student achievement.

Our members support this aspect of the role and indicate that having parental support in the board's goals for student achievement is extremely important. The partnership between PIC and the Board and Director of Education parallels and can be a model for Principals and their School Council.

Assess the level of parent involvement in matters that relate to student achievement at the board level.

The comments received with regard to this aspect of the role included:

“Certainly parent members of the PIC could anecdotally observe or monitor the amount of parent membership on board committees or projects, but I wonder if assessing the level of parental engagement is their role. Non-parent members, particularly elected trustee members on the PIC and/or Directors of Education should be able to “Assess the level of parent involvement in matters that relate to student achievement at the board level.”, particularly since they are now mandated to be directly accountable for ‘student achievement and well being’ and will have to have policy in place to form some kind of rubric or checklist to determine this and how and what PIC’s can do to help in that common goal.”

“I believe that it may be difficult to assess the level of parent involvement in matters that relate to student achievement at the Board level. What would that look like? Would it be formally done?”

“It is unclear to us whether the PIC should be tasked with undertaking the assessment or with providing advice to or supporting the district in undertaking the assessment.”

We believe that PICs would certainly have a role in contributing to the development of a survey tool to assess parent involvement. We suggest the language be reworded to reflect this.

Develop and implement an action plan to enhance meaningful parent engagement as a key factor in supporting student achievement.

There is support for this aspect of the role:

“We believe it is important that an action plan be developed by the PIC in collaboration with the district, recognizing that the PIC is comprised of volunteers with limited time and resources to undertake work.”

It is suggested that it be linked with the aspect of the role that calls for the PIC, the Director of Education and the Board to consult together on the allocation of parent engagement funding provided by the Ministry.

Be involved in the development of board improvement plans.

This aspect of the role generated a number of comments:

“I do not agree that PICs need to be involved in the development of Board improvement plans. This is something best achieved by those who can take the data and assess it appropriately”

“The only benefit I question is the wording “be involved in the development of the Board improvement plan”. I would like more discussion on what involvement would be.”

We would suggest alternative wording such as: “Have the opportunity to be involved in the consultation process for the development of the Board’s strategic plan.” The rationale is that “be

involved” could be interpreted as the hands-on role that is undertaken by board staff. Additionally, it makes more sense that the input be related to the Board’s strategic plan that sets broad directions for the board; generally, board improvement plans deal with very detailed action/strategies that permeate the basic structural/administrative level at the board. To complement this process parents are involved at the school level with each school’s improvement plan which is aligned to the board’s strategic plan and specific student needs at that location.

Provide information to school councils and parents about Ministry initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to parent engagement.

While the role of PICs in supporting the flow of communication to reduce barriers to parent engagement was strongly supported, some cautionary comments were offered.

“We believe the PIC should be responsible for supporting communication to school councils and parents, which is different from the responsibility of the District in providing information to school councils and parents.”

“The primary role should be as a conduit of information but should not be another level between Trustees and the direct community.”

We suggest that an effective method for information regarding Ministry initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to parent engagement should flow from the Director of Education and Trustees. The expectation would be that this be shared with PICs who can in turn disseminate information to school councils through the principals. The principals of the schools as the administrators responsible for those schools should receive the information and be responsible for informing the school councils.

An additional perspective around communications to reduce barriers to parent engagement and, in fact, engaging the broader community was noted:

“Sometimes it’s engaging a community, not just the parents or school council. Information can come through PICs to school councils and parents about Ministry initiatives, but sometimes the real target audience is the wider community (whether ethnically, religiously, geographically, culturally, etc. defined) It’s no use preaching to the converted. It’s how to throw a wider net. Perhaps the PIC’s could benefit from some cross ministerial support – health, C&YS, culture, heritage, community & social services, etc. The barriers to parent engagement are often the same barriers which address poverty reduction, improved adult education and parenting skills, improved physical and mental health within families, English/French language acquisition, newcomer reception, etc.”

Determine, in consultation with the director and the board, how parent engagement funding provided by the Ministry is to be allocated.

There was general support for this collaborative approach to determining how parent engagement funding will be utilized. It is important that the utilization of funding be aligned with the work of the PIC and that it support the committee’s activities throughout the year.

Role and Responsibility of District School Boards

The consultation and communication expectations for the Board in relation to PICs, as set out in the Ministry's consultation document are reasonable:

- **That the board consults with the PIC on policies and guidelines that affect student achievement, parents and families.**
- **That the board advises the PIC of actions taken in response to the PIC's advice.**
- **That the board provide appropriate facilities for PICs and make efforts to provide for members to attend meetings by electronic means.**

It is noted, however, that "in relation to PICs" should be emphasized since the role and responsibilities of district school boards far extend beyond this small list.

As noted earlier in the section on role and mandate of PICs, there are responsibilities that either should fall to the board or require board leadership.

In terms of facilities, it would be good to clarify that this means space and resources for meetings and provision of professional secretarial support to minute meetings; it is assumed that the costs incurred are covered by the Ministry's parent engagement funding.

