

Tab 10 ~

Representing All Voices ~ Building an Inclusive Council

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Representing All Voices ~ Building an Inclusive Council

Diversity refers to the unique characteristics that we all possess that distinguish us as individuals and identify us as belonging to a group.

Diversity includes dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and ability.

Diversity offers strength and richness to the whole.

Diversity may also include ancestry, age, colour, political belief, marital status, and family status.

The Hastings Institute¹

All parents and students in BC's public education system deserve the opportunity to participate fully and equally in everything the system has to offer. Parent leaders recognize that, to be truly representative and effective, PACs, DPACs, and SPCs must respect the diversity among parents and students in our school communities and find ways to draw all parents into the work of our councils.

Building an inclusive council means going beyond recognizing the diversity among us. It means working actively to encourage and make it possible for all parents to participate fully in all activities of the council.

Where to Start

Meeting the needs of all parents and students requires coordinated effort and shared responsibility among our schools, districts, and parent leaders.

¹ Established in 1989 by the City of Vancouver to deliver training on issues related to employment and service equity, diversity, cross-cultural relations, literacy, and harassment-free workplaces. Website: www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/eo/index.htm#Hastings

Understanding your community

The information you need to understand your school community lies with the community members themselves. Begin with a conversation among parents and students about the characteristics of your community. Explore the diversity of opinion, cultural background, and life-style. Identify what makes your school community unique.

Your school and district also hold a great deal of information about your community. Ask your principal or superintendent how the district tracks student enrollment and needs.

Consider the following:

- What is the cultural, ethnic, language, and religious composition of the school or district?
- What are the socio-economic, education, and literacy levels of the community? Are there various levels? How are they distributed? How do they interact?
- What is the overall level of parent or community involvement? Are there higher or lower levels in certain areas or activities?
- What makes the community unique? What are its special characteristics or expectations?

Together, we must go further than just inviting parents to the school.

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Find out what outreach programs are available in the school or district, for example:

- multicultural and language services
- programs to welcome new families
- programs and services for pre-schoolers, teens, and single parents
- health services
- meal programs or food bank
- clothing exchange
- childcare
- sports and recreation
- education centres for teens who have left the mainstream schools
- continuing education for adults
- police liaison.

Examining your council

An important step toward becoming more inclusive is to evaluate how representative your council is at the present time. This can be done in several ways:

- a general meeting of all members to discuss representation and inclusivity
- a committee to examine the issue
- a survey of parents, the entire school, or district.

Reflect on the following questions:

How do parents view your council?

Many parents recognize PACs, DPACs, and SPCs as an integral part of the education community, promoting effective parent involvement at all levels.

Other parents are not familiar with the role parents are entitled to play in public education. Some parents may come from cultures where parent participation in schools is discouraged or non-existent. These parents may hesitate to become involved because they think parent councils are part of the school bureaucracy.

You want all parents to view your council as approachable and welcoming, including those parents who cannot come to the school on a regular basis or participate in council activities. You want all parents

- to understand that PACs and DPACs are parent organizations, run by parents for the benefit of parents and students
- to understand that SPCs include parent representatives working to improve student achievement
- to know about the activities and issues these councils are involved in.

Who comes to council meetings and events? Who is missing? Why?

Look at who is attracted to your meetings and events. Do certain people or groups come to some things and not to others?

Parents must see your meetings and events as relevant and useful to them or their children before they will take the time to

With commitment to action, PACs and DPACs can be successful in promoting and modeling respect for diversity of all kinds, and ensure the broadest representation of families in their schools and districts.

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come. They must also feel welcome and comfortable talking to others with whom they share common ground.

Is your council aware of the values, traditions, and needs of the families and children in your school or district?

Once your council is aware of the diversity in your school or district, the council can respond to parent and student needs by promoting relevant resources in the community.

What does your council do to encourage participation from diverse groups?

Your council's structure, procedure, and traditional ways of doing things can encourage or discourage parents from participating in council activities. Take a look at how you do business and ask:

- Do our methods encourage participation, or do they keep some people away?
- How do we encourage participation from new members?

Promoting an Inclusive Council

Believe that everyone can make a worthwhile contribution.

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Inclusive organizations understand, accept, and respect all aspects of diversity. They have regard for the diverse groups within their community when they plan their work and develop their policies.

Becoming a more inclusive parent council is an important undertaking. Consider making it a goal in your annual plan, with a specific plan of activities, responsibilities, and targets. You may wish to appoint a committee of interested parents to explore the issue in depth and plan strategy.

See **Tab 13, Effective Planning in PACs and DPACs**, for information on creating a plan, and **Tab 12, The Role of Committees in PACs and DPACs**.

As you plan, keep a positive, open attitude and a strong commitment to working with your education partners. Talk to your PAC and DPAC members, principal, staff, superintendent, and trustees, and seek out opportunities to work with others in the community who have a stake in the issue, for example:

- students

- parent groups
- teachers
- community groups
- churches
- Band Councils
- local businesses
- labour and cultural organizations
- social and child welfare professionals.