A number of comments were received with regard to providing electronic means to attend meetings as an option.

"Adobe connect and other 'meeting software' have been helpful in involving folks who are geographically (or due to inclement weather) unable to physically attend a PIC. I think however, there should be some requirement (like the requirement for trustees) to physically attend some minimum number of meetings within the school year to be a voting member in good standing of the PIC and not precipitate a replacement member. I don't think the PIC is the kind of committee that should be held by electronic means as a primary method. Social interaction, because of the nature of the mandate, should be encouraged."

"I believe that the PIC's because of their composition and format of meetings would not lend themselves to members effectively meeting by electronic means."

"Electronic meetings would be very helpful in increasing the input of their members."

"Electronic attendance may not be possible in all areas and can add significantly to the cost of conducting a meeting. This would depend on the geography of the school board. Electronic conferencing is less effective and can pose other problems such as needing access to a phone and computer so that a presentation can be viewed while participating in a teleconference."

Our suggestion is that, while face-to-face meetings are preferred, in situations where challenges of organizing childcare or distance or weather conditions would otherwise present a barrier to participation, electronic participation should be an option.

PIC Composition and Voting

The proposed parameters for parent members generated support:

“I believe that parents should make up the majority of PIC members.”

It was noted that this aspect of membership should include “guardians” as well as parents and that eligibility for membership should include having a child attending a school within the board. Feedback also indicated that the parent member not be a board employee.

There needs to be provision as well for parent representation from the SEAC, Aboriginal Advisory Committee and other bodies that ensure the diversity of cultures within the board is represented – relying solely on school council representatives may not accomplish this. Gender balance should also be encouraged. Given the diversity among boards flexibility should be built into this component. Flexibility was particularly urged with regard to how the proposed regulation is framed:

“We believe that the regulation should provide direction at a high level, allowing boards the ability to accommodate local need in the composition of the PIC. For example, the regulation might require a minimum number of members, the categories of membership and the voting rights. Boards should have the ability to decide on the number of trustee members and any additional members whether staff (such as an Equity and Diversity Coordinator, Instructional Coach or principals)...”

The PIC should appoint community members and the Board should have a clear process for such appointments. It needs to be noted that in some areas it is not easy to get community members to sit on committees so it may be advisable to have language that strongly encourages but does not mandate community members.

Suggestions regarding potential community members included

- *“members of multi cultural agencies for help with translation of ‘outreach’ material*
- *members of businesses within the community to broaden the outreach and support necessary for parents and families to become engaged in their school community*
- *members of service organizations*
- *members of faith communities*
- *members of groups or organizations that have a focus on serving students which individual boards’ data has determined are ‘under-performing’, not graduating or at risk and could benefit from additional focused help.”*

There was agreement that PICs should have trustees as members since, by law, trustees are accountable for parent engagement. In many boards it would work well to have more than one trustee, e.g. due to the geography of the board or the urban/rural mix of the board or to reflect the various municipalities within the district. There should be alternates for these positions to ensure that meetings can always have this kind of representation. It was also suggested that:

“Alternates and other board members should be able to attend in addition to the ‘regular’ trustee assigned to the PIC.”

There was support as well for representing the voice of students through the inclusion of a Student Trustee:

“This would be a good role for a student trustee – they are aware of the focus on student achievement, the board personnel and staff and could help solicit and disseminate the PIC’s agenda to parents.”

There was consensus that it is essential to have the Director of Education or designate on the committee. This is key to the profile of the committee.

In terms of additional members, there were suggestions that representatives of Home and School Associations be included.

With regard to voting rights there was consensus that parents should form the majority of voting members and that community members also have a vote. It was noted that the number of community members should not compromise the voting majority of parents.

There was no clear consensus on whether trustee members of the PIC should vote. However, there was unanimity that the Director and other assigned board staff are a resource to the PIC and not voting members. Their role is to help to bring perspective and build a collaborative culture.

The following suggestion was also offered:

“We believe that consideration should be given to decision-making using the consensus model.”

In terms of the process for becoming a member of the PIC, there was a range of views. It is clear in the responses we received that boards look to the proven experience that “one size does not fit all” in a province as diverse as ours. It is suggested that in this case it is likely that one single process may not fit all situations. It may be advisable for each board to establish either a set of guidelines or a by-law that would cover the appointment of members to PICs and the procedures that govern meetings. Once the initial PIC is established, a possible process would be for the PIC to consider applications for PIC membership under board guidelines.

Term of Membership

Response from our member boards indicated a range of views on the term of membership on the PIC. The preponderance of opinion was in favour of a term of greater than one year, i.e., a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 4 years. A provision that allows for overlapping was supported as a measure that ensures a level of continuity for the committee. It was proposed as well that there be overlapping with the term of trustees. The following suggestion for managing overlapping was offered:

“Term to be two years; in beginning year, have one and two year memberships, and every subsequent election will be for a two-year term.”

There was also some support for the concept of eligibility to apply for a second term.