Suggestions for building inclusivity

The following suggestions have worked well for other councils and will help you get started:

- Publish information about your council in the major languages of your parent community. This is especially important for newsletters and announcements.
- Enlist the help of your principal and teachers in promoting your PAC whenever they meet with parents. Ask your principal for time to welcome parents at school-sponsored events, especially events for new parents. Have parents who speak the major languages in the school welcome parents in their language.
- Ask your school board chair and superintendent to promote your DPAC when they meet with parents, teachers, or administrators. Educate your school board chair and superintendent on the services your DPAC offers (for example, parent education and advocacy), and ask them to promote these services.
- Use plain language in all communications and at meetings. Avoid jargon when phrasing survey questions, and make instructions clear and simple. (Test your survey on a dozen people before sending it out. Are the questions clear? Are the instructions obvious?)
- Use community facilities to distribute information about your council—community, recreational, and multicultural facilities; Band Council centre; libraries; ethnic newspapers; radio and TV stations; places of worship; festivals; local businesses.
- If available, use your school's auto-dialer for PAC messages about upcoming meetings or events. Translate the messages into major languages.

- Ask your school or school district to include PAC or DPAC pages on their websites. Advertise the links to these pages in your school, PAC, and DPAC newsletters.
- Encourage your executive (and all parents) to speak to parents at social events, in the hallways, parking lot, and playground. Personal contact is one of the best ways to make people feel welcome. Attend other groups' meetings, conferences, multicultural, and religious events. Collect printed material and share it with your council.
- Hold your meetings in different locations. For example, alternate meetings between the school and local Band Council centre or community centre. Hold each meeting in a different classroom in the school so that parents can see the various classrooms.
- Plan cultural activities and events that appeal to parents of diverse backgrounds. Ask them for suggestions and help with organizing and getting the word out. Hold the events in major languages.
- Plan activities that attract families and working parents to the school, such as a family volleyball night or early morning (7:00 a.m.) Meet-the-Teacher event.
- Provide advocacy services for parents needing assistance in communicating with the school or district and obtaining information about their children. Contact the BCCPAC Advocacy Project for assistance in obtaining advocacy services in languages other than English. See **Tab 11, Speaking Up! ~ The BCCPAC Advocacy Project**.
- Make an extra effort to welcome new parents—a PAC-sponsored barbeque, social or cultural event, or information evening. Ask for contact information. Phone new parents after their first meeting or event and ask them how they enjoyed it. Offer to put them in touch with people who can answer their questions. See **Tab 19, Contagious Enthusiasm ~ How to Get Parents Involved**.

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EA)

An Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement is a working agreement among a school district, all local Aboriginal communities, and the Ministry of Education. Its purpose is to improve the quality of education achieved by Aboriginal students.

Enhancement Agreements

- support cooperation between the local Aboriginal communities and the school district
- give the Aboriginal communities and the school district greater autonomy to create solutions that work for Aboriginal students, the schools, and communities
- require a high level of respect and trust to function.

The Ministry of Education has a goal to have Enhancement Agreements in all 60 school districts by 2005.

Effective programs in districts with Enhancement Agreements have included

- traditional cultural activities and field trips for all Aboriginal students
- curriculum on Aboriginal history, culture, and issues
- parent and community involvement from all local Aboriginal communities, including events such as monthly “Family Gathering Evenings”.²

For information on Enhancement Agreements, go to

- ✓ www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/agreements/
- ✓ www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/agreements/ea_guide.pdf

Involving your PAC, DPAC, and SPC

Find out if there is an Enhancement Agreement in your district. Your PAC, DPAC, and SPC should be familiar with it. Plan to discuss it at a council meeting. Invite local Band Council members and your superintendent and principal to explain it and answer questions.

Discuss how all parents can become involved in supporting the Enhancement Agreement and all Aboriginal students in your school and district.

² School District #35, Langley. See www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/effprog/sd35.htm

SPCs must pay close attention to the Enhancement Agreement in setting priorities for improving the achievement of Aboriginal students in the school.

The suggestions in this manual for building inclusivity, engaging parents in your school community, and boosting attendance at meetings can be used to encourage Aboriginal parents and students to become more involved in PAC, DPAC, and SPC activities. See **Tab 17, Building Partnerships**, and **Tab 19, Contagious Enthusiasm ~ How to Get Parents Involved**.

First Nations Parent Clubs

First Nations Parent Clubs are a program of the First Nations School Association (FNSEA), a non-partisan organization that promotes quality and culturally-appropriate education for First Nations students.

Parent Clubs help First Nations parents become more involved in their children's education. They provide a wide range of activities, information, support materials, and publications.

For more information, go to

- ✓ www.firstnations-schools.bc.ca/index.htm