It was noted that in the case of trustee members the annual organizational meeting of the board would determine the trustee(s) to serve on the PIC. Staff assigned to the PIC would be determined by the Director of Education.

Any language in the proposed regulation around terms should be permissive since parents have commitments that can limit their time for volunteering for this role.

Views were expressed that members of existing PICs should either be permitted to complete their terms prior to new requirements coming into force or have the ability to apply for appointment to the newly constituted PIC.

Election of Chair or Co-Chairs

There was strong support for leadership positions on the PIC being held by parents and that the Chair should be elected by the PIC:

“I know that things would be much easier if the Chair were staff or even trustee, but I believe that parents need the ownership of that committee to make it effective.”

There was more support for having a Chair and Vice-Chair than going with two Co-Chairs:

“Having Co-Chairs can cause confusion and communication problems. The purpose of the Vice-Chair is to fill in when the Chair is not able to fulfill his/her duties, therefore having Co-Chairs is not necessary.”

It was suggested however that a specific structure not be mandated for use in all boards.

PIC Meetings

Our input from member boards indicates a range from a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 6 meetings per year would be reasonable. Some boards favour additional meetings held around an event, in a specific region of the board, or an open meeting that involves representatives from all school councils. While face-to-face meetings should be encouraged as the norm, electronic participation should be where circumstances require it.

“We believe that relationship building is a critical element of effective parental engagement strategies and therefore physical attendance at the meetings should be encouraged.”

The preponderance of opinion was that meetings should not be held unless there is a majority (50% + 1) of the parent members of the PIC present and they should not proceed without the Director (or designate) and a trustee (or alternate) present. Again, there was a caution about mandating a specific approach for all boards and the example of the challenges of securing attendance when the board covers significant geographic areas was cited. It was noted that without a quorum, the PIC could discuss issues but no action could be taken without a majority

of voting parent members.

By and large, there was support for PIC meetings being open to the public:

“PIC meetings should be open to and accessible to the public and should be promoted or advertised by the district in the same manner that other board and committees meetings are posted. Closed meetings should only be permitted under the in camera provisions set out in the Education Act, which would be very limited in the case of PIC business.”

PIC Records

Meeting minutes and financial records should be recorded and maintained by the administrative support assigned to the PIC with the help of funding provided by the Ministry for this purpose:

“I would definitely recommend that records of all PIC meetings be kept by an administrative assistant of the Board and that all minutes are approved by the PIC at each meeting...”

Meeting minutes should be posted on the board website with school councils made aware that they can be accessed on the site; other means of distribution can be decided locally.

In terms of an annual report, responses indicated that there should be a reporting out on the work of PICs. This can happen through the regular reports to the Board and through inclusion in the Directors’ Annual Report. The option of a specific annual PIC report also received some support.

General Comments

Beyond the responses to specific question areas in the Ministry’s consultation document, the following general comments were received:

I believe parents are an untapped asset in our goals for improvements in student achievement. We have examples of schools that give recognition to parents working with teachers as key to their improved achievement results. At the District level members of PIC are called on for advice in many areas and they speak to feeling valued contributors to Board directions.

Overall, we believe the consultation document requires greater clarity on whether the PIC is an advisory committee to the District / Board of Trustees or an independent body. Some of the terminology used in the proposed text leads to confusion on the governance and structure of the PIC in relation to the District and Board of Trustees. We reiterate the importance of recognizing that the PIC will primarily be comprised of volunteer members and therefore adequate administrative and where necessary professional support must be assigned and funded.

The formation of PICs through the system has created another level of bureaucracy for our Directors of Education to deal with. We already have parent councils at each school.

It is important to provide some guidelines while avoiding limiting boards' flexibility to ensure the success of the PIC due to challenges such as geography.

Greater clarity is required to distinguish the role of PIC from school councils and regional school councils (no blurring of the lines); allow some flexibility to appoint as well as elect in order to reach out to other parents who may not be part of a school council/regional school council and to ensure diversity.

A final general comment that bears some consideration in light of the volunteer nature of PICs is the time pressure on parents and their availability to serve on a range of committees including PICs. Will there be sufficient flexibility to cover a situation where every effort has been made to establish a PIC and there is insufficient uptake from parents?

Conclusion

As emphasized at the beginning of our response, our Member Boards are proud of the vibrant activity in schools and across the board aimed at involving parents in meaningful ways that support and promote their children's success in school. Boards also work hard with the larger community to build an environment of true partnership to meet a broad range of needs. This is a strongly expressed value.

We reiterate that in developing a regulation for Parent Involvement Committees, it is imperative to establish clarity between the role of PIC members and the legislated role of trustees as municipally elected officials with significant accountabilities under the *Education Act*. This was a key aspect of the input from our Member Boards. Boards look to Parental Involvement Committees to help them with strategies to increase parental engagement as a foundational factor in sustained student achievement. The Regulation should promote this advisory, supportive function.

Again, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association thanks the Ministry of Education for considering this response.

Respectfully submitted,



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